

The Doctrine of ‘Smashing Walls’

Pastor Laurie Hartzell’s Sermon at First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor,
Sunday, Oct. 20, 2019

Ephesians 2:11-21

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” – a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is in modern-day Turkey, and Ted and I had the chance to visit there a number of years ago. The city is very near the Mediterranean Sea. It has ruins of buildings that existed in Paul’s time. It is full of temples and statues that remind one that Ephesus was built on the worship of stone gods and the gods of wealth. The people of Ephesus were not Jews, but Gentiles.

Let’s turn now from Ephesus to the Old City of Jerusalem, where the Temple Mount is located. Throughout the history of Judaism there was a three-meter barrier on the Temple Mount keeping the chosen people of God separate from the Gentiles and dividing the inner courts of Israel from the Court of the Gentiles. Paul’s reference in the Ephesians passage to the dividing wall likely refers to the Temple Mount dividing wall. The message here is that in Christ Jesus all such barriers are now gone! For Jews who had been taught from the beginning that they were to stay clear of Gentiles and not let their faith be corrupted by Gentiles – especially in worship – this would have been life-changing and radical. The staggering claim this makes on followers of this Jesus is clear: In Christ there is no place for walls of any kind. In a world of walls – walls between people of different races and religions and sexual orientations, walls of economic divides – the gospel life brings walls crashing down. Or at least it is supposed to.

The message of Jesus is that the love of God and salvation are for ALL people. Paul tells the church in Ephesus that there is now no longer any division between the Jews and the Gentiles.

The message of Jesus is that there are no outsiders, that the love of God in Christ is for every single human being.

As you know, I will be leaving the pastorate here at First Presbyterian Church in less than a month. I've been spending my last Sundays with you preaching about things I've learned from you and with you these past, almost 10 years, as your pastor and 15 years prior to that being part of you as a layperson. It has been such an honor and joy for me to serve this great church as pastor.

The mission statement of this great church, which is on the back of our bulletin every week, is to bridge the divides in our community through the love of Jesus. Our mission statement says that we believe our call is to bring down dividing walls in our community. This passage from Ephesians, and the passage Terry Allen read from 2 Corinthians are our bread and butter as a congregation. It is who we are at the core. Look over at the two brown, stained-glass windows in our sanctuary that were taken from the old church on Territorial Road. You can see reference to 1892, the year the church was founded. You can also see the name of the first pastor, William Holden Rice. Above Pastor Rice's name is a medallion with a cross and a crown and with the words "The Ministry of Reconciliation." This church was founded on the call that the congregation was to be a vehicle of reconciliation – reconciliation between God and between people. The tearing down of dividing walls was born into the DNA of this congregation back when it was founded. And we must remember that, back in 1892, Morton Hill included some farmland and houses mostly owned by wealthier white people. There were not the divides in the community – racially, socio-economically and in a host of other ways – the way there are now. But in its 127-year history this congregation has sought to be a place where people are reconciled to God and to each other. We could call this congregation a "wall-smashing" congregation.

My friends, I would like to tell you some of my story as a way expressing how the love of Jesus smashes dividing walls. As you will see, my life here with you all these years is a big part of that.

I was born in Detroit, Michigan, and when I was 4 my family moved to Grand Rapids. I grew up there in a small, white, middle-class suburb called Wyoming. Most of my friends' parents worked at the local General Motors plant. There was one Hispanic girl in my high school class and a couple of Korean children who had been adopted. I can count on my two hands the number of black people I saw in the first 18 years of my life. When I was 10, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, and I remember my parents being very upset about how awful white people in the South were treating blacks. But I also remember that we could never go to downtown Grand Rapids because it was not safe because of the all the blacks there. When we went back to Detroit to visit my grandparents, we had to take the long way so we didn't go through the black, dangerous section of town. I remember being confused. My parents taught me that the white people in the South were bad because they were prejudiced against black people, but yet they always went out of their way to keep us away from parts of town where black people lived. It was confusing.

Fast forward to my mid-20s. A college graduate and fresh off a post-graduation mission stint in eastern Kentucky, I was idealistic and in love with Jesus and was going to save the world. I married a man who felt the same way. He decided to go to seminary and we were committed to urban ministry, so we moved into the West End of Atlanta. We lived in an apartment owned by the civil rights leader Julian Bond's mother, and were across the street from two historic black universities, Morehouse College and Spelman College. We were most likely two of a small handful of white people in this ZIP code area. Afro-centric shops, the blues, quotes from W.E.B. Du Bois and other leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, and more, were standards in the West End and began to infiltrate, heal and change my soul. My husband attended an African-American Presbyterian seminary, Johnson C. Smith, and I got a job teaching middle school math at a small Catholic school. Except for the principal, I was the only white person.

While we were in Atlanta, my life changed in radical ways. I have always been a deeply feeling person, but was raised that I needed to always keep my feelings at bay. Never be too emotional. Always be proper. Always keep your chin up. Being polite and being a good little girl were much more important than telling the truth about how you felt about things. I have wonderful parents, and they were raising me in the way that most of us were raised back then.

But my heart was full of passion and music and poetry. I had deep feelings about the world and the Kingdom of God. I had opinions and questions that I dared not tell my parents. I didn't know how to be fully myself.

When I was in Atlanta, a group of seminarians' wives, some mothers of my students, some of the teachers I worked with, and some of the women at Oakhurst Presbyterian Church showed me a different way. These were hardworking and faithful women – like I had been taught to be – but they also laughed with their whole hearts, cried when things bothered them, had passion about justice and their children and weren't afraid to say it. Most of them had also experienced barriers to getting a good education, getting the right to vote, and more. I learned that things I had taken for granted as a white person were not necessarily easily attainable for many African Americans. Also, these women, these African-American women, taught me how to be whole. How to think, cry, laugh, feel, pray with passion, and more. These women were connected to the world and to their bodies in ways that taught me to appreciate being a woman. I learned, in those years, that I cannot be fully whole if I don't have black women in my life to teach me. They helped smash some of the walls in my soul and in the racial divide between us.

One of my first memories was with a black teacher who asked me why we were in Atlanta. I told her we felt God called us to be there, and all was OK because we were "color-blind." She laughed so hard I almost fell over. "Laurie, never use that word with me again," she said. "I don't want you to be blind to my color. I want you to see me. See the black beautiful me that I am. When you say the word color-blind, you basically say that you assume I am like you. I am not. You are beautiful. I am beautiful." Yep, more bricks coming down in my wall.

These women helped me begin to see the walls in my soul. The walls I had erected between my true self and my deep feelings.

And these women and the parents of my students and this community also taught me about the racism that had been bred into my soul and that is bred into the souls of us white people in this country. Not because we are bad people, but because most of us, early on, absorb messages that teach us to be afraid, or to think that black people who struggle are lazy or that if people of color would only try harder they could do better in the world, and more. If you are white and haven't done this before, begin to notice the thoughts that creep into your head about people of color this week. You will begin to see the ways in which racism has been bred into us. Jesus wants to heal us.

I will always be so grateful for these women in Atlanta. One of the seminarian wives told me after I'd known her for a number of years that they weren't happy having me around at first. You know white people, she said, they don't mean to betray you, but they always do. They just can't help it. But she had learned to trust me. And risked trusting me. More bricks coming down in both of our walls.

You see, Jesus broke down the dividing wall between us.

But first, I had to see the walls in myself. I had to see the walls I had erected between my true self and fears. I had to see how racism was bred into me and be open to having the color-blind myth obliterated so I could really see people and see myself. And this work is not kumbaya and singing "We Shall Overcome" and feeling all cozy all the time. It can be hard, and it can shake us to the core. That's why I call it "wall smashing" rather than "wall dismantling" or something like that. These walls of racism in this country and in our souls are so high and strong and ancient that they need to be smashed by a spirit that is stronger than us. The Spirit of Christ's love.

So, that was the beginning of a lifelong journey of seeking to allow Christ to break down the walls inside me and also help me be part of dismantling walls in our world.

My friends, there are not a lot of churches that really want to do that work. I've lived in Atlanta and got to be part of a great church there, Oakhurst Presbyterian, an integrated congregation whose work and mission are to face the walls of racism and injustice in the church and in the world and let Jesus lead them in healing those divisions. I lived in Macon, Georgia, and in Cincinnati and in Philadelphia. I always attended churches and met wonderful people. But it is hard to find a congregation that really takes this work seriously. Many churches want to do "good works" and be seen as "helping others and doing good things." But most churches want quick fixes to tough problems and aren't willing to do the long, faithful work of seeing and dismantling walls. Most of us aren't willing to really look at racism. We can sometimes see it as a political agenda. It is not. Some call racism our nation's original sin, but I think it is even deeper than that. Racism is part of the founding DNA of this nation we love. Our country was founded on the displacement of the people who lived here and was built on the back of slave labor. It takes courage for us to look honestly at that and look within ourselves and do this hard work.

We surely do not do this work perfectly here at First Presbyterian Church in Benton Harbor. This work of smashing walls is messy and not easy. And it makes people uncomfortable sometimes. You may even be uncomfortable with my talking about this. But for the past 25 years it has been a joy and an honor to hang with people who really want to do this work. We want so deeply to be reconciled to God and to each other. And in this deeply divided community, there is an urgency to this work. Our children's lives depend on it.

I've learned a lot from so many of you. Allene, Darlene and Jewel over and over again offer bridges for us into the black community here. I encourage all of us who are white to continue to take advantage of these invitations to things like "The Taste" at Refreshing Fountains Church of God in Christ, revivals at local churches, events being sponsored by Strong Women of Faith, fish fries and other fund-raisers, and more. My white friends: Keep showing up, keep building bridges, keep being willing to look at your own racism and let Jesus heal you. Be willing to be the only white person in the room and learn about the gifts of a culture that most of us were ignorantly taught to fear. Be willing to learn from a people who have been marginalized but find hope and grace in life and have learned resilience in the face of hardship because of deep faith. Be willing to listen and learn about yourself and others. And have fun!

I've learned a lot from the very posture this church has taken in the community over the years. We don't make a big splash. We don't ask to be in the paper or publicize what we do. We just do our work – being present, reaching out as we are led to, creating programs where all people are welcome. Creating programs in partnership in the community – never claiming that we have the answers or are community experts. This church has a long history of not just being in the community but being willing to do the work of being part of the community and joining with the work being done here.

Recently I was talking to Steve McCoy, who is the pastor of McCoy Memorial Church of God in Christ. He said to me something like, "Your church is probably like most of ours. No new people are coming, and the old-timers are dying." I said, "Actually, Steve, that is not quite right. We have quite a few new people who are coming. Most of them are white people in their 50s, 60s and 70s. We've been a racially integrated congregation, but at this point there aren't many new black people coming." He told me something wonderful. He said, "First Presbyterian has a lot of white people who are part of Christ's church in the city. You don't have to have lots of black people as long as you keep connecting with the black churches." I've thought about that a lot since he said it. Part of our call is to be a racially integrated congregation, but we are also called to be that church which integrates this city. So, I encourage you to encourage your new pastor to be involved in the Ministerial Alliance, and I encourage all of you to continue to keep showing up and joining the good work that many of the churches are seeking to do in the city. As we show up and respect the work that people are doing and join the work – sometimes doing things differently than we are used to – we continue to tear down dividing walls.

I've not only learned from the black people in this church and community, I've learned from white people here, too. People like the Goffs and Jeannette Lottridge and Jeannette Holton and

Bob Ziebart and Virginia Maxwell and Martha Momany have been here for decades. They are living out what Pastor Eugene Petersen would call “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” Jeannette Holton, growing up in St. Joe, has spent a lifetime learning about her own racism and facing it. Her vigilance in this inspires me to continue doing the same. Virginia Maxwell always insists that we serve our very best at our weekly Thursday night suppers, that we truly treat people in this community as family – because they are. Christ has broken down the dividing walls. Given her years of service, struggle and painful experiences on the Benton Harbor Area Schools Board, Martha Momany inspires me. Martha showed up and worked tirelessly. She often found herself in the crucible of racial conflict and pain. But she faithfully did her work the best she knew. And it is not just those who have been here for a long time. There are many of you who have joined the church during my time as pastor, and I know I can mostly have honest conversations with you about tough things. We come from various political persuasions and ideologies, but we seek to learn to talk with and respect each other and grow as we journey. We have even more of that to do, don’t we?

I’ve learned that most of the white people who come to this church come because they long to be part of a community where they can really get to know people who are different than them. And they also who want to be part of a vibrant Christian church that seeks to interact and reach out in the community and explore thoughtful, biblical justice work.

Our congregation has been between one-fourth and one-third black in my time here. My friends, I think that in order for this congregation to continue its history of being racially integrated, we need to continue to intentionally offer space for black leadership, black voices and black vision here. Those of us who are white need to continue to let black people teach us how to worship in new ways and allow our faith to deepen. This means that we white people need to continue to learn to listen deeply and be mindful of how we tend to take over.

It also means intentionally reaching outside our walls and nurturing relationships. I hope some of you will continue neighborhood “walk-about” when I’m gone. Many people on Morton Hill love to be prayed for and want to pray for us. While many people on Morton Hill take comfort in having our church here, there are some who may not feel comfortable coming into this building, so we need to keep going out to them. Even if people never come to the church, those relationships help us face the walls within ourselves, and the love of Jesus will heal us. Even if people never come into this building, the community will continue to see us a group of Jesus followers who are willing to be outside these walls. And like I said before, keep being willing to build relationships across racial barriers. Learn. Grow. Live. Love!

My friends, how can I say in a 15-minute sermon all that I have learned from you and with you about all this? I can’t. But I promise you that, as I leave this place, I will continue this journey and this work. I will keep learning and building relationships. There is also much we can learn these days in reading excellent writing. There are so many good books out there right now. Among the many are “Waking up White,” by Debby Irving; “White Fragility,” by Robin DiAngelo; and “How To Be an Antiracist,” by Ibram X. Kendi.

In many ways, I think you can call me your missionary as I go to Grand Rapids to continue this work. Pray for me as I seek to carry on what I learned in Atlanta and what I've learned here in a new place with new people with more walls to be smashed. The Gospel is good news and full of love, and it also is a wall smasher.

Now, there is one more very important thing in this text from Ephesians that we must think about. Paul writes that Jesus not only tears down the dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles, but that Jesus makes the two into a new humanity. Our God, our Jesus, the Holy Spirit, are always making a new creation. In the Greek version of this original text there are two words for new. There is "neos" which refers to a new thing that is similar to a former thing, like getting new shoes or a new car, or even a new friend. Neos implies something we've had before. While it may be a little different than the former thing we had, it is still similar. And there is a "kainos" kind of new. The kainos kind of new refers to a new kind of thing that we've never seen or known before. People who become parents or grandparents for the first time experience this kainos kind of new – experiencing a kind of love and relationship they have not had before.

Well, in this text, Paul tells us that, in Christ Jesus, God is making humanity into a kainos kind of new. Christ wants to create us into a kind of community we have never known before and might not even be able to imagine. Not only will the walls be broken down, but we will be made into something new. This would have been radical for the Jews to hear. They wanted the Gentiles to assimilate into their Jewish ways. But Paul is saying here that, in Christ, God is doing a brand-new, unimagined thing. Christ is making them into a NEW humanity. It would be wrong for the Jews to assume that the Gentiles should worship like them.

I think we can catch a glimpse of this kainos kind of new when we see two people in a good marriage. In the best marriages, people don't lose themselves but become more fully themselves. And as they become more fully themselves, the marriage itself takes on a life of its own and witnesses to love in a powerful way. Do you know what I mean?

So, as men and women, blacks and whites, gay and straight, rich and poor, Democrat and Republicans, or whatever category we use – we come together and Christ breaks down the walls between us. And, as the walls fall, God uses who we are to make us into something new – a new humanity. That is a mystery that I pray you will courageously continue to live into!

You, First Presbyterian Church, are a light on a hill in this work. You are to be salt of Benton Harbor – a kainos-new kind of people. Do not grow weary in this work of looking inside, of facing walls in the world, of seeking what you can do to smash them for the sake of our children and their children – for the sake of the Kingdom of God. And I will keep watching you from afar, rejoicing as our Lord Jesus Christ continues to make all of us into something new!

Amen?!