

## A Dwelling Place for God

Ephesians 2:11-22 *...in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*

Recently I have been giving closer attention to my responses to people I encounter through the day. I am amazed at the many ways I find to be critical! People sometimes tell me how accepting and open I am. Yet, I know how easily I fall into sizing people up, putting them in boxes, critical of their actions and words, how they dress or how they drive! So if I seem open and accepting, it is because that is one of my greatest spiritual challenges, one I have to work with almost constantly. When I have such discouraging realizations about myself, I am comforted by something else I've learned. The spiritual life is not about "making progress," or perfecting ourselves. It is about growing in awareness and understanding so that we know ourselves more honestly and clearly. With honest and compassionate understanding of ourselves, change is possible.

Paul talks about the "dividing walls of hostility" that have been broken down by God in Jesus. We are very good at putting up walls. Judgmentalism. Fear. Insecurity. Feelings of shame or guilt. The desire to dominate or feel superior in some way. For many reasons we raise up walls that keep us apart from one another. The walls in our hearts and minds are the root of not only hostility, but also alienation and loneliness.

Paul told the community at Ephesus that they had been brought home to God by God's own love in Jesus. The Gentile Christians in Ephesus had been enfolded by the same God who embraced Israel. This happened through Jesus' life and death, the message he taught and lived. It was a message some found so threatening that they killed him. Jew or Greek, male or female, servant or free (Galatians 3:28), Paul understood and experienced Jesus' life and death as the decisive event in God's bringing down every dividing wall.

Jesus did away with life lived on the basis of commandments and laws, says Paul. That's a very strong statement. Paul had deep respect for God's commandments. And yet he knew they were to be embodied, not woodenly obeyed, and certainly not used to separate ourselves from others. Paul says that Jesus did away with that external way of living by obedience to external laws. He did it by LIVING the life to which the commandments of God had been pointing all along. He just DID it, LIVED it. Embodied it. And get this. Paul says that Jesus created in his own life a "single humanity" (New English Bible). Not another religion. We have enough of those. Not changing one group so they conform to the other group. Not making one religion dominant over others. God's purpose in Jesus was to create--or restore, we might say--one single humanity. He lived the life of God's embracing, reconciling love with such authenticity and fullness that it got him killed. However, even his death became a powerful proclamation of God's love that is always eroding the walls between us, always working to awaken us to our common humanity.

When we are becoming aware of the walls we erect among ourselves, when we are growing in our understanding that these walls arise from our fears, insecurities, or ego desires, then we are doing our part to help God dismantle those walls. When we humbly acknowledge and deepen our understanding of our wall-building habits, we prepare the way for God to create something new. For God is also building something up, says Paul. It's like a renovation job. The walls are taken down to make room, to create a new space. As we center our lives in Jesus who speaks to each of us the message of peace, and as the walls start coming down in our own hearts and minds, something is being built. WE are being built up to be persons and a community that are "dwelling places for God." Isn't that a wonderful image! As we allow the walls that we have erected in ourselves to be dismantled by God's love, space is created for God to dwell. As we become more empty of the walls we have raised,

God has more room live in us. Community is created.

Robert Frost wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall/That wants it down...." That "something" is God, says Paul, the Power that is at the core of life itself. God's reconciling love knows the suffering on both sides of the walls. People suffer because we as nations put up walls of hostility. They suffer from our guns and bombs, our greed and wealth, our arrogance of culture. There are those who suffer spiritually because of religion when it becomes arrogant. We make Jesus himself into a dividing wall of hostility. Look at the divisions among Christians! Look at the way we turn religion into an excuse to demonize others! I am hearing the term "spiritual abuse" with more frequency. It means badgering others because we think we have the right spirituality, the right beliefs, the right way, instead of treating others with honor and respect, as also having something to share and to teach. But we ourselves suffer because of the walls we raise up. The walls don't make us secure. They don't help us feel good about ourselves, at least for very long. The walls keep us disconnected from our fellow human beings. Living in fear or hate, ignorance or isolation is not living.

I think this passage gives us yet another way to look at our life here as a community. We emphasize the importance of what we call the inward journey. It is the way we become more aware of our lives in relationship to God. A part of that is growing in honest self-understanding. We become aware of the ways we build up those walls of hostility in our minds, and we deepen our understanding of where they come from. We do not do this in a harsh, self-judging way. That would only continue the wall-building, dividing ourselves up and becoming filled with guilt and self-condemnation. We do it with compassion. As we understand ourselves better, things begin to change. The walls start to weaken. This is the work of God in us. We don't attack those walls in us by direct assault, with sledge hammers of "self-improvement" or some such idea! We identify them, acknowledge them, and deepen our understanding of the fears or hurts or whatever it is that caused us to raise them in the first place. As we do that more and more, we find that the walls begin to lose their strength and crumble.

We don't do this just by ourselves. We do it in community. That is why, for instance, in mission groups it is important to maintain the group's inward journey. And an important part of that is the sharing that we do with one another. In a trustful atmosphere, we are able to talk about this inward work of self-understanding and of working with the things in ourselves that cause us suffering and keep us isolated. This is not easy for most of us and it takes some getting used to. However, we discover in the process of sharing of our lives that it creates more space in us. We begin to lose our defensiveness, our fears, the hurts or anger or isolation we have carried for a long time. As the walls come down, something else is being built up. WE are being built up into a dwelling place for God, as Paul says. We center our lives in Jesus whose life and death were all about the love of God that removes the dividing walls of hostility and fear. Notice that Paul says that we are BEING BUILT into God's dwelling. We have our work to do, but we begin to experience a Presence and Power that is working in us and through us to create more space for itself. A dwelling place for God.

When people come to this place, they often say that they experience a sense of sacredness and peace. Those who stay in our small retreat center find an atmosphere of beauty and spiritual and physical rest and renewal. These forty acres are a dwelling place for God. This is important and something we need to continue to nurture. However, it is even more important that we continue to be a community that is being made a dwelling place for God. This happens as we keep working with ourselves, our own hearts and minds, our own life together. It is very important that in a world of wall-building there are communities that are working with God's wall-removing love, communities that are being made into dwelling places for God.