

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Rooted and Grounded in Love: A New Reality”  
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Isaiah 66:18-23, Ephesians 2:11-22

They really disliked each other. In fact one might say they hated each other. The Jews and Romans had no use for the other and essentially wished that the other would simply go away. The Romans hated the Jews. They hated them because the Jews were atheists. I realize that this is a rather odd statement considering that the Jews worship the one, true, living God. But as far as the Romans were concerned anyone who did not worship the gods of Rome were atheists. The Romans also hated the Jews because the Jews did not fully participate in the cultural activities of the Empire. They did not worship at the temples. They did not offer sacrifices for the emperor. They did not engage in the festivals. The Romans hated the Jews because the Jews were the only religion that was exempted not only from worshipping the Roman gods, but was exempt from some associated taxes as well. This made them extremely unpopular and so there were anti-Jewish riots in many of the Roman cities such as Alexandria. And at one point they were so hated the all Jews were expelled from the city of Rome itself.

Likewise, the Jews hated the Romans. The Jews hated the Romans because the Romans were pagans. The Romans, rather than worshipping the one, true, living God, worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses. In other words they were idol worshippers. The Jews hated the Romans because the Romans were their oppressors. Even though Jews could and did worship freely there was no doubt that the Romans were their overlords. The Romans demanded heavy taxes of all non-citizens and restricted the rights of non-citizens, which included most Jews. The Jews hated the Romans because Rome was a culturally imperialistic empire; meaning that Rome pushed its culture on all its conquered peoples. This included things such as Olympic athletic games where all the competitors were naked and Roman theatres with their plays, both of which took place in Jewish territories. The Jews then to protect themselves built legalistic walls. If the Torah said to do “X” the Jewish community would do “X<sup>2</sup>”.

All of this might have been of little or no concern except for one small issue. That issue was that the Jewish people, the children of Abraham, were on a mission from God. Their mission was to bless the world, and as long as they remained behind the walls which they had created out of the fear of being absorbed into Roman society, they would never be able to fulfill their mission. It was into this situation that God intervened. God intervened by sending God’s own Son, to become incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the messiah would live, die and be raised in order to break down the walls that had been constructed over a period of more than 500 years. This is how Paul puts it in his letter to the church at Ephesus. “In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the wall that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances...” Let me be clear here. Jesus did not do away with the Torah, or

laws such as the Ten Commandments. What Jesus did was to break down the barriers that those laws, commandments and ordinances set between Jews and Romans. And by so doing Jesus released into the world two great powers. These powers were peace and the Spirit.

The first power which was released was that of peace. I want you to notice the central place that peace plays in this part of Paul's letter. Paul tells us that Jesus is our peace; that hostility is gone; that Jesus has created one humanity, thus making peace; that hostility has been put to death; and that Jesus came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and those who were near. And this peace is not a Roman peace that is enforced by the edge of a sword; meaning be peaceful or else. This is not a Jewish peace of being dominated; meaning we need to act peacefully or we will pay a price. The peace that Jesus Christ brought, that Jesus made possible is a peace that literally takes enemies and makes them friends; that takes strangers and makes them family; that allows people who had nothing in common to live in harmony with one another. This is peace that is closer to the Jewish concept of Shalom in which all things are well as if the Kingdom of God has come and renewed the face of the earth. Jesus Christ made possible reconciliation among enemies so that a lasting peace might be possible.

The second power which was unleashed was that of the Spirit. Paul puts it this way. "So Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him, both of us (Jews and Romans) have access to one Spirit to the Father." And this Spirit is not present to give us ecstatic experiences or to comfort us, but to make possible the reconciling work of peace. Again Paul, "So then you are no longer stranger and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints also members of the household of God...in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in him you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." In a sense what Paul is telling us is that not only are the walls down and human beings are capable of making peace, but that the Spirit of God empowers that reconciling work. The Spirit of God takes us from being strangers and makes us not only into one family, but into one temple of God. Humanity becomes the place where God dwells, binding us together.

So what does this have to do with us, you might ask? Let me begin with a quote. "We have a statue of liberty on the east coast given to us by a foreign community. But we need a statue of unity built by all Americans, for all Americans -- in every American community. Today, our nation is not united. This country is in trouble because too many Americans prefer not to know each other. Not to care about each other. [...] Our country cannot go on like this." Anyone know that quotation? It was offered in 1967 by Sargent Shriver as he was addressing the issues of race in our nation. It would be easy to say Shriver's statement still describes our nation today. Yet if we are honest with ourselves we will admit that things have changed. There is no longer "redlining" here in Detroit, meaning people of color were prohibited from living in certain neighborhoods. There are no longer schools which are segregated by law, like the elementary school in which I grew up. All persons may now marry, whether they are straight or gay. We have a black president. Things have changed.

Yet if we are even more honest with ourselves we will admit that we are not there yet. We have not achieved a society that is united. We know this because in South Carolina there are those who continue to defend the Confederate Battle flag on multiple state flags. And by the way those battle flag symbols were only added in the early 1960s in the face of integration. As a Texan whose ancestors

fought for the confederacy, I will tell you that those battle flags are not there to “honor” those who fought, but as a sign of latent racism. We know we are not there yet because there are politicians who are telling county clerks that they do not have to issue marriage licenses to gay couples even though the Supreme Court said that they did. We know we are not there yet because even if there is no legal segregation in our schools and neighborhoods there is de facto segregation which leads to inferior education for many of the poor in our nation. We know we are not there yet because we have politicians stating that all Mexicans are rapists and drug dealers. We know we are not there yet because of the Muslim woman who was denied a closed can of coke on an airplane because it could have been used as a weapon. We know we are not there yet because there are those whose entire careers are based on building walls and demonizing “the other.”

But there is hope. There is hope because the Spirit empowers us as followers of Jesus Christ to tear down walls and build bridges. There is hope because we know that peace is possible because we have seen it happen. One of the most powerful signs of that hope came on the steps of the South Carolina legislature. Two groups were squaring off over the Confederate Battle Flag. One group was composed of tough looking white men covered in tattoos holding the Battle Flag. The other group was young black men and women, who were calmly expressing their reasons for seeing the flag as a sign of slavery and racism. It was a moment ripe for conflict. Yet in the end one of the black men reached out his hand in friendship and the white man took it. Even though they did not agree, peace had become possible.

This is our task as the church. We are to be those, who while holding to our core beliefs, reach out in love and peace to those with whom we disagree. We do so in order to build bridges and help make this world a place in which all persons become one people and one nation, united in the love and grace of God. That then is my challenge to all of you, to ask yourselves, how am I building bridges in the places where I live, work and go to school?