

The Everyone Welcome Church

2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22

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I listened to an interesting TED talk with week. It was titled, “Why We Hate.” Guy Raz, the host, interviewed a man named Dylan Marron who hosts and produces a podcast. He’s gay and his show takes on controversial issues. He says he regularly gets Internet hate mail. One person wrote, “You’re everything I hate in a human being.” Ouch! He’s been called every name you can imagine, most of which cannot be used in a sermon. Most of the hate messages came through social media. Dylan discovered that if he clicked on the profile picture of the person who sent the message, he could learn a lot about the person. He could see pictures they were tagged in, posts they had written, memes they had shared, and sometimes their telephone number. While seeing their pictures and personal information helped Dylan to see that they were real people, he still struggled with how to respond to such anonymous hatred.

So he decided to call some of them, which I thought was quite daring. Some hung up on him immediately. Others, though, were willing to talk. If they talked, he asked them about their lives and then asked this question, “Why did you write that?”

One of the people who talked with him was named Josh. He was about to graduate from high school. He admitted that high school had not been pleasant. He was bullied, he said, because he was “chubbier than a lot of people.” Dylan told him that he understood bullying because as a gay teen he too was bullied.

By having a simple telephone conversation, they found a common bond, which defused the hatred.

Near the end of his talk, Dylan says, “Sometimes the most subversive thing you could do was to actually speak *with* the people you disagreed with and not simply *at* them.”

Oh, this is needed desperately today. Our country feels terribly divided. There's the gay-straight divide. There's the liberal-conservative divide. There's race. Gender. Socioeconomic level. Immigration. The president. Division is a mark of our country today, and we spend too much time talking *at* each other and not enough speaking *with* each other.

Division was a mark of Jesus and Paul's day too. Division was so sharply defined that it was codified in the layout of the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was like a church turned inside out. The very place the people did not go was inside the building. Instead, they worshiped on the outside in a series of courtyards carefully divided by stone walls. At the center of the temple was a very small room with no windows that was normally left empty. It was called the Holy of Holies, emptied to symbolize that it was reserved as the dwelling place of Almighty God. Once a year, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the High Priest entered that room to offer a sacrifice for the sins of the nation.

On feast days, the people traveled to Jerusalem and took their place outside in one of the four courtyards. The largest courtyard, which was the farthest from the Holy of Holies, was named the Court of the Gentiles. The "God-fearers," they were called, were Gentiles who worshiped the God of the Jews. They were allowed to enter only the Court of Gentiles. Since they were not Jews, they could not go beyond the courtyard reserved for them. Large walls served as barriers to make sure the Gentiles were kept in their proper place. Division.

The next courtyard, a little smaller and a little higher and a bit closer to the Holy of Holies, was called the Court of Women. Jewish men and women both could enter this courtyard, but women could go no further. Again, large walls served as barriers to keep the women in their proper place. Division.

The next courtyard, again a little smaller and higher and closer, was called the Court of Israel, sometimes called the Court of Men because only Jewish men were allowed to enter. This may sound like a place of privilege, but it too had a wall that kept the Jewish men in their proper place. Division.

One more courtyard existed, a U-shaped area around the sanctuary called the Court of Priests. As its name implies, this courtyard was restricted

to those in the priesthood of Israel. It was forty-five inches higher than the Court of Israel, signifying the elevated status of the priests over the laity. And again, walls served to keep even the priests in their proper place before God. (William Hull, *Breaking the Barriers*, Broadman Press).

Division—ethnic, gender, and religious—was fundamental in Israel’s understanding of faith. The architecture of the temple literally put people in their proper place and stone walls kept them there.

We had something like this in the South years ago. My grandparents had an African American housekeeper. She came five days a week. Her name was Essie Winn, and she helped rear my brothers and me. My brothers and I sometimes rode with my grandmother when she took Essie home. Regardless of how many people were in the car, two or five, Essie always sat in the back seat. Of course, my brothers and I clamored for the front seat—shotgun! But not Essie. She always went to the backseat. So I asked my grandmother once why she sat in the back. My grandmother replied, “She just does.” Stone walls didn’t separate her neighborhood from my grandmother’s, but a railroad track did. And it was immediately evident that she lived on the wrong side of the tracks.

Of course, we know now the hostility that created. We know now about the Civil Rights Movement, the protests, the sit-ins, the demand for equality.

Surely it wasn’t any different back in Paul’s day. Surely the Gentiles, way back in the farthest courtyard, blocked from everyone else by a stone wall, felt inferior to the others. And the women, also blocked by a stone wall, must have felt inferior to the men. The men too, also on the wrong side of the tracks, must have felt inferior to the priests. And surely someone must have protested, at least in their heart, “This is not fair! This is not what God is like! We’re all just people, no one more acceptable than the other, and surely God loves us all equally!”

This system, like the oppression of African Americans in the country, failed to acknowledge that they all shared a common human bond. Yes, they were Jews and Greeks, males and females, clergy and laity, but deeper than those differences were their common hopes and dreams and frustrations, and the one God to whom they all turned.

The words I read earlier from Ephesians 2 are nothing short of radical. Paul calls Jesus the wall-breaker. Against this backdrop of official religious division, where the institution of religion itself created division and hostility, Paul says that Jesus “has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Paul was writing to Gentile Christians, those God fearers, whose courtyard was the farthest from the Holy of Holies. They were the ones “far off,” “aliens,” Paul says. Until they were “brought near by the blood of Christ.” Listen to how radical these words are:

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 off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Jesus, whose name in Aramaic is Jeshua, Joshua, broke down the walls of division at the temple. They came a tumblin’ down, just like Joshua in the Hebrew Bible, who saw the walls around Jericho come a tumblin’ down. Jesus brought down the walls dividing Gentiles from Jews, women from men, and laity from clergy. And most importantly, the New Joshua toppled the wall that separated humanity from God. The Holy of Holies was opened, the curtain that blocked the entrance torn in two. The door to God was thrust wide open for everyone on equal footing.

That now is our job. The Church is the wall-breaker now. And we must be diligent about not allowing the walls of hostility to rise again—between ethnic groups, between men and women, between clergy and laity, and between all the other divisions we face today. The Church is the wall breaker in the world, thrusting its doors wide open and hanging a large sign that reads, EVERYONE WELCOME!

That’s actually a pretty good name for a church: The EVERYONE WELCOME Church. Let us be that church.

Closing Prayer

We are aware, Lord, that we are Gentiles, most of us, the ones who were far off. And we are grateful that you brought us near by the cross of Jesus. Help us now to welcome all of your people. Amen.