

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:11-22

"Tearing Down the Walls that Divide"

UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL

"United we stand, divided we fall." We have all heard of that statement before. It is a statement of profound truth. When there is unity of mind and purpose, great things can be accomplished individually and more importantly corporately. When there is unity of mind and purpose, there will also be peace of mind and direction for one's life and a community's life.

But if there is division, that means there will be conflict; and if there is conflict, not only will there be no peace, but you won't be able to accomplish much. And whatever you do accomplish, it will be long and hard. I mean how can you move forward if you are fighting another?

Unity of mind and purpose. It is one of the main attributes that the Kingdom of God brings. And it is the antithesis to the kingdom of man. I want you to think about that for a moment. Think of history, think of our present world. What is always the common characteristic? Division – my side against your side, my family against your family, my party against your party, my people against your people, my nation against your nation.

We can trace the first division back to the Garden when the devil tempted Adam and Eve to side with him and rebel against God. And it reared its ugly head again when Cain murdered his brother Abel. It continued with the division between Isaac and Ishmael, and then Jacob and Esau, and all throughout history – brother against brother, family against family, clan against clan, tribe against tribe, nation against nation, empire against empire. And it never ends. Though there have been literally thousands of peace treaties between peoples and nations, they inevitably are short-lived.

And the ultimate result of such division is war and death. And while some would say a good economy, a good government, and a good view of others is the answer, is it really? Is our unity to be based on whether or not things are going well? Isn't that merely a superficial unity? And what about religion? Is religion the answer? Where allegiance to one's religion and customs is most important in life? Will that lead to true unity? It certainly has not been the case if you look at history and our world today. Judaism has not fostered unity among the peoples of the earth; Islam has not either – there are two main divisions in Islam Shia and Sunni and they despise each other. And Islam really is an Arab-centric religion for if you do not pray in Arabic or read the Koran in Arabic, or face Mecca in Arabia to pray five times a day, you aren't fully Muslim! And Hinduism? Which is the basis for the Caste System in India and which teaches that if you are born into a lower caste or state in life it is your punishment for sins of your previous life. And Buddhism which is about removing all the things that divide so that you are no longer uniquely you and you become one with the universe? Will that bring unity to our world? And even in Christianity when it is treated as merely one's religion, leads to the same division. When certain Christians have placed more allegiance to their Church or Denomination than to Christ, Himself. Has that led to unity? Has that led to peace? One has only to look back to the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the hatred between Roman Catholics and Protestants throughout history to see that a trust in one's own Christian religion does not foster unity.

THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN TEAR DOWN THE WALLS THAT DIVIDE

No, there is only ONE MEANS for the unity of mankind. There is only ONE WAY that leads to unity of purpose and mind. There is only One who if we are in unity with Him, everything else will fall into place. And that One, that Person, is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the means of our unity – with the Father, with each other, and for understanding our purpose and place in life.

Someone will ask, How do you know that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life? What sets Christ apart from all other leaders and teachers and prophets? It is a good question. And one could answer with such things as His profound wisdom and teachings, His demonstration of perfect love, His miracles of healing, deliverance, and resurrection, and His own rising from the dead. But the other reason why I know Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life – He is the only One who can bring all peoples together. Think about that for a moment.

Why is He the only One? Why is He the only One who can tear down the walls that divide? The walls between man and God. The walls between our neighbors – brother and brother. The walls between Jew and Samaritan, between Jew and Gentile, between every tribe, tongue, and nation. How so, you may ask?

We find out in our second reading from Ephesians. Let's look at it again. The Apostle Paul writes, ***"Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands— 12remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.13But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, 15by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, 16and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.17AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; 18for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. 19So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."***

Here Paul highlights the division between Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were God's people, being in covenant with the Lord. Gentiles could become spiritual Jews, but they would have to go through the Jewish ceremonial requirements which for males included circumcision. The basis for being accepted was through law and ritual; and though such rules were instituted by the Lord, to highlight the difference between the clean and the unclean, and the holy and the profane, that very law, the law of God, eventually became a wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. The law which was actually to show all of mankind's weaknesses and sin, became something that Jews boasted in. In fact, the wall of the Law created another wall between Jew and Gentile in the Temple. For in Herod's Temple, there was a wall separating the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the temple areas. Archeologists discovered this inscription from Herod's temple, *"No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to*

blame for his ensuing death." It was this wall that the Jews thought Paul and his Gentile friends crossed when the Jews attacked him in the temple and threatened to kill him (**Acts 21:28–31**).

You see, God gave the law to show us that we have a problem - that even with the law we will fail. For the law, while beneficial in this temporally world, by itself cannot bring life and meaning and purpose. In fact, it shows us where we are weak and fall short and that we have a sin issue – a character problem. Its ultimate purpose was to point us to the coming of Christ. To show us our need for Jesus, for a personal Savior, for a personal Lord.

For there was another wall in the Temple and that was the heavy thick curtain that separated all the people, both Jew and Gentile from the Lord's presence in the Holy of Holies. And do you remember what happened when Christ died on the cross? When He died, the veil in the temple was literally torn in two during an earthquake, and that wall of separation (figuratively) was torn down. The dividing wall between man and God was eternally torn down! And while there have been thousands of peace treaties and covenants in history and thousands of peace missions, there is only One that matters, only One peace mission that has not failed, only One peace treaty that is eternal, and that is the One God has made through His Son, Jesus Christ, sealed with Christ's own blood.

The only One who can set us free from our sin and failure to live up to the law, the only One who can unify both Jew and Gentile – the only One who can unify all people – is Christ Himself. He is the One who breaks down the walls between His Father and man, and He breaks down the walls between all people.

Recall how many times during Christ's ministry it was one of bringing Jew and Samaritan together. Recall Jews looked down on Samaritans for although they had the same father Abraham and were descendants of the children of Israel, they had intermarried with Gentiles and even incorporated some of the pagan views into their religion. But Jesus called on the Jews to not look down on the Samaritans or the Gentiles. Jesus called on us to look at others through the lens of God's grace and love.

It is Christ who restores us to God because He shows us the way and truth. He is the essence of life. He shows us that we should not let anything divide us from Him or reaching out to others in His love. They can leave us, they can reject us, they can even fight us, but we are called to tear down walls that divide because that is what Christ has done for us.

HOW DO WE TEAR DOWN THE WALLS THAT DIVIDE?

In our families, in our community, in our nation? Three ways.

First, we are always to take the initiative. Do you remember what Jesus said in **Matthew 18:15**? ***"If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private."*** In other words, ***you go first*** and seek to be reconciled. Do you remember what Jesus said to us as our Great Mission? He said, ***"Go and make disciples."*** The first word of Christ's command is GO. That means to take the initiative. Don't wait for someone to come to you, go to them. Don't wait to say hello to you first, but first say hello to them. Don't wait to be invited to dinner, but you invite someone to dinner. Don't wait to clear up a wrong committed or a wrong received, but you go and seek to be forgiven or to forgive. There is a reason why Jesus summed up the law of love this way. He said, ***"Do unto others as you would have others do unto you."*** That means we are to be actively engaged in doing good to others. Notice Jesus did not say, "Don't do to others as you would have others not do to you." It

wasn't a passive statement. It wasn't, well, you don't bother me and I won't bother you. No, it is go and do. Get out there. And when we get out there, then people will not only see us but they will see us in action.

Second, we are to Be LIKE Christ in our going and as we take the initiative. That means in our words and actions. Think about how Christ was like – He was humble, He was honest and straightforward, He was a good listener, He was an encourager, and He sought to help everyone. When people see such things in us, they will notice the difference in us. That we are not like the world. And how do you get someone to open up? It is not only being a good listener but it is asking the right questions. Did you ever notice from the Gospel accounts that Jesus was always asking the right questions to get people to open up?

What are some questions to keep in mind when speaking with others? How about how are they doing for real? What is going on in their life? How are their children or family members? How is work? What are their likes and dislikes? These are the keys to developing a healthy relationship with others. They won't see Christ in us unless we take the initiative and actually be like Jesus to them.

Third, ultimately if we have enough time with the person and depending on how a conversation goes, we will have an opportunity to let them know Who is the most important person in our lives and why. **We will have the chance to point them to Christ.** Not to law, not to religion, not merely to our church, but to Christ. Let others know that Christ is the most important person in your life. In other words, point people to Him!

There is that chorus from a popular gospel song that says *"They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, they will know we are Christians by our love."* And that will only happen if we take the initiative by going and doing. That will only happen if we actually behave like Christ. That will only happen if we truly let others know who Jesus is to us.

We have all been given a peace mission. We have all been called to tear down the walls that divide us. We have been called to be Christ's witnesses and ambassadors to our world so that all mankind can be one in Him. There is a reason why the Apostle John in His Revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ saw the vision as recorded in **Rev. 7:9-10**, *"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; 10and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."* Jesus is the Great Unifier. He is the only One who can truly tear down the walls that divide and bring us together.

There are three upcoming opportunities for everyone here to put what we have heard into practice. Today is the church picnic. It not only is a great time for food and fellowship, but it is a wonderful opportunity to get to know other brothers and sisters in Christ that you don't know. And we will be having a few dozen, if not more, South Sudanese joining us! Please say hello and get to know them as we begin a new South Sudanese Anglican Church!

Second, on Saturday, August 18, we will be having our Community Fun Day Outreach event. It will run from noon to 4 PM. Not only will we have three different food trucks, and games and activities for the kids, but we will be having three 30-minute talks answering three important questions: 1) Can the Bible be trusted? 2) How do we hear from God? And 3) How do we find hope in a broken world? Then at 4:30 we will be having like we did last year a healing service in the church. Please invite friends, coworkers, family, and neighbors to our event. The first 150 visitors will receive a \$5 food truck voucher. We also need people to volunteer to help

out. This event is not really for us but for the community. It is an opportunity to welcome our neighbors and to share the love of Christ with them.

Third, on Saturday, September 29, there will be a joint event with other churches in the area called "*Arise: Shining the Light of Christ*" This will be a time to gather together to meet other believers from our churches and hear from our pastors about how we can share the love and light of Christ with others through and in our relationships with others.

I close with this story: A missionary was preaching in the village market, and some of the people were laughing at him because he was not a very handsome man. He took it for a time, and then he said to the crowd, "It is true that I do not have beautiful hair, for I am almost bald. Nor do I have beautiful teeth, for they are really not mine; they were made by the dentist. I do not have a beautiful face, nor can I afford to wear beautiful clothes. But this I know: I have beautiful feet!" And he quoted the verse from **Isaiah**: "***How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation***" (Isa. 52:7). And so, I ask you this day, "Do you have beautiful feet?" If you do, you will tear down the walls that divide!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!