

## **“Breaking Down and Building Up”**

Psalm 46; Ephesians 2:11-22

The Reverend Joanna M. Adams

Morningside Presbyterian Church

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*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. Ephesians 2:14*

When I was ordained, I was examined by the Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry here in Atlanta as to whether or not I was fit to be a minister. There was a person on the examination committee who was not particularly enthusiastic about women being ordained into the ministry, and when his turn came to ask me a question, he said, “Alright, Joanna, what is your favorite Bible verse?” For some reason, (I believe it was the Holy Spirit) I answered, looking him directly in the eye, “For [Christ] is our peace; in his flesh has made both groups into one, and broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” (Ephesians 2:14) The verse remains one of my favorites.

In Ephesians, the main concern is reconciliation, reconciliation between two groups that are deeply estranged from one another. Distrust and dislike characterize their relationship. I am speaking of the Jews, who were the first followers of Christ, and the Gentiles, who were now becoming a part of the Christian movement in growing numbers. Almost immediately, the Christian message could not be contained within the confines of the Temple community. Jesus himself had said to his followers, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19) This evangelical thrust has always been a part of the Christian Movement. It came from Christ, himself, and so Gentiles in Asia Minor were being converted and baptized. Tensions between the founding members, shall we say, and the newcomers were strong, and emotions ran high. Believe it or not, there was trouble in the early church.

We have ample evidence around us today that a particular brand of Christians called Presbyterians can be fractious and irritated with one another. The New Testament reminds us that from the very beginning, the Christian community could have benefited greatly from group therapy. Arguments abounded over leadership styles, theological doctrine, church practices, who was in, who was out.

The most intense recorded controversy had to do with whether or not male, Gentile converts to Christianity needed to be circumcised, as required by Mosaic Law, in order to receive Christian baptism. If you want to see a church fight with the gloves off, read Paul’s letter to the Galatians. We will get to Ephesians in a moment. In Galatians, Paul punches first with his right jab, that is, justification by faith, not law, and then he is back with his left, a strong understanding of Christian freedom. In between the punches, he calls those who disagree with him either foolish or bewitched. It is enough to make your stomach churn.

In the letter to the Ephesians, we see a more irenic Paul. He takes a different approach. It is not that Jews and Gentiles are ever going to become like one another. It might not even be that they will ever come to like one another, but the inherent differences are put into perspective because of new information, information that is essential to the life of the church as the breathing of oxygen is to the human body. What is the essential information? It is that God plans to reconcile Jews and Gentiles, and not only is that God's plan, but the reconciliation has already begun to go into effect, though few seem to have realized it. This is new information to the Ephesians, but it is not new information with regard to the Christian Movement.

I love what someone wise has written: "Jesus himself called his followers from opposing forces in society and introduced them to an order of common life that did not depend on what they shared in common. It depended on his calling, his grace alone." Or as Will Willimon has famously put it, "God's idea of the church is a party with people who you wouldn't be caught dead with on Saturday night." In other words, the church the community of Christian disciples is not a voluntary organization of like-minded people; it is God's idea. The body of Christ is Paul's most famous metaphor for the church- a body consisting of different parts, with different functions, but never can the eye say to the ear, "I have no need of you." Or the hand say to the foot, "I have no need of you." The newcomers cannot say to the old timers, "Now that we are here, you need to move over and get out of the way." Christ creates in himself one new humanity in place of two. Christ is the head of the body whose parts are intended to work together, and it happens, not because of a task force or a study committee decided to do it, but because Christ decided to do it—this work of reconciliation through his own death and resurrection.

Actually, it is not just the oneness of the body that is the church that is of concern to God. According to the letter to the Ephesians, God intends to reconcile the whole world. The universe itself will be marked by unity and harmony. "With all wisdom and insight," Paul writes, "God has made known the mystery of God's own will set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things, things in heaven and things on earth and until that great day comes, the church is to be the foretaste" of what is surely coming. We couldn't do it ourselves if our lives depended on it, but Christ can, Christ has. We are the ones to be most pitied if we forget the power and possibility that ours as an unmerited gift from God.

Just this past Thursday, a dozen members of the Morningside congregation spent a day in Birmingham, Alabama attending the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of our Presbyterian denomination. Our own Miranda Brownlee served as a Youth Advisory Delegate, a particular honor and important role. Some say, "As the YADs go, so goes the Assembly." It was a long, eight-day meeting, full of reports and a lot of tedium. Presbyterian Assemblies sometimes put me in mind of something columnist, George Will wrote about the sport of football and how it combines two of the worst characteristics of American culture, violence and committee meetings. I am glad to report to you that there was no violence at the General Assembly, but there was a plethora of committee meetings and intense debates marked by passion tempered most of the time with civility,

a striking development given the depth of differences among Presbyterians today, and yet not surprising at all when you remember God's plan to tear down dividing walls and to build up a holy temple.

The most potentially divisive matter before the Assembly was the report of a committee called the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force. Twenty theologically diverse people met for four years to help our divided denomination figure out how to stay together despite its differences. Four years of committee meetings for that loyal and faithful group. God love the Presbyterians. What is the old story about what the Presbyterian did when a fire broke out? The Baptists jumped into the baptismal pool. The Lutherans waited for the Spirit. The Methodists called a prayer meeting. The Roman Catholics called the Pope. The Presbyterians appointed a task force to discover what happens when combustible substances combine with oxygen and after careful deliberation, a report was sent to a committee which was sent to another committee that was sent to another committee and then on to a council.

By a vote of 298 to 222, the General Assembly approved the recommendations of the Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity. That is a 57% to 43% vote differential, indicating the ongoing differences in our church over matters of inclusion, particularly regarding the ordination of gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people to office in our church. The report strongly encourages Presbyterians to witness to the church's oneness, to avoid division.

The Assembly voted overwhelmingly not to change the Constitution in terms of who will be ordained at present. The Constitution of the Presbyterian says that only people who are faithful in marriage between a man and a woman or celibate in singleness are qualified for office. That remains in the Constitution, but the new report allows leeway for congregations in Presbyteries to apply ordination standards in a way that is, perhaps, a little more flexible than has been the case in recent years.

A lot of people were disappointed. Presbyterians who are deeply committed to full inclusion were deeply disappointed. Presbyterians who oppose ordination of gay and lesbian people were deeply disappointed because they feel as if the decision might give license to ordain people who would not otherwise have been ordained and encourage Presbyteries and congregations to ignore the Constitution's standards.

We are in a time of disagreement as a denomination. The chair of this committee, Blair Monie, a fine Presbyterian pastor, said,

"Part of the reason that we are divided is that our country is so divided in the political realm, and we come to the communion table of the church with all kinds of opinions. What unites us as Presbyterians is not that we agree on these matters. What unites us is that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. We share the same baptism, 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.' Regardless of what the headlines around the country said, the real news from the Assembly did not have to do with sexuality. It had to

do with Presbyterians deciding once again that it was God's will and Christ's mission for us to stay together and to claim the oneness that was God's original gift to the church."

The wonderful theologian, Letty Russell, who teaches at Yale Divinity School, once told her students that the kingdom of heaven dawns when people act as if it has arrived. You could see it, bits and pieces of the kingdom of God, 136 miles west on I-20 in Birmingham, Alabama last week.

I have worked for a long time to help the church move away from categorical exclusion and toward a way of being the church that welcomes all whom God calls into leadership. Many have worked longer and harder than I. I will not, they will not cease working for the day and the PCUSA will do justice and love kindness and be a little more humble about deciding about who is worthy to serve and who is not, but I have also seen clearly in the past 10 days that arguing without ceasing is not getting us anywhere. It is comprising the mission, the education, the ministries of the church that we **do** agree on. Former Moderator Marj Carpenter was particularly eloquent on this point at the Assembly.

Ann Lamont tells the story of a Benedictine nun who sat by her dying mother's bedside and tried to comfort her by saying, "In heaven, mother, everyone we love will be there." But the older woman replied, "No, in heaven we will love everyone who is there." Wherever human beings are, this side of the Jordan, the possibility, the probability of conflict exists. But wherever the spirit of the living God is, the possibility exists for the transformation of heart and mind to reflect more clearly God's own heart and mind. How is it done? Through the power of the cross. When that power is released, transformation takes place, walls are torn down, and people come to accept the fact that they are inexorably connected to one another and that their future and the future of the other can never be separated. We are built together into a holy temple of the Lord, God's residence in the here and now.

The Assembly did many other things and I hope you will read about and pay attention to.

I want to close by sharing with you three brief sentences from three Christian leaders. First, a pastor named Young Ro Ahn, a pastor in South Korea, told the Assembly with great joy that the South Korean Church which was started by missionaries from the Presbyterian Church in the United States is now, itself, sending out 1,400 missionaries each year. He said, "Despite ideological differences, the goal of the church in South Korean is to take the gospel around the world and that includes North, to our sisters and brothers in North Korea. " Talk about the power of Christ to tear down walls of hostility!

I heard a pastor from First Presbyterian Church in Havana, Cuba, a wonderful man named, Hector Mendenz, say, "The church in Cuba is thriving. It seems that neither capitalism nor communism is capable of dividing the great church of Jesus Christ."

And then finally, our wonderful, young, outgoing Moderator, Rick Ufford-Chase, in a powerful sermon described the dramatic transformation of a tiny Presbyterian congregation he had visited in southern Taiwan. This little church was surrounded by an overwhelmingly Buddhist society. Taiwan is only 3% Christian. The church members were timid and afraid. Feeling in the minority, they built a six-foot high wall around their church, but then they called a new pastor. He said that the wall has to come down. The church members took the wall down. They replaced the sanctuary's heavy wooden front door with glass office doors. They moved a tree that was blocking the front and they placed a pink neon cross on the top of the steeple. They built a treehouse in the front yard to attract the children, and a climbing wall to attract the teenagers. And the rest is history.

Walls, they need to come down. Connections, we need to make them. The world is longing to hear the reconciling message of Jesus Christ and all the possibilities that are ours because of the great saving work he has done. Let us be about his mission now at Morningside Church and with our friends everywhere. Amen.