Are We Building without Walls?

Year B—Lectionary 16 / 7 Pentecost

**Theme Statement**
An overarching glimpse of the entire worship series.

Often we don’t notice that a building is being constructed until the walls go up. From purchase of the land to the architectural design, from surveying to excavating, a lot can escape our notice if we are not personally involved in the project. Then one day something changes and we see a new edifice rising.

Many of Paul’s letters were written to churches with a long laundry list of problems. The letter of Ephesians is unique. Paul saw the need for a new vision for the church. It does not address problems within the church but problems outside the church and ways that God’s people could gracefully meet those challenges. This would be a church built on love. The town of Ephesus proved to be an especially good building site for this increasingly visible church.

Membership in many churches today is declining. Some consider the church to be an ineffective earthly institution. This series is an opportunity to examine the church’s divine origins and lessons which can guide us in mission and ministry. Paul’s message in Ephesians is not limited to the people of ancient Ephesus. Its powerful insights are designed to inspire churches and leaders for all time.

1. Are We Building in Love?
   Ephesians 1:3-14 (Year B—Lectionary 15 / 6 Pentecost)
2. Are We Building without Walls?
   Ephesians 2:11-22 (Year B—Lectionary 16 / 7 Pentecost)
3. Are We Building beyond Measure?
   Ephesians 3:14-21 (Year B—Lectionary 17 / 8 Pentecost)
4. Are We Building as One?
   Ephesians 4:1-16 (Year B—Lectionary 18 / 9 Pentecost)
5. Are We Building Up?
   Part I: Ephesians 4:25—5:2 (Year B—Lectionary 19 / 10 Pentecost)
   Part II: Ephesians 5:15-20 (Year B—Lectionary 20 / 11 Pentecost)
6. Are We Built to Withstand?
   Ephesians 6:10-20 (Year B—Lectionary 21 / 12 Pentecost)

**Focus Statement**
God’s grace through Jesus demolishes the walls of hostility that separate us. We are “joined together” in Christ, the great cornerstone of a living church.

**Key Verse**
For [Christ] 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

**Tip**
Many of the creative worship suggestions in these preaching and liturgy supports require some preparation, so please look through them well in advance.

**Text Study**
An expository summary of the reading related to the Together in Faith Adult Bible Study.

Last week’s session began with an invocation. This week the theme could be considered our confession. We are reminded of times we have been separated from God and one another. Jesus transformed us with his
reconciling sacrifice on the cross. Jesus demolished (put to death) the hostilities that separate us and we are now united “in Christ.” Christ grounds our work together as the great cornerstone of a living church.

This construction theme is clearly prevalent throughout chapter two. Verse 14 speaks about the removal of the dividing walls of hostility. God comes to us in Christ. Our challenge is to remain “in Christ,” a teaching at the center of Paul’s theology. By building up the church God’s way, we actually dwell in Christ. Verse 19 speaks to the walls or divisions that exist and includes a description of the Gentiles as strangers or aliens who live in a place that is not their homeland. Verse 20 shifts from household members to the building itself.

Finally, Ephesians gives two images for Christian to identify with: as a “member of the household of God” and as a “holy temple in the Lord.” Referring to concrete examples of temple construction, Ephesians depicts the building of the temple (verses 21–22). A parallel “construction” theme is referenced in Jesus’ teachings: “[He] is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house” (Luke 6:48–49, see also 1 Corinthians 3:9–17).

Insights from the Original Language:

Eirēnē: Peace. In Christianity, this describes the tranquil state of our life that has found meaning and salvation through Jesus. Peace and harmony make things safe and prosperous (Ephesians 2: 17). “Go in peace and serve the Lord.”

Akrogōniaios: Cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Christ is portrayed as the great cornerstone, and the apostles and prophets are the foundation (or their message is the foundation). This is not the foundation stone that is set at the beginning of construction. It is the final stone that is placed on top of an arch or building that binds it together. Jesus is at the summit (the head) holding the church together. Jesus is at the crown of this ongoing construct. Just as a cornerstone joins two walls together, Jesus joins us together as the church.

Xenos: Stranger or traveler. Originally referred to those who were non-Greeks (Ephesians 2:12). This included people from foreign lands and customs. In the New Testament it also came to signify someone who was a special “guest” (Romans 16:23). Jesus transformed the meaning when he said, “I was a strang-er and yet you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). Today “xenophobia” is the fear of strangers or aliens.

Oikodomē: Building (Ephesians 2:21). This is the act of building up or edifying—promoting Christian growth in one another. Describes structural or spiritual growth.

Luō: To break down or demolish (Ephesians 2:14). In this case, this refers to demolition of the barrier or wall that divides people. It also refers to the removal of sins (see Matthew 16:19 and Luke 13:16) and the destruction of the temple (John 2:19). In all cases, it describes the removal of a spiritual problem.

Sermon Outlines

The first outline is designed for use if the scheduling of this series corresponds with the Church Year calendar. The second outline is provided for general use at any time of the year.

OUTLINE 1: (LECTIONARY-BASED SERMON)

Gospel Connection:

Mark 6:34 describes Jesus as having “compassion” (splagchnizomai), because the people who massed around him were like sheep without a shepherd. The word “compassion” in Greek implies feelings “coming from the bowels,” which were the source of love and pity in Greek culture. In Latin com means “with” and passion is connected to “suffering.” From deep within, Jesus understood that they were lost and alone. They were in need of comfort and connection. Jesus is the good
shepherd and we are the sheep. Jesus gathers, cares, feeds, waters, protects, and leads us on the righteous paths of life. The sermon for today could also reflect on Psalm 23 and its images of a compassionate shepherd and the shepherd's beloved flock.

**Title: Walls that Divide**

**Introduction:** Divisions have often existed in God's house. For several hundred years walls were built in Christian churches to separate the common people from the eucharist and worship area. The practice of screening off the altar is an ancient one. It contributed to the feeling of mystery and divine presence. A wall or veil also symbolically served to separate the clergy from the people.

1. **Before Christ, such separation was typical of ancient Greek worship.**
   a. They kept their gods safely tucked away in a far off place (temples or Mount Olympus).
   b. Occasionally, their gods would mix with humans (almost always with disastrous results). The greatest tragedy of ancient times was “Oedipus Rex.” In the theatrical rendition of this story, the gods conspire to demolish a person's life.

2. **Even after Christ, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 divided people from God and each other by...**
   a. Highly criticizing the Greek Orthodox Church for differences from the Roman Catholic Church.
   b. Persecuting Jews and Muslims by requiring them to wear special dress so that they could be distinguished from Christians.
   c. Establishing a Fifth Crusade to violently “Free the Holy Land” from non-Christians.
   d. Advocating the use of sanctuary walls, or “Rood Screens,” which is ironically derived from the Saxon word *rode* meaning “cross.” Martin Luther and the early reformers encouraged the removal of these barriers and the reestablishment of open space in worship.

3. **The very fact that Jesus came into this world reveals that God wants to break down barriers that separate us from one another.**
   a. In 1871, a portion of temple wall was discovered with the inscription “Let no foreigner enter within the partition and enclosure surrounding the temple. Whoever is arrested will himself be responsible for his death which will follow.” Gentiles (anyone who was not a Jew) were prohibited from going beyond a special court made for them.
   b. When Jesus visited the Court of the Gentiles, he found it filled with merchants. This area was originally set aside for prayers and teaching where pilgrims of all nations could seek answers. Upset by this practice, he drove the merchants from the temple.

4. **The author of Ephesians also addresses the need to break down the walls of hostility that divide one another.**
   a. There are divisions between the Jewish Christians and Gentiles who were new to the faith. They were called names like the “uncircumcised ones.”
   b. Ephesians 2:14 remind us that “[Christ] has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

**Conclusion:** Jesus eliminates the tensions between followers and builds them up to be an open and caring fellowship of believers. We are called to be an inclusive church. Galatians 3:28 reminds us that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” That is why so many pagans understood that Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection were such good news. This was the best news ever. God does not desire tragedy and separation. Jesus has compassion on us! God loves us in Christ! Our response is great joy! Thanks be to God!
OUTLINE 2: (THEMATIC SERMON)

Title: “Life Together”

Introduction: Dietrich Bonhoeffer was deeply influenced by the letter to the Ephesians. In his book Life Together he refers to Ephesians nine times (more than any other epistle). He describes the way that he and other Christians built the “Brother’s House” during times of persecution in Germany. This was not a construction of brick and mortar with walls and a ceiling. This was a fellowship of believers who cared and supported one another. He says, “Concerning the details of their daily routine, they envisaged a simple common life, a daily schedule of prayer, mutual encouragement, common theological studies, and worship together.”

1. Bonhoeffer taught that to be “in community” is the same as being “in Christ”
   a. In 1935, the Nazi party discovered and shut down their efforts.
   b. In a twist of divine irony, Bonhoeffer volunteered to serve in German military intelligence. He used the powers and dollars of that position to protect Jews and arranged for many to escape to Switzerland.
   c. Eventually he was caught, imprisoned, and executed weeks before the German surrender, along with his brother and brothers-in-law.

2. Bonhoeffer was convinced that our faith in Christ drives us back into the world to make a difference.
   a. “Whoever sets eyes on the body of Jesus Christ in faith can never again speak of the world as though it were lost, as though it were separated from Christ; he can never again with clerical arrogance set himself apart from the world” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Eberhard Bethge, Fortress Press, 2000, p. 884).
   b. Bonhoeffer concluded that to be “in Christ” means to share in the world. Good, therefore, is not an abstraction but a process, a movement, constantly accepting the world and people and taking part in their lives.
   c. Ethics is helping people “to learn to live with.” It is the Christ-like in the midst of the human . . . Christ leads, not beyond, but right into the realities of everyday life. Christian life is not an end in itself, but puts one in a position to live as a person before God, not as super humans, but to exist for others” (Bonhoeffer, p. 720).

Conclusion: Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a martyr who dedicated his life to building authentic Christian community and breaking down walls between Christians and Jews. St. Paul wrote, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). Bonhoeffer was described by many as a humble and caring man who sought to share the hostility-ending, barrier-busting love of Christ.

Children’s Lesson

The first option is designed for use if the scheduling of this series corresponds with the Church Year calendar. The second option is provided for general use at any time of the year.

OPTION 1: (LECTIONARY-BASED LESSON)
Supplies needed: 1) a sheet with a hem pre-cut to make it easy to rip in half; 2) small gifts or treats for each child.

Divide children up by two (color of eyes, hair, or age). With another adult helper, place the sheet between them to establish a temporary wall. Provide some treats or small gifts for the children on one side. Discuss the problems of separation. Remind them of the barrier-busting role of Jesus. Like the temple veil, tear the sheet from top to bottom and give the treats/gifts to all.

OPTION 2: (THEMATIC LESSON)
See: Liturgy Supports/Ideas and Images for Worship/Experiential Worship/Option #1
Ideas and Images for Preaching
What follows are a variety of creative ways to enhance the communication of the message. While some links to ideas and images are provided, permission and payment may be required for congregational use.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION
Ways to create an active learning environment.

Have a dialog with a seasoned member of the congregation as part of the sermon that reviews the history of your congregation. What have been moments of tension and division? How were they resolved? Have worshippers “share the peace” following this presentation.

CLIPS
TV, movies, and miscellaneous video.

Option #1: Rebuilding (from http://www.sermonspice.com/videos/355/rebuilding)

Option #2: Walls (from http://www.sermonspice.com/videos/17423/walls)

Option #3: Walls (from http://www.sermonspice.com/videos/19925/walls)

DRAMA
Scripts, improvisational igniters, or links to dramatic resources.

Option #1: Invite members who are skilled at drama or dance to act out Robert Frost’s “Mending Wall.”

Option #2: Invite an actor to monologue appropriate passages from Bonhoeffer’s Life Together.

ILLUSTRATIONS
Stories and anecdotes that enhance understanding.

Illustration #1: Berlin Wall
The most significant wall of modern times was the Berlin Wall, which was tangible evidence of an “Iron Curtain” separating communist East Germany from democratic West Germany after World War II. The 97-mile (156 km) wall was constructed of stone and concrete. It stood for more than 25 years and hundreds of people lost their lives trying to cross it. In 1988, a Lutheran pastor started holding weekly “Prayers for Peace” services at his church of St. Nicholas. Rev Christian Führer (führer is the German word for “leader”) was significantly influenced by the teachings of Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He advocated non-violent change. Numbers increased every week till tens of thousands gathered in his church courtyard for weekly prayer vigils. The movement culminated with the “Peaceful Revolution” on November 9th, 1989, when the Berlin Wall came tumbling down. The oppressive government was experiencing a time of great weakness and the strength of the Christian witness and desire for the God-given gift of freedom contributed to lasting change.

Author’s Note: One week later, I broke bread with one of the Lutheran pastors who participated in peaceful rallies and was active in tearing down walls. He was enthusiastic (filled with the Spirit). He had seen God’s hand at work in the destruction of the walls and collapse of the oppressive government. He stated that the authorities did not challenge the religious gatherings because they knew God’s transforming power was at work in these people and events.

Illustration #2: The Temple Veil
Within the Jerusalem temple there had been many walls that were used to divide people from one another. There was a progression of separate areas. There was a Court of the Gentiles (anyone could enter), Court of the Women (for Jews alone), Court of the Israelites (Jewish men alone), Court of the Priests (where priests alone offered sacrifices), and the Holy of Holies, which was reserved for a select few such as the high priest. (This area was veiled by a curtain estimated to be over 50 feet tall.)

Today’s gospel is from Mark. Near the conclusion of Mark, the author wrote, “At the time of Jesus’ death on the cross; Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he
breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:37-39). Ephesians' author may have had this gospel passage in mind. The torn temple curtain was a powerful demonstration of God's desire to break down man-made barriers. After the "dividing wall" was torn apart, a centurion (a Gentile) realized and proclaimed "Jesus is the Christ!" Reconciliation with God and others can happen when our barriers come tumbling down.

**PROJECTION**

NOTE: The PowerPoint presentation provided for use in the Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies can be easily adapted for worship settings.

**PROPS AND OBJECTS**

Ideas for designing a more multi-sensory sermon.

Option #1: An object of division, such as a room divider, might be used with effect.

Option #2: Make connections with *MasterBuilders Bible for Men*, an official Bible study resource for Lutheran Men in Mission.

**QUOTES**

Theme supporting, thought provoking, words from notable sources.

Option #1: Robert Frost—“Good fences make good neighbors” (from “Mending Wall”). NOTE: Many have misunderstood or misquoted this final verse. The wider context of this poem challenges the presumed wisdom of this familiar phrase.

Option #2: Dietrich Bonhoeffer—“Whoever sets eyes on the body of Jesus Christ in faith can never again speak of the world as though it were lost, as though it were separated from Christ; he can never again with clerical arrogance set himself apart from the world” (from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* by Eberhard Bethge, Fortress Press, 2000, p. 884).

Option #3: Go to the Web site of St. Nicolas Church in Leipzig to read about the fall of the Berlin Wall in Rev. Christian Führer's own words (http://www.nikolaikirche-leipzig.de/content/view/64/100/)

**IMAGES**

Links to photos or art that enhance multimedia presentations.

Option #1: Breaking down walls (from http://bradydenger.theworldrace.org/blogphotos/theworldrace/bradydenger/brick_wall.jpg)


Option #3 Temple warning inscription (from http://rambambashi.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/jerusalem_temple_inscr_iam.jpg)


Option #5: Rood screen (from http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/36/Wechselburg-Lettner.jpg)

**LINKS**

Are you a helpful link? Consider making any creative worship ideas that your congregation develops available for more churches to use via the social networking features of www.bookoffaith.org.