

“No Longer Strangers”

Ephesians 2:11-22

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So last Monday I was on my way to the bank and stopped in the right hand turn lane at a red light. The green arrow for those turning left had just changed, and I could have dashed out in front of those cars turning, or I could have turned into the right lane allowing the oncoming cars to make their turn but only into the left lane which would have meant if they had wanted to make a quick right turn into the businesses on my side of the street, I would have definitely been in their way.

My manners told me to just relax 2 seconds and then make my turn. BUT the gentleman behind me didn't agree. He blasted his horn and then when I looked into my rear view mirror, he was going like this....(spinning motion around his head). Either he meant that I was cuckoo or he meant to get my wheels going, which I did after the car with the right of way had cleared the intersection. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that had that gentleman known me, he would not have treated me so rudely. But we were strangers.

It is easy to be strangers in our world today. There are so many people we can't possibly be friends with them all. In addition, our culture encourages us to remain strangers. Our lives are too busy. Most of our houses have walls around the yards; some subdivisions have another wall around the subdivision. When I was a child, I remember yards with no walls or at most the wire fencing that at least you could see through. But it's easy to isolate oneself and to remain strangers with people.

In today's Ephesians' lesson, we read about walls and strangers and things that separate human beings. Paul is writing about some problems with racism in the early church. Some Jewish Christians, and remember the first Christians were Jews, insisted that the Gentiles become like them (be circumcised) before they could be Christians. They saw the Gentiles as "not like us". They thought the Gentiles "less pure and less worthy." Jesus was THEIR Messiah, and the Gentiles shouldn't forget it.

But Paul's message was that racial heritage and the traditions thereof doesn't matter. What matters is that Christ makes us one; Christ breaks down the walls that separate us. How does Christ make us one? Jesus did not walk around proselytizing people to become Baptist, Methodist, Catholics, or UCC. In fact, Jesus was a faithful Jew. He

never used the word Christian. He called people to repentance, to reform, to faithfulness.

He never said one had to change their God given ethnicity to be a Christian. He said "follow me, do what I do." And his major work was to build community, invite everyone to the table of fellowship and wholeness, and to be very clear about not having "insiders" and "outsiders."

So Paul is echoing the Christ message. "Stop creating barriers, either physically, ethnically, socially, economically, to people being one; because in Christ all those walls don't matter anymore."

We hear a lot about walls these days. Whether it's the Great Wall of China, walls built in Palestine, walls along our borders, they all have the purpose of keeping out the "stranger." I don't feel smart enough or informed enough to make judgments about the politics of walls and so don't worry, I'm not going to go there. I DO believe that as we think about the whole of humanity for which Christ died, we are compelled by our Christian conscience to come with humility and compassion to the difficult and demanding decisions about our world that is shrinking, and where the lines between peoples and nations are becoming blurred, we are called to do our best to make those decisions carefully, thoughtfully and out of the politics of Jesus which was and is a politics of compassion.

I want to share with you a trip I took about 1996 with about 20 youth from the UCC church in Claremont. I have a few pictures to show as well. The trip was carefully planned; I had not taken any youth out of the country before, and taking minors across borders requires particular attention and documentation.

As you'll see Christina was one of the youth who went. We crossed the border at Tijuana and met our hosts from the YMCA. Coincidentally, their "motto" was the same as the UCC's, painted on our blue van, "that they all may be one." These are pictures of the Y's kitchen where we ate. The dorm room had bunks stacked three deep. I have to say I didn't sleep much; I worried about what to do if there happened to be an earthquake. These bunks were not substantial.

We worked in their childcare center painting the playground and some rooms. We took a bus ride to the border at evening. We saw in the shadows folks building small fires to warm their supper before preparing to scale the wall. We saw the barbed wire and spikes on top the wall. We were told that there was a set time each night when the border patrol took a break and that was when folks would try to cross over. Everyone

knew that the U.S. wanted a certain number to successfully enter because our economy depends on it. Then we went to a place where the wall meets the ocean and there the wall is sheet metal extending several hundred feet out into the Pacific. The kids stood in front of the wall where some unknown writer had painted these words: "This is the new Berlin Wall."

When we came home the next day, I must admit there was a great sigh of relief in my heart as I got all those kids back into the U.S.A. Then we took them to the Carlsbad beach for a fun, relaxed time and a chance to debrief the trip.

I remember as we turned off the 10 onto Indian Hill in Claremont, I overheard the kids saying, "Now we can brush our teeth with tap water." They mentioned many other things which previously they'd taken for granted but now understood were not the way everyone in the world lives. It's safe to say their gratitude for their lives had greatly increased.

Paul says that in Christ we are no longer strangers, in Christ barriers are broken. If we are no longer strangers we treat each other as friends. Though we may try to maintain our safety with all kinds of walls both without and within our hearts so that we won't be hurt physically or emotionally, these attempts are often futile. Our world no longer allows it and most people can't forever maintain a wall around their hearts. But Christ has presented a new possibility. In Christ we are one. You don't have to become like me for me to love you. I don't have to become like you for you to love me. We both love Christ and therefore; we are no longer strangers.

I'd like to close our worship by showing you one of the UCC commercials which you may not have seen. It's my favorite: *"Here's the Church, Here's the Steeple"*.