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BREAKING AND BUILDING

by Marci Morey

It doesn't take much observation to realize we are a divided society:

Politics divides: Conservative vs Liberal. Republican vs Democrat.

Economics divides: Rich vs Poor.

Geography divides: Jews vs Palestinians (and how we, as America and individuals, respond)

Sexual and Gender identity divides.

Anti-Abortion vs Pro-Choice.

Religion divides – The classic Christian vs Muslim vs Jews. Division between Christian denominations or even within a specific denomination, even within the United Methodist Church.

Smoking vs Not Smoking.

Working moms vs Stay at home.

Ultimately, these are all different ways of saying Us vs Them.

On a more personal note, we face conflict and division with the people we interact with and live with every day:

Are you a morning person or a night owl?

Should toilet paper come off the roll from the inside or the outside?

Be honest, who has ever had a conflict over how the dishwasher should be loaded?

Conflict and division is inevitable. How do we get past the conflict and break down the walls that divide us?

Our main passage today is from Ephesians (2:11-22) and talks about breaking down the dividing wall. My understanding is that Paul was referring to the walls of the Temple that defined the various areas and set limits for where certain groups of people were allowed to be.

The structure of the Temple was somewhat like a box within a box within a box. At the core was the Holy of Holies which housed the Ark of the Covenant. The Holy of Holies is where God lived and contained the manifest presence of God, the Shekinah, centered between the cherubim of the Ark. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and then only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

Outside the Holy of Holies was the Holy Place. Again, only the Priests could enter to perform various duties such as offering incense. Priests were chosen by lot and could expect to get this opportunity

maybe once in their lifetime. We're familiar with the story in Luke 1, when Zechariah was chosen by Lot. He was in the Holy Place when the Angel appeared to announce the birth of John the Baptist.

The Court of Priests housed the Altar of Sacrifice. It was visible from some of the outer courts, but only Priests could enter this court.

All Jewish men could enter the next court, the Court of the Israelites.

All Jews, both men and women, could enter the Court of Women. This is where the alms boxes for the poor were located. One source I read said there was constant dancing, singing and music.

And outside all of those was the Court of Gentiles. Anyone could enter the Court of Gentiles, and the area was primarily a bazaar. Vendors were everywhere. They were selling souvenirs, sacrificial animals, food and doing currency exchanges. It was the Court of Gentiles that was the setting for Jesus throwing out the Money Changers.

If the Ephesians were familiar with the Temple, they would know there were strict rules about who could go where and thick walls dividing each section from the others. In this passage, Paul talks about the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles and tells the readers that Christ broke down that "barrier of hatred that divided us." I don't know if the Ephesians understood just how radical it was to say the walls had come down. Paul said we are all equal before God, that we all have full access. Those divisions are no longer significant.

"The barrier of hatred that divided us"... The walls are still there. We are still divided. We don't come to Christ and *Poof* everyone always gets along. So what does it mean that the walls between us are broken? Especially when it seems that too many people spend their time building those same walls up again.

First, I think it's important to acknowledge that we *are* different. Inclusion doesn't mean uniformity.

America is described as a melting pot, which makes me think of when ice cream melts into a soup and one bite is indistinguishable from another.

When I picture Inclusion, I prefer the picture of a stew – we're all in this together, but our individuality is still apparent. If you eat a bite of carrot followed by a bite of beef followed by a bite of potato followed by a bite of onion and chase it down with a swig of broth, you aren't going to have the same taste experience as you would if you cooked all those ingredients together first. In a good stew you can recognize each ingredient and understand how they add to the overall end result. Together we are greater than the sum of our parts.

Second, we are not responsible to change the whole world. No matter what we do here at SUMC and no matter how I respond to those around me, there will still be division in the world. I can't change it all. But I can break down walls around me, and I can work with all of you to break down walls at SUMC. Hopefully, any changes we make here will leak out and affect the broader community where we live and work.

When it comes down to individual relationships, the problem is I still have strong opinions, and so do you, and all too often those opinions are on different sides of the debate, whatever that debate may be. A few minutes ago I gave a list of just a few of the things that divide us in this world. Simply coming to

Christ doesn't change our hearts and take away that conflict.

My son once told me that his motto as a Christian was to "Love God with all my heart, soul and mind. Love my neighbor as myself. And then do whatever I want." I've told that to some people and they take exception to the 'do whatever you want' part. They think that gives people license to sin or simply to be jerks.

But the 'do whatever you want' part is built on the "Love God and love your neighbor" part. I may want to yell at other drivers or gossip about my co-workers or arrogantly engage in a political debate that does nothing but build walls and hurt feelings, but do any of those things show love?

We can't "do whatever we want" if that 'doing' builds walls between those around us.

Now, I like mental reminders like my son's motto, but that one is too long for me. When I find myself in a situation where I need to stop and think, reciting "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. And then do whatever you want" sometimes takes too long. It's too much to remember in the moment.

I'd like to share my new motto, and maybe it can help you, too.

You may have noticed the sign above the door at the back of the sanctuary.



I don't think I'd noticed that sign until I started coming up front and singing with Praise Power. I'd look at it and think "Love", that's a good reminder. Love should be what drives us.

Now, sometimes I can be a bit of a slow learner, and I'm a bit embarrassed to tell you that it took me at least a year before I realized that the letters in that sign were in the middle of each block of color and were surrounded by the background. For the letters "L", "V" and "E", the background is darker than the letter. For the second letter in the word, the background is lighter. It was a bit of a shock when I realized the sign actually said "Live."

I don't know if you've ever believed one thing and then been provided with information and realize that what you believe isn't really true but the right answer is something different. If you're like me, it can be difficult let go of your old belief. You know the new information is true, but that old information is still part of your history.

That's what I face with that sign above the door. Ever since that day when I realized it really said "Live" and not "Love," whenever I see the sign, I see both words and read it as "Live Love." That has become my motto, and that is one part of how I think we can build an inclusive community here at SUMC.

As individuals in a faith community, how do we "Live Love"? What does it mean on a Sunday morning when we say we are Inclusive?

When someone comes through the doors of this church -- and I'm not saying "someone new," I'm just saying "someone." I mean each and every person here today and every Sunday -- when someone comes through those doors, we have a choice how we respond to them. Sometimes it's easier to accept a visitor. We can welcome them and mean it because, well sometimes because we don't know them. They haven't annoyed or hurt us yet.

If we truly believe today's Scripture, then Christ broke down the walls of hostility that divide us. That means when faced with that person who slighted you or said something that hurt you, you can respond in love. Not to simply stuff the hurt away and pretend like it's not there, but to choose to forgive and let it go.

The passage in Ephesians ends with "Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit." What are we building at Salem United Methodist Church? Are we building a place where God lives and His love is evident? Or are we building a place where we hold onto the division between us, building walls?

I want to be a church where visitors and members alike know they are loved and welcomed. I don't want us to simply be "friendly" but to be a welcoming family. I want to be a place where each individual's gift is recognized and celebrated. I want to be a place where we can disagree and still like each other. I want to be a church that, both as individual members and as a body, truly Lives Love.

Amen.