

Sermon for Proper 11 Year B

2 Samuel 7:1-14a and Psalm 89:20-37; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

We humans are great builders – towns and turbines, subways and satellites, farms and factories. We can take justifiable pride in these accomplishments, but too often we tend to do our building for all the wrong reasons.

Remember the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel? Those builders achieved amazing things – they were on their way to building a tower to heaven itself – but they were constructing a temple to their own glory. God scrambled their languages and put some limits on their ambition.

Unfortunately, we took those skills we had at building one very tall tower and got really good at building lots and lots of walls. We build walls to protect and to shelter, to corral and to contain, to mark boundaries and to defend them.

In fact, the walls themselves work in concert with the curse of Babel – they help us define and defend all the differences between us. We usually start with languages and nations, but before long we're segregating ourselves by customs and habits, by religions and ideologies. The distinctions get finer, and the walls grow more numerous. Ever creative in our pride, we begin to build walls to the glory of our own distinctiveness, and then convince ourselves that God dwells within our own particular boundaries.

Into the midst of this situation comes Jesus, and as we read in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians today, Christ "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Languages and nations? Christ proclaims peace to those who are far off and those who are near. Religions and ideologies? Jesus was prepared even to "abolish the law with its commandments and ordinances," in order to create one new humanity.

Jesus takes down whatever walls we have raised to create divisions amongst us. Insiders and outsiders? The walls come down. Citizens and foreigners? The walls come down. Oppressors and victims? In Christ Jesus, the walls come down.

Jesus isn't just doing demolition work here – he's not trying to bring about a sort of spiritual anarchy. He's working to raise a new structure, to join us together into a holy temple. Jesus is working to reverse the curse of Babel, first by healing our divisions and then by creating a new tower. This tower, though, is built to God's glory. Instead of striving to reach heaven from the earth, this temple is built to invite the presence of God, to be "a dwelling place for God."

Paul tells us that Jesus does all this through his own body. "In his flesh he ... has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." At least in part, Paul is talking about the crucifixion. On the cross, Jesus accepted the full weight of our pride and our contention, allowing his own body to be broken in order to show us the folly of our divisions and hostilities.

Here again the story does not end in mere destruction. In the resurrection, Jesus not only witnesses to new life, but acts to reconcile all our divided factions to God "in one body through the cross." In a sense, this is a natural extension of Jesus' work of bodily healing throughout his earthly ministry. In our gospel reading for today, remember how the crowds rush to meet Jesus, bringing the sick to lay

along his path. The sick and injured come to him with nothing but their faith and their own weakness and vulnerability. Jesus meets not only their needs to be healed, but their needs to be seen and acknowledged.

Sickness or disability in that culture was a sentence of separation. Likely it meant a life of dependence or even of begging. Certainly it meant exclusion from religious life, being declared unclean for temple worship, prevented from drawing near to the physical presence of God that the temple represented. Jesus instead brings God's presence directly to those most excluded and most in need. Jesus does not let even the religious law stop him – he heals on the Sabbath, he heals in synagogues; he overturns tables in the temple and the sick come to him to be healed there.

Jesus is healing more than bodily illness; he is healing division and exclusion. In fact, he is creating a new Body, gathering together the crowds who have been like sheep without a shepherd, and bringing God's presence among them. Teaching and healing, Jesus begins to assemble a new community bound together by faith in the nearness of God.

In the cross and resurrection, Jesus consummates all this work of teaching healing. He shows himself to be present even in surrender and suffering and death. He surpasses all those ills in the resurrection, and invites all of humanity to become part of his own body. He not only restores the temple of his own body in three days, but begins to shape all of us into the Body of Christ. In the cross, the two great metaphors for the church are united and find their basis: the church as the Body of Christ, and the church as the new temple of God.

We all are invited to join with the apostles and prophets in their self-giving role of building this new and holy temple. More, we are invited to hold each other up in service, prayer and worship, even as the stones of the temple together bear the weight of the whole.

This can only happen because of Jesus the cornerstone, who also happens to be the master architect. We may look at the church and see it terribly fragmented. We may look at our fellow Christians across the dividing line of denominations and worship styles and theologies, and despair of ever working together. Frankly, we may not want to be placed side-by-side with them in a new and unified structure. But if we come to seek healing, in humility and in faith, then maybe we will see that Jesus, who is able to heal our divisions, is also able to grow us into one body of many different sorts of members, so long as we remember that Jesus is the head. And Jesus as our master-builder can make use even of our differences in order to create a perfect balance and counterpoise. He will work until the only walls that remain standing are the walls of one great "holy temple in the Lord."

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Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

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