

In June of 1990, I had the privilege of traveling throughout Europe while performing in several countries. I accompanied the Mona Shores Choir, directed the Handbell Choir, and gave organ recitals in St. Petersburg, in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and The Netherlands. It was a remarkable experience for which I am deeply grateful. At one point during that tour, we took the ferry from Denmark to what was then East Germany. It was just days before the borders came down. We made our way to Berlin and, while we were in Berlin, the borders that had divided East from West did come down. During our stay in Berlin, we were also able to chop down our own piece of the infamous Berlin Wall. My own little chunk of that memorable, insidious, dividing wall now sits on a bookshelf in my kitchen as a reminder of that trip and our historic experience. When I look at my piece of the Berlin Wall, it reminds me that walls of hostility, whether concrete or metaphoric, are created because of fear and they ultimately divide families, communities, and nations as the Berlin Wall did for so many years.

When the Berlin Wall came down and when the borders between East and West Germany dissolved, I had so hoped we as a people were entering a new place and time in the history of the world. However, when

we look at the past few years, it seems we cannot learn from history because we now live in a time of epoch wall-building – walls that are seen, unseen, figurative and literal. And, it seems we **always** develop such absurd arguments as we attempt to justify our wall building efforts. We say we build walls because they will keep us safe. Because we are afraid or in danger. Because we feel threatened. Because we have been hurt by others. Because we are protecting what is ours or what we have. But guess what, all these justification projects and arguments show no grace, no attempt to understand those considered “other,” and they serve to create divisions and hostility between people. To move beyond this, to learn to live as builders of the household of God and not builders of dividing walls, we must change the way we look at those we consider “other.” And, we can learn something about this in all of today’s scripture readings.

In our reading from Jeremiah, the prophet gives us a window into **his** world, one that can enable us to look out upon **our** world with clearer insight. In a nutshell, things are not good in Jeremiah’s world. The shepherds, the rulers of the land, those in charge of leadership at every level throughout the land, are not shepherding. The sheep, the people, are scattered and, when the people are scattered, fear and walls of hostility develop. Shepherds are called to care for and tend the sheep. However,

the rulers, those charged with leading justly and caring for the people, those charged with making sure that no one gets lost, those charged with helping the flock find the green pastures and still waters, those charged with helping the sheep revive their soul and find the right pathway are NOT attending to the sheep. In fact, they are **destroying** the sheep.

Through the prophet, Jeremiah, God is addressing not just individuals. God is addressing the whole nation, most especially those who hold power of any kind at any level. God is not happy with the state of civic affairs in Israel or Judah. So, the God of Jeremiah proclaims these words of judgement and hope: “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, oh you shepherds who have not shepherded, I will attend to your evil doings. Then I, myself, will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who **will** shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing says the Lord.” You see, the people were like sheep in need of a loving, caring, justice creating shepherd. After pronouncing words of judgement regarding the evil doings of the leaders, Jeremiah speaks of the righteous Branch who will be raised up, the one who will reign as king and deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness in the land so that Judah

will be saved, and Israel will dwell in safety. I think we can all look at the past few years of our lives and gain some insight from Jeremiah's words.

There is just so much in today's readings and, as always, these readings speak to us and tell us about **ourselves**. In Ephesians, we hear words addressing two groups engulfed in hostility, the Jewish people *and* the Gentiles. The Gentiles are getting a little too puffed up and the writer of Ephesians reminds them that **they** were once outsiders looking in. They were once strangers to the promises of God. The Greek word used here for outsiders is *xenos*, as in *xenophobia*, as in fear of the stranger. You see, they were once considered aliens, those literally alienated, estranged, from the commonwealth of Israel. And the Greek word used for this sense of commonwealth is *politeia*, which is about the administration of *civic affairs*. (Think back to the administration of civic affairs Jeremiah addresses.) This word used in Ephesians describes how we structure our society together as people, and it is the same root that gives us the word "*politics*." These stories and our stories are so connected!! You see, the writer of Ephesians says the Gentiles, who held a lot of power in that society, were once "without hope, without God in the world." And, there was hostility, animosity, and enmity between those who were called "the circumcision" and those who were called "the uncircumcision." With these

words we find a little biblical name calling – “the uncircumcision” – the ultimate “not us!” Now, just think about this. Who are the “not us” today? Who are the groups in opposition? Who are the groups engulfed in hostility? Where are the binary groupings of **us vs. them**? When we look back at our reading from Jeremiah, there are the sheep *and* the shepherds. Then and now, we find those at the economic top of the ladder *and* those who cannot even get on the first rung. There’s management *and* worker. Citizen *and* undocumented. Black *and* white. Men *and* women. Gay *and* straight. Politician *and* constituent. Republican *and* Democrat. Liberal *and* Conservative. Urban *and* rural. Advocates of gun control *and* advocates of gun rights. There are the socially elite *and* those who do not know what silverware to use when you get past a fork, knife, and spoon. There are Christian, Jew, *and* Muslim. There are people of faith *and* professed atheists. Quite honestly, we could go on and on. Doesn’t it kind of make you long for just two – “the circumcision” and “the uncircumcision?” We can find so many ways to slice and dice the world into “the us” and “the not us,” the us vs. them, and, when we do this, we always continue building dividing walls! It really can be despairing.

However, we can only build walls between us and others if that is all we see – someone who is “other.” That which is not us. Not-me. Not-us.

Not-one-of-us. As long as we define everything and everyone else in the world as not-ours and not-us, we will continue to build dividing walls, create supposed enemies, and throw bombs, both metaphorically and literally.

But, if we can see others as Jesus the **Good** Shepherd sees **all others**, if we see with compassion, if our stomachs literally turn over with love for those we see as the Greek word describes Jesus' compassion in today's gospel reading, we will **not** be able to build walls that divide. If we see the names, the hearts, the lives that struggle as we do, and if we see God's face in **all others**, then we **cannot** make the "other" less than us, less than God's precious children. You see, they **too** are God's precious children!

People of God, yes, we do need to build. But, instead of building walls that divide, we can build together. We can build to strengthen lives, build to serve, and build to love others. The writer of Ephesians tells us, "You are no longer strangers and aliens, you are citizens... and members of the household of God, built upon the **foundation** of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the **cornerstone**. In him the whole structure is joined **together** and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

People of God, Christ is our peace. Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us. **Live into this truth.**