

Our church building houses three congregations- York Center Church of the Brethren, Parables Community (for families with children and young adults with special needs) and God's Congregation Worship Center (non-denominational African American). We held a joint worship service to celebrate our unity and our diversity and to encourage our folks to meet each other. Pastor Christy shared the sermon with her colleagues, Pastor Jeanne Davies (Parables) and Pastor Carl Mabins (God's Congregation). The service was a meaningful and wonderful celebration! Here Pastor Christy's portion.

"Three Congregations—One Family in Christ"

Ephesians 2:14-22

Joint Worship Service: YCCOB, God's Congregation Worship Center, Parables Community

July 30, 2017

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

You may have noticed that we live in a divided world.

You may have noticed that human beings spend a lot of time designing, financing, building, and maintaining walls that separate people.

Family members do it.

Communities do it.

Nations do it.

Even churches do it.

I have four sisters- I know about building walls, maintaining resentments, and nursing grudges. We were experts at it for years. Fortunately, we have grown out of it. I can't say the same thing for our nation and our world, though.

If it makes you feel any better, our generation did not invent this desire to separate people- it has been happening for about as long as human beings have been alive on this earth.

The Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church in a town called Ephesus specifically because they were forgetting that Christ came to **include** not to **exclude**. In those days the two warring factions were the Jews and the Gentiles. Gentiles included everyone who was not a Jew. In the Old Testament we know that the Jews were God's chosen people, they had a special relationship with God. Even when they broke

that relationship - over and over again- God always called them back. God always honored the promises made to the people.

In the New Testament we find a new relationship- we find that God came to earth to be with us as one of us. In Jesus all people were considered chosen by God and the old dividing lines were no longer necessary. Jesus came to break down the ugly walls. But, you know how people are, they liked those walls, they were familiar with those walls, those walls were important to them so they continued to build and maintain all that separated God's people from one another.

If there is one message we should pay attention to in the Bible it is this—Jesus welcomed everyone. He invited everyone into God's family. **Everyone!** He reached out even to those who opposed God's love. He reached out even to those who were supposed to be his enemies. He reached even out to people who were turning their backs on God and he invited them into a new way to live. Here is what Paul told his friends in Ephesus.

"The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.

He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to God. That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone.

God is building a home. God is using us all in what God is building. God used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now God is using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home. (The Message)

And that, my friends, my sisters and brothers, is what I see God doing in this place- *a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.*

This new temple isn't so much the building as it is the community of believers who gather here. This new temple is a much more fragile structure than a building- although buildings can fail too- toilets overflow and you get a large hole in the ceiling of the women's bathroom downstairs. This new temple is more fragile because it is made, not of bricks and mortar, but of flesh and blood- it is made of us- fallible, selfish, immature, ignorant human beings. Christ tells us the most impossible thing: **We are the place where God wants to live!** Right here! Right now! With us!

So I look around, especially on a day like this and I wonder- is this a place where God wants to live? A place where God is honored and welcomed? Yes! I believe it is.

Jesus Christ came to overrule all of our human divisions and make a new humanity, a single community that celebrates its diversity.

Just because we all belong to Christ doesn't mean we should all be the same- the beauty of a gathering such as this is that we have such a variety of traditions, histories, understandings, gifts, and abilities. We are different genders, different colors, different ages, different people but through Christ we can call each other brothers and sisters.

Just like in the days of the Apostle Paul, the world will try to tell us who we are.

The world will try to identify us.

The world will try to put us in little boxes separated by big walls.

The world will try to make us turn against one another because of our differences.

My sisters and my brothers,

we cannot let the world tell us who we are,

we cannot let the world tell us how to live,

we cannot let the world tell us how to be the church.

We know how to be the church. Jesus Christ told us and he continues to tell us- "You are my body."

Our human made divisions are sinful and dangerous. We are called to another way of living- we are called to be a crucible, a laboratory, an incubator, a nursery, for the beloved community of God- bringing with us all that makes us unique and different and beautiful.

When the neighbors of that little church in Ephesus saw who was eating together at church potlucks they were astonished. No one did that-- ever. Folks, if we aren't shocking the neighbors, if we aren't challenging the stereotypes and biases of this world then we are not doing our job!

While the whole world is building walls- let us, in this place continue to give life to the beloved community of Christ.