

“Lasting Peace”
Ephesians 2: 1-11
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So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far-off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in the one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the Saints and also members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Time is so precious and time is so limited. There is so much yet to be taught and learned, so much yet to be proclaimed and explained, so much more to be discussed and organized. It does not matter whether we are a few months into a ministry or a few weeks from leaving one. Inside of every minister a voice cries out, “We will never have enough time.” Even though a seed that has been planted in the rich soil of First Church has begun to produce grain, it seems like the planting season has just begun. Then the Lord’s voice enters this inner dialogue (a voice that for some reason has acquired a definite female timbre) and says, “Think about the application of that agricultural metaphor to the work of ministry, it really does not fit the reality of either faith or life.” The experience of life and faith is more complicated than the simple cycle of seed time, growth time, and harvest. Every pastor, every church family member is called to do all three seasons of ministry as needed and that necessity is rarely a neat A-B-C progression, nor is the timing of God’s work an open book. That is, to plant, nourish and harvest, each ministry will likely extend beyond the span of one pastorate and even sometimes beyond one human generation.

We experienced an intergenerational harvest in the last church I served in Chicago. A new building was built two years before the great depression. Most of the church family had just enough money for life’s necessities, and certainly not enough to pay off an expensive church mortgage. The pastor, a diminutive Scotsman, the Reverend Asa Ferry convinced congregational members to buy a \$5,000 life-insurance policy naming the church as beneficiary. The premium was affordable, tax deductible, and a signed policy was acceptable collateral for borrowing. Three decades after the death of Reverend Ferry, an occasional check for \$5,000 would arrive through the mail. It was a brilliant solution that saved the church. However, there were church members who called the church building and this plan to save it, “Ferry’s Folly” because it would change the church and the neighborhood, and circulated a petition for his dismissal.

We thanked God for this dreamer who was supporting the ministry of a pastor he would never see. The life of faith is the life of continuing regeneration, of constant birth and rebirth.

The life of faith builds shelter and not protection, bridges and not walls. It is also a life of the rich harvest of truth and peace, there is no beginning or middle or end, and the three seasons are all intertwined. The constant in the Life of faith is growth and transformation. It is impossible to package God's truth or freeze it in place, or contain it behind walls, so that we can stop this dynamic movement from the ways of our familiar world to the innovative ways of God.

Change is not easy, that is why we build real or metaphoric walls around the world that we know, because walls mean safety. Surely, that wall of earth will survive Katrina and contain the threatening waters of Lake Ponchartrain. Surely the wall through the middle of Berlin will contain the people's hunger for freedom and self-determination. Walls keep people in their place. That is how walls create peace: that is the equation behind this assumption. From the Great Wall of China, to the walled-in holy of holies in the temple at Jerusalem, to the Maginot line to a proposed wall separating the United States from everyone to the south; the assumption is the same, isolation will bring peace and allow us to settle into our own version of family or church or community or nationhood. Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down. When in history has this wall-building strategy for making or finding peace ever worked? Aspiration cannot be contained, transformation cannot be contained, desperation cannot be contained.

Believe me dear friends I do not like change. When I drive to Lafayette, Indiana to visit my mother, I avoid Interstate 65, I purposefully choose old US41 because it bi-sects small Indiana prairie towns with charming names like Morocco, Kentland, Fowler and Boswell the self-proclaimed "Hub of the Universe." These towns have not changed one bit from the last time I played high school basketball in those cracker box gymnasiums. However, little backward Boswell in the heart of my prairie Shangri-La is no longer isolated from the winds of change. It is about to become the ethanol capital of the Midwest.

Drastic change is such a jolt to the system. I empathize with those of you who have lost both parents and sold your parents' house to strangers for whom it is now home, these new residents who may, if they are kind, they will allow you to walk through, but it won't be the same nor will the town be the same.

Christ did not come to leave the world untouched. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, behold I make all things new." The world provides a mountain of disturbing news that strums our fears and stimulates wall building. The challenge is to us as Christians is twofold: first, letting go of the old which is so familiar and embracing the new which is still taking shape. Second, knowing when change is God's doing and when it is human destructiveness having its way with God's creation and God's creatures. To receive the alpha and omega Christ and the calming power of his peace, we must let go of the old angers and

fears that fuel isolation. We must get rid of the tools, and get out of the wall building business. Somehow I don't believe that letting go is as difficult for us to do or understand. We are the vocational and economic Globetrotters of the world and have lived in so many places that the word home is an oblong blur. We understand how the disciples could drop their nets and follow him. Following our careers is easy. Follow the zigzag list of addresses across the country and even on several continents. So we know what it takes to leave for a secure life because our work security depends on our willingness to make radical changes on short notice.

Turning from everything that will keep us from embracing the peace of Christ is the ultimate security move for the ultimate right reason. Our past is similar the Ephesian gentiles; we have had our agnostic times and seasons. We have been without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of God's people, we have been strangers to the covenants of promise, having periods of time when there has been no hope and without God in the world. We have walked that Path at some time in our lives, some of us may be there now, and on the inside we are grieving the loss of our faith.

It is so deceptively simple to say that Christ is the answer, but I will say that, know that those words are a call to do a 180 degree life turn. Turn from the dividing wall's of grief, anger, sadness, hostility: turn to the living Christ of peace, turn to this awakening family of faith, turn to the hunger for prayer, joy, learning, and meaningful service. By turning and leaving the world behind, we create space that Jesus will enter and occupy.

Transformation begins with our decision, not by magic, or some pastor's eloquence or crafty ministry, but by our decision to open our lives from the surface to the center and let Christ in. That is the beginning of spiritual transformation and the change from anxiety to peace, from life isolated behind protective walls to an open and expectant soul.

How does he know when change is God's leading, and not some form of self-deception? Aside from our knowledge of Scripture or familiarity with Christ and the willingness to gather in small groups with dear trustworthy believing friends with whom we can test our perceptions, there is no other way, than gathering together to share the peace of Christ, and through living, worshiping, praying, learning, and by serving together. The old bootstraps individualism will not work. If we choose this faith journey we will walk with brothers and sisters who have made the same choice. In addition to multiplying gifts this new life without walls opens the way to the joy of being with good and honest people who live by God's Word and tell each other the truth in love. That sounds so good, in fact too good to be true. It is good, very good and it is true. Life without walls is God's grace gift to us through Christ. Amen