

The Wall of Law

[Ephesians 2:11-22](#)

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

As the choir has drawn us into understanding, walls can have two effects upon gatherings of people: the effect of drawing people in and the effect of keeping people out. It came to my attention that on Tuesday when the Presbytery was meeting here, a number of pastors came up and congratulated me on the fact that we no longer need giving to support this church. I was taken aback. They said "Look at the signs of the door. It says no more donations. Thank you." Of course it was referring to the mission fair, but the sign gave a message. And sometimes it is a message that we do not intend. That is the nature of the law. Sometimes the law can give us a message of welcoming us in and keeping us safe, and sometimes it can keep us out and say that we are no longer wanted.

The overall movement of scripture is that God came in the midst of chaos of creation and said that there should be order. Out of that order, God brought covenants and law; and finally God brought us Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son to show us the fullness of love. And it is in that movement that we need to understand the role of law as being described in Ephesians chapter two.

Listen to the word of the Lord. "So then remember at one time, you Gentiles by birth called the uncircumcision by those who were called the circumcision, a physical circumcision made by the flesh of human hands. Remember that you were at that time without Christ being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenant of promise having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once off, far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he is our peace. In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with his commandments and ordinances that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two and thus making peace. And might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross thus putting to death that hostility through it.

And so Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who are far off and peace to those who are near. For through him, both of us have access in 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 upon the foundation with the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into holy temple in the Lord in whom you are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Oh Lord, may your Word through Jesus Christ empowered by the community of your Holy Spirit move us to become one people, that we might reach out in the name of Jesus Christ, and to places in the world that are cut off and without hope. On this World Communion Sunday, may we turn our minds and our hearts toward a world that is walled up and cut off. May Jesus Christ come and speak to us a word of encouragement in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I was about seventeen years of age. I was wearing my brand new red jacket that my mother had just given me for my birthday. I was driving the family car which was a 1957 Buick with a really hot engine in it. When that Buick was on you could hear it coming down the street like a pair of woofers. I was driving to a university concert. Not familiar with the streets and the nuances of turns, I stopped at a red light on a major boulevard, made a right turn signal and turned right into the school. Immediately I heard a siren and red lights flashing in my rearview mirror and as a seventeen year old, I was terror-stricken by the implications. The officer pulled me over and said "You know you ran that red light. Since you are under eighteen, you are going to have to appear with your father before a judge in order to take care of this ticket." It was getting worse by the minute. I was very concerned how my father would deal with this since this was my first ticket and I was a young driver. Much to my relief, when I told him that I got a ticket he said, "You know, everybody has to get their first ticket sometime." But then I told him that he had to go with me and appear before the judge so the judge could figure out what to do with me.

So we got dressed up together on the day of my appointment and we went and stood before the judge. The judge looked down at me (as judges often do) with a very firm look and he said "Well, I'll tell you something son. I'm going to invalidate this citation. I don't agree with the officer, in fact, I don't even like this officer. I think he's an opportunist who preys on teenagers who don't know what's going on. So I want him to stop doing that. I'm throwing out the ticket."

I was relieved to say the least. At that moment, I think I understood the nuance between law that is strictly enforced and law that is in the context of compassion, humanity and understanding. There is something in that moment when the judge said "Yes, I'm a judge but I'm also a human being who understands the dynamics of what's going on here."

The purpose of law can get rather confusing sometimes if it is taken away from the graciousness of human beings and the presence of Almighty God. For law is created to set boundaries so that we will be able to get along with each other and do things well. And that law has two forces attached to it: it is a force that draws people in, because it is a good law; and in a sense it is a law that pushes people out, because it may not be a good law or it is poorly enforced.

This was the nature of the dilemma of the people of God. God had given them a good law – a law that was set so they could model a kind of life together that would transcend all of the other nations of the world, so that people would see God in their midst. It was a law that was set there for them to pay attention to God and to each other: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. However, the longer that they lived with that law, the more that law began to define who they were as a people and they began to understand the law as a protective zone to keep other people out, not draw them in.

We sometimes have laws that keep other people out. Someone was talking to me not too long ago about their gated communities and their concern that the gate was no longer keeping out the thieves; there had been a theft of car and burglary of houses. Sometimes when we have gates in our doorways it is to protect our children. We put a gate at the top of our stairs when our children were very young and we didn't want them to fall down the stairs and that gate protected them. But sometimes that walling effect when children are older can be seen as confinement, and closing kids up in a closet, and keeping them from venturing out.

A wall has a two-fold effect. The Jerusalem temple was given such a wall around it to separate the committed Jewish people from Gentiles and women. And that was to have the impact to draw the Gentiles into the court so they would become Jewish people but over a period of time, it was used to keep people out and to block them. The sign on that wall around the time of Jesus read "No man of another race is to enter this enclosure around the temple, or be killed."

Law can be used as sign and symbol of grace or hostility. It is interesting that the book of Leviticus is a book all about law. If you've ever studied the book of Leviticus (and I don't know many people who have) you will notice that it is one law, after another, after another, about procedures, ceremonies and sacrifices. But in the midst of that book is one phrase that says it all. "As you love God, then love your neighbor as yourself."

The law is summed up, as Jesus pointed out, with that movement of love. Without that movement of love, law can be a frightening thing. Someone showed me a photograph of an eight-year-old boy who was caught stealing in Iran. His arm was put under the front tire of a truck and they drove over the arm as a punishment to help him remember not to steal. Law, in that context, is not only about drawing a boundary of love, but also vindication. Sometimes our laws are not so helpful in drawing people into the presence of God.

At the time of the Ephesian church, the Romans and the Greeks had plenty of laws: military laws and philosophical laws; but their laws were attached to many gods. There laws were based upon the fact that if you were strong, you were mighty; and if you were weak, you were nothing. The weak should be discarded. Women were disowned and children were treated as insignificant; the poor were to be avoided. It was not a law that included the compassion of God. There was hostility toward any group of people that treated themselves as separate from Roman law. And so the Jewish people were seen as part of the problem: people who were off by themselves and keeping their own agenda, who did not want to contribute to the Patramana. But the irony of the Patramana is, while Rome could change the laws of human beings, Rome could not change the hearts of human beings.

Without God in the midst of law, without faith among the people in the midst of law, there is no love, mercy, grace, or forgiveness. And law becomes a wall. The rules divide us and the opinions of people condemn us. Law kills relationships... kills spirits... and kills people. Our law, even in this country, is based upon the assumption that there is a good will and a good God in the midst of the people. That was the true assumption of the people of God.

In the law of Israel, the law was based upon the understanding that God was in the midst of his people. The law was there to draw people into a life of a good relationship among people and their neighbors. But law became a set of rules and a set of opinions. And the law became an act of judgment and condemnation rather than invitation to God.

And so Apostle Paul says "You Gentiles who were once far off have been brought near because Jesus will no longer treat you the way that the law has treated you. And thru the life and death of Jesus Christ, the blood of Jesus Christ, you have been brought near. You are no longer aliens and strangers. For Jesus has made both Gentile and Jew to be one and the wall is no longer the dividing factor."

Now people have sometimes thought that this wall of law had only to do with ceremonies and specific things in the law but I believe that the Apostle Paul understood with the depths of his being that law without love is dangerous; for he himself had used the law to kill people, to imprison people, and to hurt people.

How often in the world have we seen that in a sense, walls have two themes about them? The Berlin wall—the wall that was supposed to protect people, really kept people from leaving when they wanted to and kept people from coming in when they needed to. Now we see in the wall that divides the nation of Israel from the west bank—there are two sides to that wall. On the one hand, security and protection and on the other side, oppression and fear. The wall is not the solution and never has been. The law has is not the solution and never has been.

I say this at a bit of a risk in a sanctuary that is full of lawyers. But Calvin was a lawyer. One of the things that he knew about himself was that Jesus Christ came to make sure that the law was properly fulfilled. And so it is, that in Christ, Jesus' life and death put to death the hostility that the wall often creates. Rather than amplify the ancient pattern of rage and condemnation and people being cut off from one another, Jesus allowed the Gentiles and the Jewish people to come into his life and to kill him while he refused to return the favor. He refused to fight back. He refused to defend himself. He refused to take vengeance—to seek revenge. He told his followers: "Don't go out and fight my fight. Go and proclaim peace and good news."

And so, in the life and death of Jesus, we see that the law gave us a sense of completion and fulfillment. As Peterson in this text translation says, "Christ repealed the law code that became so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than helped. And he started the whole thing over with. He created a new kind of human being. A fresh start."

Several years ago, I met a man who owned a number of oil wells in Oklahoma. He told me this story of his encounter with a friend who also owned several of those oil wells and two of them were over the same mineral rights for a piece of land. This happened to be a Christian brother in Christ. The two of them could not agree on who should really have those mineral rights. Their fight accelerated to the point that they would no longer talk to each other. They would no longer be in the same room with each other. They finally ended up being seated across the table from each other with rows of lawyers on each side ready to have a fight over that land.

It struck the person who was talking to me, in the midst of their beginning conversation at that table, that this was missing the point. Here were two Christian brothers who could not even talk to each other about a piece of property. So he said, in the middle of the

conversation, to the fellow Christian across the table with whom he hadn't spoken to in many months, "Would you be willing to step outside with me for a short conversation?" The other man agreed and they took a walk together. He asked the question, "How did we get here? What happened? How did we turn against each other?" And in that conversation, they came back together with their sense that Jesus Christ is the core valuing presence in their life and that they should not fight this battle with lawyers.

Two people can't get along and they can't talk to each other; they become divorced and distant from one another and the real question to ask is: who is the core presence in our life? Remember, Jesus came to fulfill the law, not to put an end to it. Jesus came to make the law meaningful in the context of grace and law and mercy. We, as Christians, are called to build bridges with people with whom we have differences...with whom we are tempted to divorce...with whom we are tempted to make divisions.

If our partners can't work together, we seek the law. If our spouses can't live together, we seek the law. If our siblings can't agree with each other about inheritance, we seek the law. If our church members can't work together, we file suit. There is another way: it is Jesus Christ. I admit that there is a time when we've done everything we can in the name of Jesus, where we have gone as far as we can go, that the law may be the solution that we have set before us. But we go into that legal process with a sense of a call of Jesus Christ for reconciliation, for love, for mercy and forgiveness... and not for vengeance.

And so, this passage of scripture is very relevant for all of us today. It invites us to understand that all law is based in the fundamental assumption of a loving God and a presence of humanity helping people to be loving presences with each other and not allowing the law to draw us apart, but to bring us together.

It is in Jesus Christ that we commit our lives to a pattern of engagement even with our enemies and with those with whom we have hostility; and we never give up for the purpose of reconciliation. That is the message of Ephesians chapter two: all nations, all people from all parts of the Earth will come together at the table of Jesus Christ, and the law will not divide us. I believe in the law and I think the law is important. I'm in a nation of lots of good law. I'm here and I'm happy with this because Jesus Christ and the love of God is still a primary message that is still being communicated in many parts of this country. It is with that knowledge that we are able to move forward and do what God has called us to do. For in Jesus Christ, we have become one people. We no longer have a law that divides us.

Let us pray. Lord, Jesus Christ, on this World Communion Day, may you guide us into your presence and bring us into unity, that we might be people drawn by the love that you have shown to us by your life and death and resurrection. May we be people of healing wherever we go in the world and use law for reconciliation, redemption and for salvation. May your will be done on this Earth, as it is, in grace, in heaven. It is in your name that we offer ourselves. Amen.