

Sermon: Pentecost 9B July 21, 2024

Peace, Danville Pr. Lucy Kolin, preacher

Texts: Eph. 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

A while back I stumbled across an article by Maria Said, a newspaper reporter by profession who spent two years teaching English near Agordat, a small town in Eritrea. For someone used to the easily obtainable solitude and anonymity people of privilege can find in the United States, the experience was jarring, humbling, and revealing. Her article describing her experience was entitled, "Half-walls between us" and began this way:

*"For two years I shared my home with more than 30 children, four freedom fighters, a government bureaucrat, a wife-beater, a Red Cross worker with a taste for liquor, a number of prostitutes, a madman, and all the customers of the tea shop next door. That was not to the unexpected circumstance of living in a room with only half-walls..."**

Maria lived in a half-finished house where there was no time out from community, no relief from transparency, and no room for secrets. *"The air itself,"* she wrote, *"filled with the sounds of anger and laughter and the smells of cooking and fires, moved in and out of our homes, bringing messages from one place to another....The physical nearness of people imposed vigilance on my speech and actions. It is much easier to be a hypocrite when life can be divided into public and private parts. In a community with half-walls, there is little room for pretense."*

At first Maria thought she had very difficult and different neighbors, but after two years, she had to admit the similarities between them. *"I had heard the frustration, irritation, sadness, and jealousy in my voice as well as theirs. I had seen the fighter, the cripple, the prostitute, and the madman in myself. For two years, this proved to be my greatest challenge: to love people through their darkness and, even harder, accept the fact that they knew mine."*

But **from** this strange and difficult communion, times of joy and blessing emerged. One of the women who lived next door became Maria's best friend. *"When the dust storms came and the lights blew out, she would place her candles on top of the wall so that we could share the light. On nights when she worked late, I passed bowls of American-style food over the wall and listened as she and the tea shop customers tried to identify and swallow the strange meals. Each night, after we dragged our rope beds out of the hot rooms into the small courtyards, we would whisper over the wall and wish blessings for the next day. She called me 'sister' and her family knew me as a member."*

Maria's article, brief but powerful in itself, can **also** help us to reflect on today's reading from Ephesians, in which Paul asks his congregation – gentiles **all** – to think back to the time when they had no place in the house and household of God. Think of the time, the writer pleads, when Jews and Gentiles were two separate groups, separated, estranged, hostile and suspicious of each other, the **antithesis** of God's original vision of one diverse but united community of creation.

But then **Jesus** came and brought a **new** reality. Jesus broke down the dividing wall and created one new humanity instead of two, bringing peace, unity, and hope. Jesus did this not by a policy or program but in his own body and through the cross. When he was put to death, the wall that divided Jews and Gentiles was demolished, demolished by love. And in its place, God began to build something **new**, one common holy house with walls low enough to let us set our candles to share the light of Christ, or to pass from one room to another the bread of friendship and peace. Such nearness is uncomfortable at times, yet it brings unexpected blessings...and makes it a house in which **God** is pleased to dwell.

I like to think **this** understanding of God's intentions and actions, of Jesus' love and self-giving is underneath what birthed Peace Lutheran Church in the way we know and experience it today, a place where all are welcome, where our differences make us open to what we and our interfaith neighbors can teach each other...because Lutherans – and Christians – are not the **only** ones who know what it is to receive and to live in God's love. And right now, when in the United States we are unfortunately all too good at building higher walls and emphasizing differences (which we often translate as "inequalities" and treat as irreconcilable) the gift and the call to live **with** and **open** to **all** our relations is what holds the promise of disturbing or at least making our wall-loving neighbors curious about how this different way of life can work...how it can be a blessing, not a threat or inconvenience, not something simply to be tolerated, but rather wholeheartedly embraced.

Of course, like Maria's house of half-walls, the experience of living together isn't always sweet and uncomplicated. Sometimes it's difficult, irritating, and perplexing. Sometimes we'd like the half-wall to be completed, to box ourselves into our comfort zone, so we wouldn't have to do the hard work of getting to know one another – "in the faith," of becoming culturally competent, of discovering the painful reality of our stereotypes and the **lack** of reality behind our expectations of each other.

We are hindered by fear and sin and the temptation to believe the message around us which is quick to tell us why people of such diversity cannot – and should not – live and worship together and care for one another as neighbors and friends. We who are the Church, we who have received the gifts of unity, peace, and reconciliation through Jesus' death and resurrection, sometimes have difficulty receiving these gifts, because our hands are not open – they're full of bricks we've been making for building the walls higher and higher...the very **opposite** of God's vision and purpose for us all. Piling up bricks as fast as God takes them down means we are shutting ourselves out of relationship not just with our neighbors in Christ, but with our **Chief Neighbor**, God, who doesn't want anyone to be zoned out of the house that has Jesus as its cornerstone, who delights in living with and among us all, who delights equally in all our ways of expressing faith and love and praise. And keeping our private stashes of bricks at the ready means we are **less** available to carry out the work God's Church has been given to do – to call the world to **God's** vision of community and welcome by how we live and speak together.

So it is **indeed** “right and salutary” – the “old” language at Communion, that each time we meet we hear God's Word, we remember our baptism, and we share the Lord's Supper, the means of grace by which God brings us back to the truth about who we are, whom we serve, and what our mission is. Every Sunday, like the people in the villages Jesus visited in today's gospel, we place ourselves, sick with sin, in Jesus' path and receive forgiveness for our stubborn insistence on building walls that make for false borders instead of building up God's house of living stones. Every Sunday we hear God the Great Shepherd claim us **all** as the sheep of God's pasture and reaffirm that he will never rest until all are one and at home. Every Sunday we remember our baptism and are reminded anew that God's family is bigger than just me, just us, or just people who look or sound like us, because **everyone** is documented as a beloved child of God, is *axios* – worthy, absolutely worthy. And every Sunday we share the bread and cup, we gather as one around the Lord's table – imagining how our siblings near and far and even in heaven are given grace to live a new life that proclaims God's full welcome and boundless love.

Today in this dangerous and conflicted time when it's **especially** important to hear, God calls us again and we pray to follow that voice, not run away from it and to regard the name of Jesus as “sweet” even when it disturbs our settled ways. Today we ask God to lead us into becoming more and more a community where each member is ready and willing to learn and to treasure the life and faith of another, and to share one another's questions, struggles, and prayers. And,

until Jesus comes again, let us never weary of placing the candles of Christ-light where **all** can see and pass over the half-walls plates overflowing with the food of peace and holy friendship. God grant this today for Jesus' sake! Amen.

**This and subsequent quotes are from Maria Said, "Half-walls between us" in the re:generation quarterly (Spring 1999).*