



“Pull Up a Chair”
Ephesians 2:13-22
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Open classrooms were all the thing in the late 1960s and 1970s. The idea of the open classroom was that a large group of students of varying skill levels would be in a single, large space with several teachers overseeing them. Schools were redesigned. Walls were torn down. Large open spaces were created. And lots of students were put into one big space – think sixty kids in one large room.

For a very short period of time in elementary school, I experienced an open classroom. It was - let me be clear - absolute hell. Loud. Chaotic. Overwhelming. Not conducive to learning, at least not for me.

In the few months of that failed experiment, do you know what I longed for? Ached for?

Walls. All I wanted were some walls.

We can underestimate the value of walls. Walls provide so much. They divide space into manageable components. They protect us from sound and chaos. They provide structure and meaning. They make life manageable. Imagine if the 77,000 square feet of this building was just one cavernous space. It would be horrible!

Walls are awesome. Essential.

Except when they are not. In today’s reading, Paul talks about the walls that separate people from one another. It’s a big topic for him.

To understand all of this, it’s helpful to go back to Paul’s early days when he is known as Saul. Back then, he is an expert at keeping track of who belongs on which side of a wall. Paul has a wall of rules and traditions and rituals to define who he is and who he isn’t, who is in and who is out.

Then one day, on the road to Damascus, all of that changes. That day, Paul is knocked to the ground and – much to his surprise – he finds out that the force that puts him there is love. A love that has no respect for walls. A love that smashes through barriers. Paul becomes the number one spokesperson for this wall smashing love. He passionately believes that God sends Jesus, not to save a fortunate few, a lucky few who happen to be at the right place at the right time, but rather God sends Jesus to restore and redeem the whole of creation.

So, Paul invites everyone to be a part of the churches that he starts. As Paul writes,

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” (Galatians 3:28)

What a beautiful vision for our common life. This, we know, is a better way of doing life together.

And. And. All of us are really good at putting up walls. As a young adult I lived in Denver, a city in which people were always moving in and moving out. I would make a friend and then they would move away. I didn’t like that. So, I developed a strategy. As soon as I learned that a friend would be moving, I put up a wall. I treated them with indifference. I stopped hanging out with them. That way when they left, it didn’t hurt as much.

We put up walls for all sorts of reasons.

- A teenager shares something vulnerable and gets laughed at. From then on, every serious question gets answered with a joke.
- A couple has the same argument enough times that eventually they stop arguing. It looks like peace from the outside, but really they have just stopped letting each other into certain parts of their lives.
- Someone is deeply hurt by a church and decides, “I can believe in God, but I will never trust a church again.” The wall they construct makes sense—it helps them survive—but at some point it can become difficult to distinguish protection from isolation.
- A person is repeatedly disappointed when asking for help, so they become extremely competent and independent. They tell themselves: *I can handle it myself*. But underneath it is often a different sentence: *I have learned not to need anybody*.
- Someone experiences betrayal and develops a new rule for life: *I’ll be friendly, but nobody gets all the way in*. They may have hundreds of acquaintances and no one really knows them.

We are all good at putting up walls. And some of those walls are necessary. Think back to that open classroom. Some walls are essential boundaries that keep us safe and healthy and whole.

But too often we put up walls that unnecessarily divide us from one another. How do we hold ourselves accountable to Paul’s vision? What helps us lower the walls that divide us?

Here are some ideas:

- An attitude of humility: regularly remind ourselves that we are not experts, that we always have more to learn.
- Curiosity about other people
- Compassion: Seeing others, especially those with whom we disagree, as children of God
- A willingness to be vulnerable: back to my story of when I was a young adult. I grew out of that practice of turning on my friends before they moved. I had to learn to be more vulnerable.

Let me share the church’s absolute best idea for breaking down walls: eating together.

Today is world communion Sunday. Christians in every corner of this world are gathering around Christ's table. This has been happening for 96 years. (take down) It all started in a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh. The idea spread first through this denomination and then ecumenically and then across the globe. It's a simple idea: setting aside one Sunday every year to remember the ties that bind us together across miles and language and culture. The thing that connects us this Sunday is the table. The meal.

Meals do that. Tables do that. It is very difficult to construct a wall in the middle of a table. We tried to construct barriers during the pandemic. We tried so very, very hard, but nothing worked very well.

Tables are one of the great levelers of human existence. And although any given table doesn't have unlimited capacity, there is always room for one more. We pull up a chair and barriers start coming down. The walls that divide us get a little lower.

A few weeks ago, I was in an unfamiliar city with time on my hands. I went to a restaurant for dinner by myself. I was asked, "Do you want to sit at a table or at the bar?" At the bar, I said.

It was a good choice. If I had sat at a table by myself, I would have pulled out my book and read and interacted with no one. But at the bar? It was a feast of connection. With the bartender, and other patrons and by the time I left, I experienced that warmth you feel when you have shared a meal with others.

I invite you to take a moment and think about some of the tables of your life and the meals you have eaten at those tables. Think of the way those shared meals brought down the barriers that tend to separate us one from another. Today, we give thanks to God for the gift of such meals.

If we want to get a little closer to the world that Paul envisions, we eat together. We eat together.

In a few minutes we will hear an invitation. An invitation to share a meal with Jesus. An invitation to share a meal with those who are here today and with people all over the world. How does one respond to such an invitation?

You pull up a chair. You pull up a chair.

Amen.