

As many of you know my Scripture and sermon themes are planned several months in advance. Beginning today I am going back to using the Lectionary (a suggested Scripture guide for each Sunday of the Church year offering an Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel and New Testament reading). Now, I know it should not surprise me but it still does – how texts and themes planned months in advance can have an impact on the day they are used.

It was with the texts for today in mind that we headed out for the ABC Biennial in Pasadena. I had my legal pad with Scripture and themes ready for notes along the way. As the Biennial progressed it seemed to be appropriate for our texts today. Thus, this morning I want to share with you some of our Biennial journey.

We arrived in Pasadena on Thursday afternoon and after settling in to where we were staying – really it was directly across from the Civic Center – a walk out the front door, across the street (jay walking) and we were there! After getting the car unloaded and settling in we left our friends and headed across to register. As we were crossing the street we met an African-American group from Omaha, Nebraska, who had already registered. We asked them which of the three buildings the registration was located in and they took us there! They even waited as we greeted several from Evergreen we met on the way. We had been there only a few moments and already new friends.

As I registered I heard my name yelled from across the registration area. It was the head of the Convention First Aid station, a Filipina friend. She ran across the registration area and I got my first hug of the Biennial, there were many more to come. As we were talking the pre-Biennial Asian Caucus ended and more Asian friends emerged and more hugs! What a wonderful way to start our time in Pasadena.

The evening was spent with the friends we were staying with catching up on old times and meeting some new friends who were also staying where we were. Talk about a family that shows hospitality!

Friday saw us at the M & M luncheon where we gathered at a table with old friends – and a couple of new ones. One was a member of FBC, Los Angeles, who is now the director of the American Baptist Extension Corporation – which may have some funding for “Wings!” Following the M & M luncheon I met one of the Philippine Xtreme members and she introduced me to a friend of hers who is a young Latino American Baptist pastor serving in New Jersey and who has a new book (in English and Spanish) on being Baptist which was highlighted at the Judson Display (it sold out the first day!).

Then came our first full Biennial gathering in the Civic Auditorium. As I looked around I thought of a verse from Revelations, “*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count (well, this one could be counted) from every nation, tribe, people and language*” (7:9 NIV). I was reminded of a recent statistic: we American Baptists are one of the most, if not the most ethnically diverse denomination in the United States. Together we were inspired in worship and praise. We were challenged to continue to be a diverse people united together as One in Christ. I felt a great sense of community and family – a sense of the Oneness that we have in Christ. Again and again I was reminded of the walls that have come down in order for us to reach this point in our American Baptist history. Even Rich Warren of Saddleback Community Church joined us for worship on Sunday evening.

Now I want to fit the pieces together using our text for today beginning with David’s dream of building a place for God. David wants to build God a Temple. God’s response is, “Why do I need a Temple?” Why does the God of all creation need a place to call home? God knows that a Temple has the potential of limiting the people’s view of God. In one way it will not set them apart but will make them like the others – having a place for their God. A Temple could possibly have them limit where God dwells.

Yes, a Temple will eventually be built but not by David. He has done the task God asked of him. The Shepherd/King has brought Israel together as a nation, a people. They are no longer 12 quasi-independent tribes. David has united them as one and has brought peace to the land. The Temple will be built but this is not a part of David's story. Each one of us plays our part and only our part in the drama of God.

As Paul writes to the Church in Ephesus he reminds them of the walls that have come down and of the unity that resulted. The separating, dividing walls of history are no longer a part of who they are. Who we are. We who were once two separate peoples (Jews and Gentiles) are now One in Christ. All of the old separations are now gone in Christ. Hostility that existed between us should now be buried in the past. The imagery is now one of unity and togetherness. The suspicions of the past should now be destroyed and new relationships built. We are One in Christ.

I thought of this yesterday as some of us joined with others in the Evergreen Association at a BBQ sponsored by the Evergreen Black Caucus. We had a delightful time of sharing with some members of the Black Caucus at our table. We laughed together and commented on the delicious food and the wonderful day. It was not too many years ago this would not have been possible (at least in some parts of the United States). It reminded me of the walls that have come down that made yesterday possible.

For me the Biennial was a wonderful reminder of the walls that have come down. One look around the Pasadena Civic Center affirmed that. We were a rainbow audience – the young and not so young, male and female, ethnically diverse and even the worship styles represented a multitude of experiences. We celebrated our Oneness in Christ, the positive steps we have taken over the years.

We have torn down many of the barriers that have separated us. I remember our former General Secretary Robert Campbell talking about the ordination of women at a conference a few years ago. He reminded us that we cannot really document when we ordained the first woman– it was not a moment that anyone thought was historical enough to document. It just happened and the ministry of Christ continued. (This afternoon some of us will be joining with Grace Baptist in Tacoma to ordain a gifted young woman to ministry. We will affirm again that the walls continue to come down.)

Eugene Peterson translates Ephesians 2:15 this way, “*Then he started over. Instead of continuing two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everyone*” (*The Message*). Read that again. He created a new kind of human being – the walls were torn down.

David gave Israel a new start. He brought together a nation.

Christ came and continued to build by tearing down. The walls that once separated us are now gone. We have been brought together as one people in Christ – this is the Church. We are now bound together as one. We all have equal access to God through Christ.

No, all the walls have not come down. Unfortunately there are still those who would build walls that separate and divide. We have come a good distance but we are not fully there yet. We need to continue the work begun in Christ. We need to keep tearing down the walls that divide and separate us and keep us from being One. Our task is to unite not divide. May we continue to be a congregation whose goal it is to build up by tearing down the walls that divide and separate.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIJ, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1984
Peterson, Eugene, The Message Parallel Bible, Zondervan, 2004, 2006