

Hoping for a New Humanity
Jeremiah 23:1-6
Ephesians 2:11-22
July 19, 2015
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church, Clemson, SC

When I was in high school I played on the tennis team. We practiced at the college courts in the afternoons. When I arrived home after practice one day, my mother asked me who I was playing with that day. I told her David Adams. She stopped what she was doing and looked at me with combined fear and concern. She told me not to play tennis with David anymore. In typical adolescent voice I defied her and said, "We were playing tennis. And if I want to play tennis with David again I will. We weren't doing anything wrong." My mother said nothing else, but that exchange was one I will not forget.

A few weeks later my father came home from work and announced that Demetrius Glass had asked to join the Lutheran church. I knew that Demetrius was the college band's drum major and a good one at that. I thought that was cool that he was a college student going to church in town when he was from somewhere else. My father went to a called Session meeting the next evening.

What I didn't see so clearly at those times were the dividing walls that existed in my parents' life experiences. Years later I learned from my mother that she was scared I might be targeted for playing tennis with a black boy. Her fear was born during her childhood one night when the KKK had burned a cross in the front yard of the boarding house my grandparents owned. They had rented a room to a black man. When she told me that story I was stunned. I thought that kind of stuff happened years before I was born. But then again my first grade year was the first year of integration in the schools. I had spent my whole educational life with white and black students. I had known nothing else.

Demetrius was black too, and his desire to join the white Lutheran church was questioned by some who thought he was trying to push boundaries. So the

Presbyterians gathered and made a plan just in case a black person wanted to join our church too. The plan was for the preacher to leave the pulpit and meet the black person at the narthex and then escort them down to a seat near the front of the sanctuary. It was a plan of welcome, but very much over the top, I thought.

The dividing wall—we all have them. In Ephesians the dividing wall could have referred to a low barrier where Gentiles stayed outside of the purified areas of the Temple. Signs were posted that informed trespassers who were non-Jews that they would be executed. Yikes. Racism was serious stuff especially in Jerusalem. It still is today. Culturally there are Jews, Palestinians, and Arabs in Jerusalem. Religiously there are Jews of different kinds, Christians of different kinds, and Muslims worshipping in Jerusalem. And they are segregated to different parts of the Holy City. There are dividing walls in the city. And outside the city surrounding it, there is even a huge 25 foot high dividing wall that when completed will be 403 miles. That's as far as it is from here to Richmond, VA. It was begun in 2002 and separates Palestinians from Jews. You may remember The Berlin Wall. It was 11.8 feet tall and 96 miles long, about the distance from here to Montreat. It was built in 1961 and came down in 1989. The walls that divide are real and social, and spiritual. Ephesians challenges Jews and Christians by insisting that cultural and religious divisions are contrary to God's vision of peace.

The walls are made by humans, not God. The wall of hostility in Ephesians could not have been the temple wall because of the timing of when the letter was written. The temple wall would have been in ruins then. Rather, the dividing wall of hostility is one that is abstract—it is a mutual construct by people on both sides—Jews and Gentiles. Hostility is the stuff of this wall. Hate speech is also a part of this text, but we need to know more about what is being said to understand that. In verse 12 the Gentiles are described as those “without Christ” and those “having no hope and

without God in the world.” These were verbal punches at the Gentiles, calling them uncivilized and calling them atheists like pagans.¹

The Jews on the other hand have benefits of being the original recipients of the scriptures about the revelation of God—they are the circumcised in the flesh, they have messianic hope, they have their citizenship in Israel, and they are the chosen people. The Gentiles have none of these—they are uncircumcised, they are without Christ, they are aliens excluded from citizenship in Israel, and they are strangers to the covenants of promise.

Now, that’s all the bad news for us Gentiles. At least for now.

The Good News is that by Jesus Christ yielding his flesh and blood on the cross, both the Jew and the Gentile are brought near to God. Christ is the peace who makes the walls come tumbling down. Christ is the one that abolishes the old law and creates the new humanity who also makes peace, and reconciles both Jew and Gentile to God and one another. The word reconcile actually means to *remove hostility*.

As the wall comes down, Christ himself takes his place as the chief cornerstone. The cornerstone is the first stone laid in place and all other stones find their place aligned with the cornerstone. The cornerstone sets the direction of all other stones in relationship to it. Thus, it is the most important part of the foundation and all other stones find their purpose in connection to it. Also part of the foundation are the apostles and prophets, giving witness to the cornerstone by touching it and following the plumb line of justice and righteousness.

Listeners of this letter to the church at Ephesus would have also heard these words about Christ Jesus being our peace and heard it as a challenge to the Emperor Augustus and his Roman Peace which was a false peace achieved by military victory, a

¹ Pheme Perkins, “The Letter to the Ephesians-Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, vol.XI* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p. 403.

hostile war machine. Theirs is not real peace when walls are put up or when military force has to be in place to keep peace or separate refugees from residents. That is no peace at all.

To hear that Jesus is our peace would be an offense to the Roman powers that were ruling. The peace of Christ brings unity among those who had once been strangers. It is peace that is for all of creation—shalom—life abundant, not the absence of war, but the presence of hope. Jew and Gentile are transformed into a new humanity because of Christ and now have hope. Hope comes with responsibility for the “other” and not just self.

Last year I met Allan Boesak. Allan is the first holder of the Desmond Tutu Chair for Peace, Global Justice, and Reconciliation Studies, a joint position at Butler University and Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. He holds this position because of his experience and leadership in dismantling apartheid in South Africa. He speaks of the need for justice where a mother cries clinging to a blood drenched t-shirt of her 7 year old son filled with bullet holes. In it is his arm, the only part left of her son. The mother asked if God did this to her son? “Did God kill my son?” Apartheid had taken root in the church and she wanted to know if the God of the Bible did this. If it was, she wanted no part of God. Allan had to comfort far too many parents whose children who had fallen to hostility’s bullets. And yet, in the face of fear, with God as his only hope, he marched in Soweto with others who were also afraid, also filled with hope in God.²

“The poor and powerless cannot ever let go of hope. That is a luxury for the rich and powerful.”³ Hope in God, that God *was the God* revealed in the Bible and *not* the god of apartheid was what kept Allan and others going in the face of hostility. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “Hope is one who teaches her children to be “stubborn and

² Story shared by Allan Boesak at Montreat Conference Center on October 17, 2014 at a conference on “The Confession of Belhar—A Cry for Hope.”

³ Allan Boesak, *Dare We Speak of Hope? Searching for a Language of Life in Faith and Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), p. 14.

purposeful” in fighting for those things that are life-giving to the earth and humanity. Hope is what inspired Allan to help write the Confession of Belhar in 1986,⁴ ten years before the end of apartheid.

St. Augustine said that “Hope has two daughters: Anger and Courage.”⁵ Allan said that righteous anger is necessary in the face of suffering. Without it forgiveness is meaningless. Think about what we saw on television after Ferguson and New York and Baltimore. We saw Hope’s daughter Anger wailing at the way things are because of injustice. Then think about what we saw after Charleston. That second daughter arrived—Courage—to see that things do not remain the same. And she spoke words of peace and forgiveness. People have to be loved into forgiveness. It doesn’t just happen. It is cultivated by Hope.

“...hope means to have firm resolve to pull oneself to one’s feet and to attack injustice with love, even if one has to pay a price for doing so.”⁶ We must have *God’s love* for justice.

This is what the new humanity looks like—being reconciled to one to whom you were hostile to before, forgiving the people you need to forgive, and thanking the people you would like to thank. Justice is the partner of righteousness. Together, they create an environment for peace. Christ is our peace and suffers on the cross so that Anger and Courage can follow their mother Hope into the hearts of a new humanity—that’s us—the dwelling place for God.

⁴ This is a link to a pdf of the full version of the Confession of Belhar, published September 1986. This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession as it was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. In 1994 the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa united to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). This inclusive language text was prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Confession of Belhar has received over two thirds approval by the presbyteries and will be ratified into the Book of Confessions at the 2016 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf

⁵ St. Augustine, *On Free Choice of Will*, Book i, para. 5.

⁶ Boesak, p. 45.