

15. A KINGDOM WITHOUT WALLS



FOCUS: The good news of the gospel tells of a radical hospitality where boundaries, barriers, and walls are overcome by a grace that knows no bounds.

“I DIDN’T KNOW SO MANY PEOPLE WERE JEWISH!”

It was the Schnitzers’ second Hanukkah in Billings, Montana, and five-year-old Isaac wanted the menorah to be in his bedroom window. But as Isaac and his sister, Rachel, prepared for bed, a brick hurled from the street sent shards of glass flying through the room.

The day after the incident, an FBI agent advised the family to get bullet-proof glass in their windows and to take down the menorahs. Instead, they decided to put the menorah back in the window and call the local newspaper.

The next morning, a member of the local Congregational church read the story and phoned her pastor. Echoing the World War II legend from Denmark where Nazi occupiers were thwarted by King Christian and thousands of other non-Jews who donned yellow Star of David armbands in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors, a plan was hatched.

Within days, the word was out and paper menorahs were distributed for display in windows throughout town. The Target store had some plastic menorahs but soon sold out. An antique store in Billings reported a Christian woman buying a very expensive, antique menorah to place in her window. The marquee at the Catholic High School read, “Happy Hanukkah to our Jewish friends.”

Soon, hundreds of homes in Billings had menorahs in their windows. Some were shot out by bullets, some shattered by bricks. Hate calls were made to Christian families. Margaret MacDonald, whose idea it was to put up the paper menorahs, said she thought it would be a simple thing for people to do. But when she went to put the menorah in her own window, she hesitated: “With two young children, I had to think hard about it myself. We put our menorah in a living room window, and made sure nobody sat in front of it.” The community would not be intimidated. Each night of Hanukkah, more and more menorahs were placed in windows. The local paper printed a brightly colored full-page menorah, urging its 56,000 subscribers to place them in their windows.

On the last night of Hanukkah, hundreds of homes had menorahs in them. As the Schnitzers drove around town that night, Isaac saw all of the houses with menorahs in their windows and exclaimed, “I didn’t know so many people were Jewish!”

EMBRACING THE STRANGER

As Nikos Kazantzakis walked along a dusty path in his native Crete, an elderly woman was passing by, carrying a basket of figs. She paused, picked out two figs, and presented them to the author. "Do you know me, old lady?" Kazantzakis asked. She glanced at him in amazement, "No, my boy. Do I have to know you to give you something? You are a human being, aren't you? So am I. Isn't that enough?"

Over and over, Hebrew Scripture lists three groups of people as worthy of special kindness, extra thoughtfulness, and intentional consideration: strangers, widows, and orphans (c.f. Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29). The legal mandates in the Old Testament are unique among the other known judicial systems in the Ancient Near East in their consistent and outspoken advocacy of the weakest, least protected, and disadvantaged members of the society.

"Strangers" are listed with "widows and orphans" because strangers were alone – they lacked any kinship-connection that would otherwise protect and support them. Jesus ate with the outcast and the stranger, and preached that "whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do to me." Paul defines the mark of the true Christian as one who extends hospitality to strangers (Romans 12:13).

Ephesians 2:11-22 takes it even further. They used to be "aliens," strangers, they had "no hope." But "in Christ Jesus" these strangers become part of a common humanity with believers. The dividing walls have been "broken down." The anonymous author of Ephesians says, "Don't exclude people because they aren't the way you want them to be. Remember, not too long ago, *you* were the strangers and some wanted you to be circumcised to be part of the fellowship. Remember that?"

William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, spent many years reaching out to the poor and needy on the streets of London. An apocryphal story from the day captures the essence of his work: every Christmas, London churches sent out representatives to the streets to invite the poor to Christmas celebrations. Huge crowds would gather to take advantage of this annual outpouring of generosity. The Anglicans began by announcing, "All of you who are Anglicans, come with us." The Roman Catholics followed: "All who are Catholic, come with us." Then the Methodists, the Lutherans, and all the other denominations announced, "Whoever is one of us, come with us." Finally, when all of the church representatives had made their invitations and left, a large crowd of people remained milling about. At that point, William Booth would step out of the crowd and shout out to the people, "All of you who belong to no one, come with me!"

“LET LOVE BE DANGEROUS”

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

– Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy & Leviticus

God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh. Instead of facing his prejudice against the Assyrians, he ran away. After a deep sea detour of some repute, he finally made it to the Assyrian capital. Much to his self-righteous chagrin, they embraced God’s love and forgiveness with such fervor and humility that even the cattle were wearing sack-cloth and ashes. When the books to be included in the Bible were being debated and negotiated, the book of Jonah was included in direct opposition to earlier sources that suggested that God was some sort of exclusive tribal deity. Instead, the story of Jonah trumpets the conviction that God’s grace is extended to all peoples, even the ones for whom we might hold human hatred and prejudice.

If God can love even the Ninevites, there must be something bigger going on here. It goes beyond just *tolerating* people. It goes on to acceptance and affirmation of people– not despite their differences, but because of their differences.

As part of the Center for Progressive Christianity’s Eight Points by which Progressive Christianity is defined (www.tpc.org), a list is suggested of those who are called to be in a community without walls:

*believers and agnostics,
conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,
homosexuals and heterosexuals,
females and males,
the despairing and the hopeful,
those of all races and cultures, and
those of all classes and abilities, those of all ages.*

They don’t have to *be* like one another or *become* like one another – but are still all together in fellowship. Embracing such diversity serves as an antidote to those who would claim to be the sole arbiters of a holiness based in conformity of both belief and behavior. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis, “Can you think of a type of person who might make you uncomfortable if they sat next to you? May that person come into your life soon!” That’s where true discipleship is tested.

Jesus repeatedly shattered the rules of ritual purity and cultural expectations of separation from “the other.” The stories of Jesus healing people in Matthew 9 are a perfect example of Jesus’ willingness to break down the walls separating

people: the paralyzed man, the blind and mute man – all people whom the “righteous” would have labeled as sinners and thus deserving of their fate. Some of the others to whom Jesus showed compassion were:

A tax collector who was cheating the people:

He was a “traitor,” hated by fellow Jews for helping the occupying forces of Rome bleed the country dry and line his own pockets.

The woman with the hemorrhage:

Ritual cleanliness laws conspired to exclude women from religious life. Some women would never be ritually “clean.” By even *touching* the woman with the flow of blood (or being touched by her), Jesus was made “unclean” – but his response was one of love.

The synagogue leader:

A respected leader with a sick daughter who came to see this radical rabbi only after he had exhausted every other avenue to save his daughter. Despite his daughter’s having died, Jesus was gracious and went with him, healing her.

We’re called to love our neighbor as we do our own self. Not just a “Hi, how are you?” either. It involves cost, risk, and vulnerability to provide a safe place for people who are lonely, rejected by society, or beat up by others or the circumstances of life. Observing Mother Teresa’s work with India’s “untouchables,” Poet Sydney Carter was moved to reflect: *“Let love be dangerous.”*

HOSPITALITY OR HOSTILITY?

Hospitality has long been a core value in the Jewish tradition. One story of Abraham’s hospitality even has him *running* to greet the strangers at his camp. In ancient days, the practice protected people from the dangers of traveling alone. There were no safe and cheap shelters for travelers. Along the way people could be brutalized, robbed, wounded, or lost. As once practiced, it was expected that food offered to a stranger had to be as abundant as possible, even if it meant, as it often did, that the family had to do without in the coming days.

Jesus radicalized any romantic notion of hospitality into the care and love for those with no social standing, those of limited resources and questionable credibility. In the judgment scene in Matthew 25, the king says to those being given the kingdom: *I was naked and you clothed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me...* Essentially, followers of Jesus are challenged to overcome fear of the stranger and give attention to the lonely, the excluded, the unfamiliar.

In Greek, the word “hospitality,” *philonexia*, has at its root the same word which gives us the English word xenophobia. Our treatment of the “alien” or “foreigner” reveals our core values of hospitality or hostility toward those who are different.

Seeing the face of Christ in the stranger at our door is often a challenge. But the spirit of hospitality found in the Bible recognizes the child of God in everyone and obliges us to treat one another accordingly.

Ancient literature and fairytales are full of stories in which gods and other supernatural beings disguise themselves as mortals, sometimes as the lowest of the low, and roam throughout the world to see how people will treat them. As the epistle to the Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Jesus says, "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it to me."

Jim Wallis tells of how on Saturdays the Sojourners Community opens a food line to the hungry and homeless of Washington who live within sight of the White House. Before they open the doors, they gather around the food, hold hands, and are led in prayer by Mary Glover, the best pray-er of the community - someone who herself stood in that food line a few years earlier. She prays: "Lord, we know you'll be coming through this line today. So help us to treat you well."

The significance of a shared meal in Jesus' day has been somewhat lost to our 21st century way of thinking. Many of the people with whom Jesus dealt never had a full stomach. Naturally, "heaven" for them was imagined as a banquet. One of the clearest ways Jesus showed his openness and acceptance of all types of people was in sharing meals with them. Ironically, the shared meal of communion is today one of the principle tools used to exclude people from Christian fellowship. In direct contradiction to Jesus' own practice, many denominations enforce elaborate rules clarifying who can receive communion and who cannot.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, began his career as an Anglican priest and a rigid legalist. But over the years his understanding of communion is only one of his views that changed significantly. Deeming communion a "means of grace," Wesley left a legacy in which the United Methodist church now practices "open communion." As a witness to the free gift of grace and the open table fellowship practiced by Jesus, no one is turned away from the table, not even the unbaptized.

NO EARTHLY GOOD

"Jesus loves everybody – get over it."

– Jerry Barlow

Story after story of Jesus portrays him as hanging out and eating with the wrong people at the wrong time, touching people he shouldn't touch, and going against the expectations of the "proper" and pious religious folks. The Pharisees are used by Matthew as a gross caricature of people who are more concerned with their own appearance of holiness than they were with really helping people.

"I don't like religious people. They tend to be territorial, cliquish, exclusive, not hospitable. They're so heavenly-minded, they're no earthly good – so fixed on doing what they think God would have them do or say that they're not authentically present to the person right in front of them..."

– Bishop John Shelby Spong

The woman who interrupted dinner in Luke 7:36-50 was “known” – folks in the community had labeled her as living an immoral life. Yet here she was at a party where she wasn't welcome, hadn't been included, clearly wasn't wanted and was, in fact, condemned for attending.

She begins to wet Jesus' feet with her tears and shocks Middle-Eastern sensibilities by “letting down her hair” to dry his feet. As she anoints Jesus' feet with ointment, the pious host, Simon, declares, “No self-respecting or true prophet would allow this sinner-woman to touch him.”

Jesus asks Simon, “Do you see this woman?” Far from being an ophthalmological question, Jesus is asking, “How long are you, a decent, God-fearing man, going to be blinded by your rigidity?” More interested in the notoriety of having the famous rabbi at dinner than anything else, Simon had neglected the basic courtesies of washing the feet of one's guests – an act of hospitality extended here by the “outcast” and not the host himself.

Simon's condition was what might be called “hard-heartedness.” Marcus Borg writes, “Throughout the Bible, the heart is a metaphor for a deep level of the self” – below even thinking and feeling. “Closed hearts” are described in the Bible as hard hearts, shut hearts, and stony hearts. With this malady come blindness, lack of understanding, darkened minds, lack of gratitude, insensitivity to wonder and awe, and a lack of compassion.

TEAR DOWN THAT WALL

“Christ has broken down the dividing walls!” – Ephesians 2

The Apostle Paul uses the imagery of the human body to illustrate the idea that Christians of diverse gifts and abilities can nonetheless be unified – often for the benefit of all the individual “parts.” Uniformity is not the ideal; unity in love and respect for one another is the goal.

“The bond that links our human family is not one of blood . . . doesn't have to do with color . . . doesn't have to do with gender . . . doesn't have to do with sexual orientation . . . the true bond that links our human family ... is one of respect and joy for all people everywhere, regardless of blood, color, creed, gender, even those of your own family you'd like to forget about ...”

– Richard Bach

The church is rife with walls of every conceivable type: language, actions, beliefs, liturgy, music, requirements, expectations, education, rigidity, race, class, sex, and orientation. Without giving a second thought to what it says to the outsider, these walls are clung to by some as reassuring comfort that what they know and are familiar with will not change. For others, these walls are the final proof that what Christianity has to offer is primarily hypocrisy and selfishness. And yet there is something deep inside us that, if given a chance, revels in experiencing moments of unity and reconciliation.

“Tear down this wall!”

– Ronald Reagan, *Berlin*, 1987

To that end, the gospel makes an appeal to us to tear down the walls, to reach out to those who are strangers, those who are far off, those against whom we harbor prejudice – even our enemies. The gospel engenders a radical hospitality that requires boundaries be crossed, barriers be dismantled, and walls be torn down.

DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

DVD Chapter 2:

How are our prejudices and insecurities intertwined?

Describe the “humanity beyond our prejudices” to which we are called.

How do the ministries of Creech and Phelps conflict or sync with Jesus’ message of radical equality and grace?

What has Mel White learned along his Spiritual Journey?

DVD Chapter 3:

What other practices or characteristics of the human condition might be included in the “natural” vs. “un-natural” conversation?

The “body of Christ” is just one New Testament image in which difference is honored. Explain.

What’s the common denominator?

List the priorities of a “right side up” faith community.

SPIRITPRACTICE:

“Walking in Another’s Shoes” with Dr. John Cobb

Questions for Personal Reflection:

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material in this session?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

Consider the following questions as a group:

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION:

Use the words to Farquharson and Klusmeier's *Walls that Divide* for personal devotions or in formulating a responsive prayer for use in worship.

"Walls that Divide"

Tho' ancient walls may still stand proud and racial strife be fact,
tho' bound'ries may be lines of hate, proclaim God's saving act!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty!

When vested pow'r stands firm entrenched and breaks another's back,
when waste and want live side by side, it's gospel that we lack!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

The truth we seek in varied scheme, the life that we pursue,
unites us in a common quest for self and world made new!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

The church divided seeks that grace, that newness we proclaim;
a unity of serving love that lives praise to God's name!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

This broken world seeks lasting health and vital unity-
God's people in the Christ made new cast off all slavery!

Walls that divide are broken down; Christ is our unity!
Chains that enslave are thrown aside; Christ is our liberty

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Ontario N1R8A8 Canada.*

*Available as "Though Ancient Walls" (#691) in Voices United, the hymnal of the United Church of
Canada (tune name: KARR) URL: <http://www.united-church.ca/voicesunited/>*

**Be sure to follow up on this session's theme with Session 15's *Living it Out:*
"A Kin dom without Walls," distributed by your facilitator.**