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Anchors and Chains of Our Own Choosing
First Church Baldwin, United Methodist
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As we're getting started, I'm going to ask Sandra and the ushers to pass around this stone, actually a piece of concrete. As it comes to you, I want you think just briefly on the different ways we perceive permanence

We think of concrete as fairly long-lasting, and natural stone even more so. When we get into geological time, though, and get glimpses of God's long term view of things, we can see sometimes our perspective will change.

Please just keep passing it around until everyone's had a chance to touch it. While we're doing that, I'll digress a bit.

April 1945. As Soviet troops reach Berlin, the European portion of World War 2 is almost over. By May 2, German forces surrender. Between June 17 and August 2, the American, British, French and Soviet Allies divide Germany, and its capital, Berlin, in to four occupation zones.

The American, British and French sections of Berlin were collectively known as West Berlin, and it was totally surrounded by Soviet forces, 96 heavily-armed miles from the western portion of the country.

Ten tense, uneasy years pass. Federal Republic of Germany is created in the west. The German Democratic Republic or GDR is installed in the East.

On May 5, 1955, the Federal Republic of Germany is proclaimed a sovereign state, ending the Allied occupation of the west.

For the next six years, as has been the historic model wherever Communist governments have come to power, many East German citizens escaped to the west. That changes on August 13, 1961, when East Germany begins stringing barbed wire and setting up barriers. What had been an ideological divide patrolled by soldiers and police becomes a physical barrier.

Soon a concrete divide scars the ancient city and extends fully 100 miles around West Berlin. It is topped by barbed wire and manned by guards who regularly gun down anyone who tries to escape. East Berlin is now a prison

If you were alive during that era or were born any time in the next few decades, you know that construction of the Berlin Wall was a turning point in history. It immediately became the embodiment of what in 1946 Winston Churchill had dubbed "the Iron Curtain," the military and ideological divide between the Soviet-dominated East and the Western democracies.

The tensions of the East-West divide came to characterize the entire second half of the 20th century. Wherever else the struggle played out – the Korean peninsula, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Nicaragua – the wall may have been in Berlin, but its shadow was cast across the world.

Let me ask you a question: Do you have any Berlin Walls in your life? Do you have any negative events which by their very nature and scope have defined you or your world?

Do you have a failed relationship that you can't seem to get passed?

Do you have a family member who wronged you and you just can't seem to let it go?

Do you carry the physical, mental or emotional scars of any form of criminal attack?

Do you have a co-worker who unethically got the promotion that should have been yours?

Do you have a friend who betrayed you?

Do you have a fellow member or situation in this church that let you down and has become an impediment to your full participation in the life of this congregation?

I will ask again: Do you have any negative events which by their very nature and scope have defined you or your world?

If you're a human being, and I believe that applies to most of us, the chances are pretty good that you've had something bad happen that continues to loom large in your life.

Boy, have you come to the right place

Our entire faith is based on new beginnings:

2 Corinthians 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

Acts 5:20

“Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”

Romans 6:4

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

But here's another thing about new beginnings: inherent in the promise of a new beginning is the idea that to have a new beginning you must also have an ending.

An end of the power of that betrayal or argument or horrible event that altered the course of your life.

An end of the darkness that eats up a portion or even a majority of your mind.

An end to the things that divide us as a congregation.

In a worldly sense, but perhaps also in a spiritual one, we have our opportunity for a new beginning a week from today when Pastor Claire officially begins her pastorate here at First Church.

Think about it. Our faith tells us that the past can truly be *the past*.

That means what while our present can and should be informed by what has gone before, that it need not be dominated by it. That means that while we honor their delivery of the Good Word and the accomplishments of their good works, this is not the church of Pastors Henry Whyman, Walter Benedict, Eugene Fowler, Wilfred Hansen, Deryck Moon, John Robertson, Louise Pierce, Richard Smeltzer, Elizabeth Perry, James Van Schaick or Luonne Rouse, or any of the others who served here over the more than 200 years that make up our history.

This church is not bound by *their* successes or failures. This is *your* church, Dorothy. This is your church, Sandra. This is your church, Michael. This is your church, Tracy. It's yours, and yours, and yours, and mine.

More importantly, this is God's house. And we are called to be His people.

Will you answer that call?

Every day – sometimes many times in a single day – we are faced with the only choice in life that defines us not only for this existence but also the world to come: which of the two thieves on the crosses beside Jesus are we going to be?

Make no mistake, all have fallen short of the glory of God. All are in need of redemption. All are in need of the saving grace and intercession of Jesus Christ. In our consumer culture

particularly we hear a lot about getting what we deserve. Let me say plainly, thank-you, Lord, for not giving me what I deserve. Thank-you!

We do have a choice, and that choice is which one of the thieves are we going to be? Are we going to be the one fearfully sliding toward death, who mocks the only one who could save him? Or are we going to be the one who says, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Are we going to be the ones who hear our Jesus say, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” Or are we going to be the ones who hear nothing except him talking to someone else?

The only path to the answer we want to hear is forgiveness. A few minutes from now we’ll say The Lord’s Prayer. In it, we regularly ask God to forgive our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us. Don’t you think that calls us to practice forgiveness to the extent that we ourselves have been forgiven? And haven’t we been forgiven everything? And if we’ve been forgiven all of our sins, what is the limit placed on the forgiveness we should offer.

I don’t suggest for a moment that this is an easy road. Let me tell you it most definitely will not be. But the lack of forgiveness is a bigger burden, a heavy load that we struggle to carry with us while Jesus walks beside us and reminds us to put down that burden and that his yoke is light.

Back to Berlin:

On June 26, 1963, in one of the great speeches on the subject, President John F. Kennedy stood in front of the Schöneberg City Hall in West Berlin and said, “All free men, wherever they live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words, ‘Ich bin ein Berliner.’”

On September 13, 1964, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Junior, visited West Berlin. Then, against the wishes of our government, which confiscated his passport and using his American Express Card as identification, he visited Christians in East Berlin.

Berlin was again the scene of a great speech by an American President on June 12, 1987, when Ronald Reagan visited the city’s Brandenburg Gate. He said, “General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization, come here to this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate. Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

All three of those instances offer us insight.

President Kennedy’s speech reminds us that at Christians we should identify ourselves with those who need help.

Dr. King’s sermons in that climate remind us that in proclaiming the Word even the highly unlikely is possible.

And if we turn inward just a bit, President Reagan’s words can remind us to tear down the walls in our own hearts. Better than that, He’ll tear them down for us if we’ll just let Him.

On November 9, 1989, during an evening news conference, an East German government spokesman mistakenly announces that effective immediately GDR citizens will be permitted to travel without restrictions. After the fact, we learned that no one had told the border guards, but they were soon overwhelmed and eventually began helping crack open the wall.

Within months, all that remained of the wall as an artistic display. The concrete monstrosity that imprisoned East Germans, against which desperate people were shot and over which the dangerous tensions of East vs. West played out, was gone. This thing that manifested the divide between us simply was no more.

That doesn't mean its lingering effects have entirely dissipated for those who grew up under its influence, just that the thing itself is gone. All that is left of it physically is that piece of it that we've been passing around. My friend Chris Yeats chipped off of it and brought back to me personally.

This is another good reminder. Very often God's forgiveness is so much deeper than we expect and something we only come to understand in time. Just because we don't fully grasp it right away, though, doesn't mean it's not worth pursuing. To the contrary, forgiveness is the greatest manifestation of God's love for us, and it should be the same for our love of each other.

I'm not asking you to forget the past. I'm asking you to understand that whether you've known it before or not, you can put down that burden. You are free of those anchors and chains that have been holding you in back. Their hold on you has been broken.

It's time for you to let go of them as well. Forgive.

Amen.