

Victory of the Lamb

November 27, 2019

Sermon series: Welcome to Victory

Sermon theme: Generosity

Sermon text: Acts 11:19-30

Milwaukee might be one of the most segregated cities in the US. I didn't originally say this. A couple of weeks ago I was meeting with a pastor who has served in the Milwaukee area for about sixteen years. We discussed what he has learned about the greater Milwaukee area. And he said, "I believe the greater Milwaukee area is one of the most segregated cities in the country. We are divided racially, economically, socially, relationally, and religiously." We all might have a different opinion on how segregated this city is. We all might have a different viewpoint of the cause of our division. But I think we can all agree at some level that this city is segregated at some level.

We need to understand that this is not a new issue. Division has always been an issue throughout the world and throughout time. In fact, division was one of the major concerns in the early Christian church. Two weeks ago, I went into detail about the great divide between Jews and Gentiles.

So here is the question I hope to answer in this sermon: **How can we *begin* to break down the walls of segregation?**

This is the last sermon in our series, **Welcome to Victory**. In this series we have been primarily looking at the book of Acts and the Early Christian Church as we discuss our mission and core values. We are trying to model this ministry after the first Christians. So our mission is to *reach today's people with Christ's victory*. So far we have discussed the core values of trying to be a welcoming church, that is joyful, connected to our community and is pursuing excellence. And today we are going to discuss our final core value of **generosity**. I believe the discussion around this core value will help us figure out how to break down the walls the divide us.

So let's dig into the book of Acts 11. We read in Acts 11:19 **Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.**

Luke, the author, is describing what happened in Jerusalem. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem were being persecuted. Even, Stephen, a leader in the Christian church, was stoned to death. The Jewish Christians were scared, so Luke says that they fled to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch.

But Luke tells us an interesting detail. When the Jewish Christians spread out because of the persecution, they only spread the word about Jesus *among Jews*. They kept to their own people, their own race.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.

That still happens today. We like to be around likeminded people. We hang out with people who look like us, believe like us, eat like us, dress like us, and work like us. It's natural to only be around people like "us".

But remember: Jesus told us to be his witnesses *to the ends of the earth*, to love our neighbor, to even love our enemy. We are called to break out of our comfortable communities and be witnesses to people of other backgrounds.

Here's the good news. There *were* some early Christian who followed Jesus' mission. Acts 11:20-21 says, **Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**

Some of the early Jewish Christians broke out of their *holy huddle*. They didn't see themselves as the *frozen chosen*. They shared their faith with the Greeks. And the Greeks put their faith in Jesus. In fact, so many Greeks started to follow Jesus, that the church in Jerusalem took note and sent them spiritual aid.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. (Acts 11:22-23)

Barnabas came down from Jerusalem and started to teach and encourage these new Gentile Christians. But their numbers continue to grow so quickly that Barnabas called for even more help. He sent for Saul.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. (Acts 11:25-26)

So Saul, who used to persecute Christians, now became a Christian. And for a whole year, Saul, taught these people, who he used to persecute, how to follow Jesus. Saul and Barnabas had such an impact on these Gentile Christians that their pagan neighbors started to take notice. Luke writes, **"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." (Acts 11:26)**

The preaching and teaching of Saul and Barnabas so changed their way of life that the people in their communities gave them a new identity. They were not called Greeks or Romans, but they were called Christians.

But this new people group created a new problem. Now there were not only Jewish disciples of Jesus, but now there was this other group called Christians, who were made up of non-Jews, made up of Gentiles.

These two groups DID follow the same Jesus, but they were very different racially, economically, socially, and religiously. They spoke a different dialect. They practiced different religious traditions and customs. And many of them seemed to have a different economic standing. There were great walls between them that led to significant hostility. So, one of the most important questions for the early Christian church was, **"How can we begin to break down the walls of segregation?"**

And that is an important question for us today too. Just like the early Christian church, we live in a segregated city. We have put up different walls. Everybody of every different background can fall into this trap. We are divided, not so much based on language, but based on race. We are divided economically based on different neighborhoods. And we are divided religiously in many different ways. Not only do different churches in Milwaukee have different teachings about the Bible, there are also different worship styles. Some churches worship in one style and others worship in another style.

Some of these differences have been going on in this city for over a hundred years. And we will probably not be able to fundamentally resolve any of these deep divides. But how might we at least break down some of the walls so that we might follow Christ's command to love one another, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to even love our enemy?

Well, what happened in the early Christian church? **During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) (Acts 11:27-28)**

A prophet named Agabus predicted a severe famine in the entire Roman world. But the famine seemed to be especially difficult for those living in Jerusalem.

So we read in Acts 11: **The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:29-30)**

This is a fascinating verse. The Gentiles gave according to their own ability to supply for their fellow Christians in Judea. So the people who were usually segregated from each other, Gentiles and Jews, were brought together through this offering.

This is not the only time Saul or Paul gathers an offering from the Gentiles for the Jews. If we would read the rest of the book of Acts, we will find that Paul makes it a regular practice to gather an offering from the Gentiles for the Jews.

Paul does this for a few reasons. He sees people who are in need, and he wants to help them. But he also sees division among the people. He sees the segregation between the races and religions. And he believes that God is in the business of breaking down walls.

Paul writes about this in Ephesians 2:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

Paul has this deep belief that there should be no segregation, no divide, no walls. All people have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Jesus has died on the cross and made peace with us and God. And because we are at peace with God through Jesus Christ, God wants us to experience peace with one another. God gave the gift of his son to break down the walls of hostility between us and God.

Jesus has destroyed any barrier that should divide us. Barriers of culture or customs. Barriers of race or religious customs. Jesus Christ died to create a whole new humanity out of the two. To make peace between God and mankind. To make peace between all humanity.

That begins with you. You are at peace with God. God gave you the gift of Jesus and so there is no wall separating you from God. You are one with God. And you have been made one with your neighbor before God.

But this is not the reality we live in. Although God has made peace with us through Jesus Christ and that means we really ought to be at peace with one another, that is not how we live. We still live with all sorts of walls and barriers that keep us apart.

So again, how can we begin to break down these walls of segregation?

Let's follow Paul's lead. Paul believed in a God who gave the gift of his son and that gift broke down the walls of hostility between us and God. Then Paul gathered a gift from the Gentile Christians to give to the poor Jewish Christians. Paul not only wanted to care for the needs of God's people, but Paul believed that this gift might begin to break down the walls of hostility between the two groups.

Here's what we learn from Paul and it's actually a principle from the book of Proverbs:

A gift opens the door for the Giver.

When someone gives a gift, it opens the door for a friendship. You get access to get to know the person and care for the person. A gift can start to break down the walls of hostility. But also, a gift can open the door to the ultimate Giver, Jesus Christ. When you give a gift to someone who has put up their walls. You are giving God an opportunity to reach that person with the love and truth of Jesus.

So following Paul's practice and following the early Christian Church, "**How can we *begin* to break down the walls of segregation?**"

Give a gift. Toss a gift over the fence. Slide it under the door. Find a way to give a gift to the person that is on the other side of your wall.

Now this is not some magic formula. Sometimes the gift will be rejected. Sometimes the gift will be received with suspicion. Sometimes we don't see the results of the gift. But when the early Christians wanted to break down walls of segregation so that they could share the love of Jesus, they gave a gift. They took care of real needs of their real neighbors.

That is what we have tried to do at Victory. One of our core values is generosity. We know that the Franklin community might be suspicious of a church. They might wonder if we really care about the people in our community. So years ago when this church ran the "More than bricks" campaign to raise money for this building, a significant portion of the funds went directly into the Franklin community. I know that because my previous congregation was so encouraged by your mission, that we gave an offering to Victory. More recently we are running our **Linked Campaign**. And we are trying to follow the same philosophy. A significant portion of the campaign will go to this community.

And now we want to give you an opportunity to live out this core value of the early Christian church in your life. God wants you to give a gift to break down the walls that divide this city. You might be thinking, "That sounds great pastor, but I've already spent everything in my budget. I'm already financially strapped because I've spent my Christmas budget on Amazon for my own family. I don't have any money to give anyone a gift."

Well, we are going to give you the money. That's right. In a moment we are going to pass out the offering basket. But this time, instead of giving an offering to the Lord, we want to give God's money to you. We encourage each family to take one envelope. One envelope per family. Then use that money to bless someone on the other side of your wall.

Now your next question is, "Well pastor, who am I supposed to give this money to?" Here is what I would encourage you to do.

First: Pray. And if you have a family and kids, pray with your kids. Ask God to show you the walls of division in your city. Ask him to show you where you are divided. Then give someone on the other side of the wall a gift. Maybe you give a gift to someone from a different race or language who is in need. Maybe you give a gift to someone of a different faith or denomination who needs to be blessed. Maybe you give a gift to someone who is in a different financial bracket than you.

Then: expect God to do what he has always done... break down the walls of hostility with his love so that we might experience a moment of peace.

That peace might be short-lived, but peace is always short-lived in this world. But that's why we, as Christians, need to celebrate the feast of Thanksgiving. This feast ultimately points ahead to the ultimate feast in God's renewed world, where believers from every nation, language, tribe, and people will gather around Jesus, our Savior. In this renewed world we will finally have peace. In fact, Revelation says that in that world, the gates will never be shut. In other words, there will be nothing to divide us. We will all be one, as our God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one.

I pray you have a very happy Thanksgiving. I pray that you have a great meal and that your team wins and that your family enjoys a time of peace and healing. But I also pray that your joy and peace spills over into your neighborhood and throughout this city. I pray that you take all the gifts that God has given, even this envelope of money, and use it to break down the walls that divide us. I pray that this city might experience a slice of God's peace. Amen.