

PLANTING DEMONSTRATION PLOTS OF GRACE

Communities of grace in a world of dividing walls

Ephesians 2:11-22

People all around the world, today,
are trying to figure out the best way to mark
the 10-year anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks on our country.

Family members of the several thousand who died that day—
are reliving the horror,
trying to figure out how much cable news they can handle,
and when to avert their eyes from the terrifying images
running in a constant video loop right now.

Surviving World Trade Center workers and first responders
who have suffered for 10 years
with flashbacks, lung disease, cancer, and other ailments,
are likewise trying to decide whether to avert their eyes,
and how to honor their fallen friends,
and not feel too guilty about surviving.

Former government officials, no doubt,
are playing back the decisions they made 10 years ago,
in the days and weeks following,
and wondering if they were the right ones,
knowing those decisions
have changed the nature of the world we live in,
as much, or *more* so, than the attacks themselves.

Christians in our country are trying to look at this anniversary
through the eyes of their faith,
and are doing so in vastly different ways.
Some are praying prayers of lament and repentance and hope,
and are joining hands with Jews and Muslims,
trying to stem the tide of inter-religious hatred and hysteria.
Some are sounding a public alarm
to churches and the broader community,
warning that Muslims are a serious threat
to America and Christianity,

and we must stand up and protect ourselves against them.
Two different events this weekend, in downtown Harrisonburg,
represent both those ways of responding.

The friends and allies of our country all around the world
are marking this anniversary, too,
and trying to figure out what their place is
in the world community ten years later.

Some Arab nations are trying to walk a very delicate line,
being clear about their strong opposition to the violence of 9-11,
and being equally clear about their fear and distrust
of the way our country behaves internationally.

And *yes*, there are some sworn enemies of our country
who would *love* to mark this anniversary
by successfully implementing another massive strike on our soil.
And the number of terrorists in the world hoping to do us harm,
is, by every count—
including estimates of our own intelligence networks—
a significantly higher number than it was on Sept. 11, 2001.

So, since people all over the world—
of nearly all nations and tribes and religions—
are trying to figure out what to do and what to think
on this significant anniversary,
it's right that we should ask ourselves the same question.

How should faithful followers of Jesus respond to this anniversary?
How should we live in the kind of world we have today—
with its many walls that divide us one from the other:
dividing walls of hostility, mistrust, labeling, stereotyping,
and often, outright violence.

I will ask this question in a pointedly political way.
But *not*, I assure you, with the kind of politics
you might be hoping, or *fearing*, that I will.

How should Christians live in this world?

That is a profoundly political question.

By *political*, I mean,

how we as Christian disciples of Jesus live together as a *polis*.

P-O-L-I-S . . . Just a Greek word for city,

the root of our word politics.

In other words, how do Christians position themselves
in the world and with each other?

How are they structured to live healthily in this world

as a community,

as a society of God's people,

a people with a particular identity,

a particular set of values,

and particular loyalties?

Those are the Christ-centered political questions

we need to be asking ourselves all the time.

Our baptism into Christ,

and into the kingdom of Christ, makes us a *polis*.

It makes us a political entity

in the most wholesome sense of the word.

And by all means, don't confuse this with the kind of partisan politics

that fills the airwaves these days.

Morally speaking, there is virtually no connection between the two.

The American partisan political machine today

is horribly broken, and a far cry from the idealistic vision behind it.

It's about cutting others down to win a fight.

It's about ego, individualism, showmanship, deceit,

and even interpersonal violence.

It's about shaming and shutting down

those with different views,

not coming together to actually solve common problems

and inviting different perspectives

as a necessary step to a good solution.

In this sermon, and in a series of three Sunday worship services,

we are going to suggest a Christian political model

that Mennonite Church USA has publicly embraced

for the last 16 years.

You can read it off the cover of your bulletin,

or in smaller type in your order of service.

In fact, let's read it together right now, in unison:

“God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ and,

by the power of the Holy Spirit,

to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace,

so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.”

That's a deeply political statement—

political in the way *I'm* using the word today.

It positions us as a people, as a social entity,

vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

And it's a deeply *biblical* statement.

This vision is informed, first and foremost,

by what we understand the scriptures to teach

about who the church is called to be in this world.

There are basically four separate phrases in this statement.

Two of them state what God calls us to do,

one of them explains how we can do it,

and one states the purpose for doing it.

The two statements of our call?

To be followers of Jesus Christ.

And to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace.

That sums up our call.

And *how* we do that?

“by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

And for what *purpose*?

“so that God's healing and hope flow through us to the world.”

So today, and the next three Sundays,

we focus on the explicitly political part of this statement—

“*to grow as communities of grace, joy, and peace.*”

We'll take one Sunday for each.

Today, we ask how we are

“communities of grace, in a world of dividing walls.”

Next Sunday,

“communities of joy, in a world of economic anxiety.”
The third Sunday,
“communities of peace, in a world of insecurity.”

So, how do Christians live, in a world of dividing walls?

It's self-evident, I think,
how deeply divided our world is today.
Some of this, at least, is due to how we responded,
nationally and globally, to 9-11.
As a nation, we positioned ourselves defensively.
Our anxieties and insecurities went up.
They shot through the roof, actually.
We built higher and stronger walls, *figuratively*,
and sometimes, *literally*.
And we started to pre-emptively,
go after those people in the world
that we believed might have reason
to try to break through our walls and hurt us.

This aggressively self-protective posture we took on,
has had a huge ripple effect,
on our whole country, our whole culture.
We started acting more insecure, and more defensive,
toward anyone whose world view, whose culture,
whose beliefs, or whose party politics
we either didn't *agree with*, or didn't *understand*.
We reinforced the walls that divided us,
by upping the rhetoric, name-calling, innuendo,
pointing out the most extreme, the most negative,
the most fringe elements of a group,
and implying that every member of that group
was *just like that*.
We did this to liberals, conservatives,
tea-partiers, environmentalists,
immigrants, Muslims, Arabs, evangelical Christians.
It has, *unfortunately*, become
the way we live with each other now,
and relate to each other in society.

Which brings us straight back to the question of the morning,
how should *Christians* live with each other,
and relate to the world around us?
What should *our* posture be, as a people of God?—
as a *polis*? a baptismal society? the body of Christ in the world?
How should the church live?

I suggest that the best response we can have in a world of dividing walls,
is to live and grow as communities of grace.

The message of the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus,
which Brian read a few moments ago,
is that the gracious, saving work of God,
accomplished through Jesus Christ,
is a work of divine reconciliation.
God's abundant and miraculous grace
brought together that which *used* to be apart.
In Paul's own words,
“You who once were far off
have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”
Ephesians 2 is *not* about an individual, personal, internal
reconciliation with Christ.
It's *understood*, of course, that as individuals
we *do* need to be reconciled with God through Christ.
But *that's* not the thrust of this particular text.
Paul is getting real down-to-earth.
He's getting political, in the *good* sense of the word.
He's addressing the dynamics of human relationships
in a diverse community.
He's concerned about the dividing of people from people,
taking place *in the church*.
He is concerned about the systematic discrimination,
the outright hostilities that characterized Jews and Gentiles.
And he is saying to these estranged peoples,
“In Jesus Christ, God has *broken down the wall*.”
“God is creating one new humanity in place of two.”
Because of Jesus, Paul says,

“You are no longer strangers and aliens to each other.
You are [*all*] citizens with the saints
and members of the household of God.”

God did this.

God took two different peoples—Jews and Gentiles—
different culturally, socially, morally, religiously.
Every bit as different as Eastern and Western culture today.
Every bit as different as Christian and Muslim religions today.
God took these two, who could barely coexist in the same town,
and put them together in the same house church!
Through Christ,
they were thrust together,
and made to sort things out by the power of the Spirit.
The only way these communities would even *survive*,
would be to become communities of grace.
Communities of persons who each *knew* themselves
as people reconciled to God only by grace,
just like their Jewish or Gentile brother and sister.

Because of these miraculous communities of grace,
popping up all over Asia Minor,
consisting of Jews and Gentiles *together*,
they became powerful demonstrations of the grace of God
to a sharply divided, and violent, world.

That is still the role of the church in today’s divided world—
to demonstrate God’s saving and reconciling grace,
through their life together in the world.
To become demonstration plots of grace.

When MCC and other development organizations
go into an area to help farmers improve their production,
they don’t set up a classroom and lecture local farmers
about superior methods.
They plant demonstration plots.
They show what can actually happen.

The church needs to be a demonstration plot for our culture.
Today, maybe more than *ever*,
our culture needs communities of grace.
We have altogether *too* many
communities of condemnation,
communities of derision,
communities of aggressive one-upmanship,
communities of violent rhetoric,
communities of self-righteousness,
and communities of protective isolation.
Our culture is *full* of communities that have
divided themselves one from another,
building higher and thicker walls out of fear of the other.
There is a growing rift between Christian and Muslim,
West and East,
immigrants and citizens,
Republicans and Democrats,
doves and hawks,
gays and straights,
pro-choicers and pro-lifers,
developers and environmentalists,
and the list goes on and on and on.

We are gearing up for another presidential election year.
Election years, it seems,
tend to expose the deep cultural wounds that we carry.
Instead of putting our differences on the table
for rational discussion and mutual enlightenment,
people resort to personal character attacks.
They pit families and neighbors *against* each other.
They arouse intense emotions of fear, bitterness,
anger, or betrayal.
Partisan politics take on deep religious significance,
and our differences even divide congregations,
and Sunday School classes,
and families.
They cause otherwise kind, considerate people
to engage in derogatory labeling, stereotyping, and slander.

How might the church, in particular the local congregation,
the one called Park View Mennonite Church,
answer God's call to be a Christ-centered community of grace,
in a divided society?

Stanley Hauerwas once said that when it comes to public life,
the best thing a church can do, is be the church.

That means we put our loyalty to the kingdom of God *first*.

It means that we embody, in our common life,
a centeredness and clarity of life,
that allows us to thrive as a Christian community,
not in *spite* of, but *because* of, the differences among us.

It means that we are willing to seek out deep conversations—
not *happen* to have, but *seek out*—
deep conversations between persons
with very different philosophies, and views of the world.

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
who happen to have very different ideas,
gather together to discern, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
how best to contribute our gifts to public society.

And out of those conversations come relationships
of such deep mutual respect and love
that it will capture the attention of a watching world.

Wouldn't it be great if followers of Jesus everywhere
could show the post 9-11 world a *different* way to live together?
if they could be living demonstration plots of grace?
if seeds of grace could be planted, cultivated, nurtured,
and bear fruit?

Wouldn't it be great if the church understood its calling to be
a community of grace in a time of social brokenness?

And if it developed a widespread reputation
as a community that exudes Christian kindness and civility?
as a community that speaks respectfully *to*,
and respectfully *about*, people we disagree with,
as a community that is amazingly generous
even in times of economic crisis,
as a community that goes to, and identifies with,

the marginalized and forgotten people of our society,
as a community that is willing to sacrifice its own agenda
to give itself to the greater good,
as a community that can live in deep peace with each other,
in joyful hope,
even when we have very different visions
of what the public good *looks* like.

It's not that differences about public politics don't matter.
Different visions of how to lead a nation
bring different results.
Sometimes those results impact millions of lives.
So let open and respectful public debate *continue*.

But in the church that *acts* like a church,
there is a greater, and more hopeful vision, that guides our life.
It's a very different thing than the politically-expedient
"reaching across the aisle" on a rare occasion.
It is the building of brother- and sister-hood
made possible *only* by the grace of God in Christ,
and it is far more profound, and far more hopeful,
to a fragmented, and watching, world.

Let us, by the grace of God,
become that kind of community of grace.

—Phil Kniss, September 11, 2011