

Tear Down the Walls

By: Penny Holste

February 3, 2013. Does God love poor people more than others? We build up walls around ourselves, to separate our in-group from outsiders. But what if our mission were hospitality to those outside our walls? Pastor Penny's sermon today is on outgrowing the groups that divide us and tearing down the walls.

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I know some of you are in high school, and many of us have been to high school. When I think back about my high school years -- they might be different from yours -- but my high school years were years of cliques and groups. There were in-groups. There were outsiders. There were lots of groups. There were athletes. There were popular kids. There were students. There were probably the geeks. There were ones who were quiet. There were the ones who always got in trouble. And of course it was nice to be in a group. That way you knew you had someone to sit with at basketball games, and you knew that you always had a chair there saved for you at the cafeteria. But there was a downside to some of these groups too. Our group felt like we were put down by another group, and we felt superior to another group as well. You didn't move around between groups very easily; it was very hard to do it. And there were people I never talked to in my class. I never thought though, at the time, that my group had held me captive, that there were these walls. I never really thought of it at the time.

But that's exactly what Jesus was thinking about in today's gospel. He was talking about the in-groups and the outsiders, and it really got him into trouble. As you remember from last week, Jesus was the "hometown boy made good" and he came back to his hometown of Nazareth, and he was invited to read the scripture. And he read the words of the prophet Isaiah, who said that he had come to bring good news to the poor and to bring release to the captive. He said that he had come to give sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. And after he read those words that the prophet Isaiah spoke, Jesus said in so many words: and that's what I'm going to do, too.

And at first his hometown friends or probably relatives and people thought, wow that's beautiful. That's wonderful. And then they began to think, what is he saying? Who does he think he is to say that this is what he's going to do, and he can speak for God? He's not a religious ruler. He's just Joseph's son. He wasn't born into the family of the high priest. He's not a Pharisee or a scribe. He's an outsider. And they began to get angry. And then, just to prove that Jesus was more of an outsider, he brought up something they did not want to hear. He said: do you remember how in the Old Testament there are two prophets of Israel, prophets sent by God to Israel who didn't help the Israelites? Instead they went outside of the country. They went to Sidon and helped a widow who was starving. They went to Syria and help Naaman, who had this skin disease that we heard about in the children's sermon. He said there were plenty of people they could have helped in their own country, but they didn't. And suddenly they realized that what he was doing was challenging their idea that they were in the in-group, that they were God's chosen people. Therefore that God loved them more than anyone, and that God would bless them. And he was challenging that, and they became furious and tried to kill him.

Well, why did God pass over all those people that needed help in Israel and send prophets to help people in other countries who are heathen? Does it really mean that God loves poor people more than others? You know, it's interesting because Jesus himself said, "I came for the poor, I came for the oppressed." And his mother, in a few chapters before this, has that beautiful Magnificat where she

praises God for lifting up the poor and putting down the rich. And when Jesus preaches he will preach, in the Beatitudes, woe to the rich and blessed are the poor. Now, "poor" can mean a lot of things. You can be poor financially. You can be poor in the way people look at you and your prestige or your honor. You can be poor because you don't have good health. But is Jesus really trying to say that God loves the poor more than anyone else?

I can think of two reasons why God comes to the aid of the poor. They have no one else; they're powerless. But also because their voice needs to be heard. Because they have a unique perspective that we need to hear. Because you know, one characteristic of being in the in-group is a sense of entitlement. Yep, I've got power and that's the way it should be. A friend from the Midwest told me that the first time that he was out in California and heard everyone speaking Spanish, his heart kind of sank and he thought oh, they're taking my country away from me. So it's our country because we speak English? Or should it maybe be the Native Americans' because they were here first? We so easily feel that if we're in a position of power, that's the way it should be. And you know, what we see is that people who are on the margins, people who have less power, have an insight to share with us. Ask someone who's poor what the gaps are in our public transportation system. They will know. Someone who does not have a car will know what the gaps are, what the problems are in our society. Ask someone who is poor and doesn't have health insurance, or the money to pay doctors' fees, what the gaps are in our healthcare system, and they will know. Whereas those of us who may be blessed enough to have health insurance or be able to pay for those fees feel like the plan's working fine. But we don't see it from their point of view.

Children often are the ones who can speak the truth when we don't see it, because in a sense they also are powerless. Or often they're standing on the fringe, watching us. A woman told me how she spent all morning getting her house ready for a Bible class that was going to meet there that afternoon. She was scrubbing and cramming things into closets, and her little boy was watching her. And when she was all done he said Mom, isn't this kind of like lying, because aren't you being dishonest to let your friends think this is the way our house always looks? He was onto something, you know, that we do tend to put up a false front. We need to hear the voices of those on the fringe, of those who could stand back and see what we're really doing.

I wonder what it would be like if our congregation would have the same mission that Jesus did: to listen to those voices of the people not within our walls, the people outside of us. You know, we are kind of at a plateau here as a congregation. Through the generosity of individuals and the congregation as a whole, we bought the Mead Center and it's paid for. We've addressed the concerns of our youth. We do things in house. And then we also have hired a joint youth worker to provide additional activities. We feel like we've kind of taken care of two things, and so we're kind of looking for a mission. What if our mission were hospitality to those outside our walls? What if (and okay, I'm dreaming now) we would hire someone who would be the face of this congregation for the community, who would go out and look for more groups than the ones that are currently using the Mead Center? Because we have nonprofits using the Mead Center and we give them a fair and good rate so that they can use it. What if there was someone out there looking for more people and bringing them in, and managing that facility? And then (and this is the key) what if we as congregation members volunteered to be the face of this congregation for the groups that meet there? What if we were the ones who would open up the building and say hi to them, and then just listen, stick around a little bit, find out what's going on and what their needs are and what they see happening, people on the outside? What kind of connections could we make? What could the Holy Spirit do with those connections to help us see new and better ways to bring release to the captives and good news to the poor, and raise up those who are oppressed?

I think that God does not love poor people more than anyone else. I think Jesus came for all of us, really to release all of us -- surely to release those who are suffering from health problems or financial problems. But also to release those who feel a sense of entitlement, from their fear and from their blindness. Jesus came so that there would be no walls. And you know, when I went back for my 10th year reunion of my high school class, that's what I found. We had all outgrown those cliques and those groups and those walls. I talked to people at length that I had never talked to for more than a few minutes when I was sitting next to them in class, and I came to value people that sadly I had not valued when we were students together. That's really why Jesus came. He lived, he died, and rose again so that we would be free to be all part of the in-group, all part of a group with no walls: the family of God. We have been released and freed from fear, from sin. We've been freed and now we are sent out to fling wide the doors of other people's prisons, so that with the power of the Holy Spirit we might tear down the walls that divide us.

*** Keywords ***

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