



The Broken Walls of Galatians 3:28

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In Bethlehem
a baby's cry
shatters barriers.

Women, men
of every creed,
culture, race

gaze across
the rubble walls
in wonder,

finding every face
luminous
with godliness!

—Irene Zimmerman¹

THE REMNANTS OF THE WALLS ARE STILL WITH US. SOMETIMES THE PIECES are so big and wide that it seems as if the baby had not been born at all. A man is mercilessly dragged behind a pickup truck because of his race, and another is beaten and hung on a fence to die because of his sexual orientation. There are still

¹Irene Zimmerman, "Emmanuel: God with Us (Galatians 3:26-28)," in *Woman Un-Bent* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's, 1999) 73.

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places in the world where girl babies are thrown away and people are denied what we believe to be basic human rights because they are female. Religion engenders some of the world's deepest hatreds and most inhuman behaviors, from Northern Ireland to the middle east to the denominational wars in North America. The wealthy, whether nations or individuals, seem increasingly unwilling to turn loose resources for use by the poor, even for education and health care.

At other times, we encounter piles of rubble that some people can get beyond, but they remind us that there is still work to do. A recent study found that nearly 12 percent of the corporate officers in America's top 500 companies were women, representing an increase from the 8.7 percent of five years ago.² Law enforcement officers are being called to task for racial profiling. Laws mandate that public buildings must be accessible for people with physical disabilities.

Sometimes a bit of rubble trips us up unexpectedly. We might realize that when we heard the word "doctor" or "professor" or "engineer" or "pastor" we assumed that it referred to a man. The subtle stereotyping (of Asians or of poor people, for example) in the media escapes our notice. We might be unaware that our language, our behavior, or the physical arrangement of our churches can cause some people to feel excluded—people with disabilities, single people, or people with limited education. A workshop, an article, or a conversation calls us face to face with our own homophobia or inadvertent participation in institutional racism.

The remnants, large and small, of the walls are still with us. Religious/ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender differences in our day might not take the same labels (Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female). We may need to translate to new categories like Korean and African-American, Hispanic and Anglo, rich and poor, gay and straight, educated and uneducated, "high" church and "low" church, young and old, and more. The differences, whatever we call them, can still be divisive, not just in the world but also in the church.

It is true that Christ has shattered the barriers, but Gal 3:28 calls us who have been baptized into Christ to something more than just gazing across the rubble. The baptismal perspective is a bit more intimate. We are all wrapped in Christ and so drawn together into oneness. That oneness doesn't take away the differences, but it means a new way of seeing and behaving.

In her book, *The Strength of the Weak*, Dorothee Sölle recounts the story of a rabbi who asked his students how one could recognize the time when night ends and day begins.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a dog from a sheep?" one student asked.

"No," said the rabbi.

"Is it when, from a great distance, you can tell a date palm from a fig tree?" an-

²"Glass ceiling remains: study," *Chicago Sun Times*, 7 January 2000, 55. These percentages are similar to the statistics in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America: in 1998, 12.7% of the ordained ministers were women, compared to 8% in 1991.

other student asked.

“No,” said the rabbi.

“Then when is it?” the students asked.

“It is when you look into the face of any human creature and see your brother or your sister there. Until then, night is still with us.”³

Baptism makes us one and gives us the potential of seeing each other, regardless of differences, as brothers and sisters, all baptized into Christ. We all live in Christ, and Christ lives in us all. “The Christ in thee meets the Christ in me,” the Quakers say. What changes would happen in us individually, in our congregations, and in our church bodies if we really let ourselves see that way?

Christ will not be divided, and as we draw closer to the heart of Christ, we begin to feel Christ’s own longing for unity. We who live in Christ learn that we belong together, and there is an ache in our hearts whenever we are separated from one another. The separations are there because there are always some among us who would drag some of the rubble from the walls into the church, and differences become barriers again. Bits of the rubble become weapons of words and actions and attitudes with which we wound each other and the Christ who seeks to hold us together. Perhaps the worst wound of all is the one caused by our not even caring that we are divided.

To know the truth of oneness, to long for unity is painful. It is tempting to retreat to our cliques of people who are just like us, where we can be safe and comfortable. But Gal 3:28 compels us to be together, to live as one with those who are most radically different from us, even those we believe to be most distant from God’s embrace. Living that oneness in Christ is not just doing what is politically correct, nor is it practicing the non-discrimination that the law requires; rather, it is to have a change of heart. Living that oneness means confessing that we are sometimes the barrier builders and the weapon wielders. It sometimes means allowing ourselves to get close to those who are most difficult for us to love. It sometimes means bearing the consequences of the pain of those who were relegated to the outside. It sometimes means listening and listening and waiting and waiting until trust can be restored. It means entering into the hard work of reconciliation.

If we were to allow ourselves to feel Christ’s own longing for unity, Christ’s own aching over our separations and divisions, what difference would it make in the way we behave toward one another in the church?

Living with shattered barriers in the church leads us to see divisions differently also outside the church. Living with oneness in Christ can lead to working for more unity in the world. This is how Christians find themselves standing in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable or least powerful. This is how Christians find themselves becoming advocates for those who are oppressed or shut out. This

³Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, trans. Robert and Rita Kimber (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 41.

is how Christians find themselves working to break down barriers and clear away the remaining rubble.

The story is told of an old, stable neighborhood in Chicago:

On the first night of Hanukkah, a menorah appeared in the window of one of the homes. This had never happened before. Next morning, the front door of that home bore a large, crudely painted swastika. That evening, a second candle appeared in the window. But now, another home across the street had a menorah in the window as well. Next morning, the second home also had a swastika on the door. On the third evening, three candles burned in the window of the first home, and now menorahs had shown up in the front windows of half a dozen homes round about. Next morning, six more swastikas. By the fourth evening, menorahs beamed light from the windows of homes all up and down that street. No more swastikas appeared in the neighborhood. Light had chased away the darkness.⁴

It is true that the remnants of the walls are still with us, and we can become discouraged, even perhaps believing that Gal 3:28 is only some “pie in the sky” idea. But we also have glimpses of the new reality ushered in with Christ. The glimpses over and through and across the rubble pull us on to the more that God always has in store for us. Perhaps these three glimpses vivid in my own memory will help you recall your own wondrous gazings “across the rubble walls.”

Some years ago I worked with others in the Lutheran Deaconess Association to hold gatherings for mothers of young children. A grant from Aid Association for Lutherans allowed us to invite not just mothers who could afford the registration fee but also a group of women from Chicago’s uptown neighborhood, mostly single mothers receiving public assistance. After two days of talking, worshiping, playing, and feasting, we sat in small groups to evaluate the event. In a poignant moment, one of the Chicago uptown mothers turned to a well dressed, neatly coiffured pastor’s wife from New York and said, “Yesterday when I first saw you, I thought it was a mistake that we were assigned to the same small group. I was sure we had nothing in common. But now I know how much we share. Some of our problems and frustrations are different, but we have the same hopes and dreams for our children. I’m glad I got to know you.” The two women embraced and knew that they were one in Christ.

It was the closing Eucharist at a retreat I facilitated for Ebenezer Lutheran Church in Chicago. As we gathered in a circle, I was struck by the rich diversity I had scarcely noticed in our day together. People had entered so comfortably into the exercises and discussion that it was clear that they all felt at home. Ebenezer, a Reconciled in Christ Congregation, reaches beyond some usual barriers to embody a great deal of diversity. In the circle that day were women and men, clergy and lay,

⁴Frederick A. Niedner, Jr., *Joy to the World: 1999 Advent Devotions* (Itasca, IL: Wheat Ridge Ministries, 1999) 7.

African Americans, Asian Americans, and Swedish Americans. There were people with PhDs and with developmental disabilities, professionals and service workers and stay-at-home moms and dads, gay men and lesbian women. There were people many would call wealthy and one man who saved what he could from his disability check, coming with a handful of coins and asking if that were enough to pay the registration fee. I looked around the circle and listened as they all delivered the “homily,” sharing in turn insights and truths they knew in their hearts, gifts received by us all.

A few years ago I attended a meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, Switzerland. Almost 300 people—bishops, professors, pastors, staff, laypeople, youth—from all over the world listened to Jean Vanier talk about love and servanthood and healing touch. He told of a young man in the L’Arche Community that Vanier founded for people with mental and physical disabilities—a man who did not ask for wealth or fame or status or knowledge. This man asked for a friend. “Do you love me?” he wanted to know. Because words were sometimes beyond his comprehension, it was touch that most powerfully communicated to him friendship and love. Vanier told us that it was that friendship and love that Jesus gave to the disciples the night that he washed their feet. Vanier invited us to imagine what it must have been like as Jesus spent time with each one, touching them, doing that humble task. Then he invited us to wash each other’s feet. The only sounds in the room were the pouring of water and the soft singing of the Taizé chant “*Ubi caritas et amore deus ibi est*” (Where charity and love are, there is God). Orthodox patriarchs in flowing robes, young stewards in tee shirts and jeans, women in saris and caftans, men in business suits and women in clerical collars washed feet and had their feet washed. For a few moments at least the usual distinctions were gone. All were one in Christ Jesus. When living the oneness proves hard, glimpses like these can keep us going. ⊕