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Walls do two things. They keep stuff inside them, and they keep other stuff outside them. That's what a wall is for.

The Great Wall of China did both things that a wall is supposed to do. It enclosed what was in and it kept out what was out. About 2500 years ago, four warring states were united under the emperor Qin Shi Huangdi and became known as the China of the Chin dynasty. The connecting of existing defensive walls to enclose this united nation and to repel the invading Huns was both symbolic and practical. We, inside this wall, are one people. The rest of the world is not us, nor are they welcome here, said that wall. Over the following centuries the wall was improved and expanded to span some 6,300 km, and today can be seen from the space station if you know where to look.

The Berlin Wall didn't so much keep what was out, out as it existed to keep what was in, in. Follow the Second World War and the division of Germany into two countries, one democratic and the other communist, the people of Germany began to vote with their feet. Over a ten-year period, more than 3 million people left their homes in communist East Germany for the hope of a better life in the West. The Berlin wall was constructed in 1961 to stem the tide of people. As a symbol it did not so much unify East Germany, as it symbolized the division between what had once been a united people. When the wall came down on November 9, 1989, torn apart by ordinary people carrying hammers and chisels, it was a wonderful symbol of the end of the cold war, a reunification of what had been divided, and for many the triumph of western-style democracy over soviet-style communism.

On the other hand, the Security Wall recently constructed along the border between the West Bank and Israel pretty clearly exists to keep what is out, out, rather than keeping what is in, in. Beginning in 2003, the Israeli government constructed a barrier consisting of walls, barbed wire, gates and fences by which they hope to control the flow of Palestinians, from the West Bank into Israel. In part because of its purpose of dividing people from one another, and shutting one group out of desirable employment, some have named it the apartheid wall, and its legality has been repeatedly questioned both within Israel and in the international community at large.

Maybe it's basic human nature to build walls. Walls define us; walls say I'm in and you're out. Walls protect us, keeping out what's different or unknown. Walls let us claim property rights, give us a sense of security and power, or else they shut us out and let us know exactly where we stand. But despite the enormous impact of the Great Wall of China, Berlin wall and Israeli security wall, each of these structures was built long after the psychological walls that separated peoples were well in place. And even years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, graffiti was seen at the site reading, "Put the wall

back,” and Germans today speak of the psychological wall that still separates those from East Germany from those in the West.

In St. Paul’s day, the psychological separation was largely between those Christians who were Jewish, and those Christians who were Gentiles. The Jewish Christians had all grown up faithful Jews, the men had been circumcised at 8 days old, and they were all used to obeying the Jewish laws and thinking of themselves as members of the chosen people of God. The Gentile Christians had none of this. Before coming to faith in Jesus Christ, they may have followed any of a number of other gods and religions that existed in the first-century Roman Empire. But when they were baptized and joined the church, these Gentile Christians came to believe not only in the story of Jesus but, because he was Jewish, they came to learn and believe the stories of Moses and Abraham and David and Esther and Ruth and all the other characters of what we call the Old Testament. They didn’t only believe in Jesus; they believed in the whole Jewish story, too. And since they weren’t themselves Jewish, some Christians, Jewish and Gentile, believed that the Gentile Christians were somehow second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

It is hard, I think, for us today to imagine the kind of division and animosity that Paul was trying to address. For someone like me, growing up in the Canada of official multiculturalism, the idea that we should all get along and be part of one big, happy and diverse family is more or less a given. We might not always be very good at it, but we agree that that is how it should be. But I suspect that someone who grew up in the Germany of the 1930s and saw the relationship between Jewish people and Gentiles there, or in South Africa in the 1970s and 80s and saw the relationship between whites and blacks there, or in Ireland in the 1960s and saw the relationships between Protestant and Catholics there, might have a better sense of the depth of the division Paul was addressing. The walls that define us also serve to separate us, whether those walls are physical or mental.

But once we are baptized into the name of Jesus Christ, Paul wrote, those walls cease to exist. “For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Jew or Gentile doesn’t matter any more, because it is in Jesus Christ that we are all made one with God’s saints. Black or white, yellow or red or brown or green, whatever our colour, we are one in Jesus and one in God’s household. And just as all the bricks in the building up of a house are needed, so too are each of us needed. No two stones will be exactly the same, but each will have its place in the building up of the household of God.

I said earlier that human beings seem to have this natural tendency to build walls. So far, we seem to have had real trouble with figuring out how to be unique individuals, with valuing our differences, without building walls to keep some people out and other people in. French post-modern philosopher Jacques Derrida writes that even in defining

ourselves as this but not that, there is a kind of violence at work, for in the exclusion of what we are not, there is violence, there is wall-building. It may be that in this world he's right, although I'm not completely convinced.

But holding these two things in tension, valuing our differences without building walls, is something that all human beings have to work at. Today's reading from St. Paul gives us the hope that with God, it is possible. "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Baptism is the citizenship ceremony for the kingdom of God. You and I as baptized Christians, are full members of the household of God, whatever our race or age or gender or whatever. Yes, we are all unique, and yes, God created and loves our diversity. But we cannot let the ways in which we are different become walls that keep us separated from one another. For Jesus Christ came for us all, and brings us all together in the Spirit of God. The walls come crashing down when we can know and believe that, and when we live it, we are an example to the whole world, a world that desperately needs an example of how to live in love without walls. Amen.