

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25  
November 14&15, 2009  
Intern Pastor Ken Staib

Twenty years ago last week, the Berlin wall fell, an event marked by celebrations in Germany. Seeing pictures on the news this week from that momentous event brought back memories of all that was happening in Eastern Europe around that time. I remember images of joyous celebration as a long dark period of history came crashing to an end.

The Berlin Wall was built to separate two parts of Berlin: West Berlin, which was free and democratic, and East Berlin, which was communist. The primary purpose of the wall was to keep people from fleeing out of East Berlin into West Berlin. Not only was the city divided, but so was the nation of Germany in which it is located, as well as the entire continent of Europe.

The nations of Europe were divided by the so-called "Iron Curtain". Of course there wasn't really a physical curtain there, but it was a border that was not to be crossed. People were kept away from each other. It was as if there were two separate worlds. The nations on the east side of the Iron Curtain were allied with the Soviet Union, while the nations on the west side were allied with the United States. Over a period of about 30 years known as the "Cold War" the United States and the Soviet Union built up arsenals of weapons and pointed them at each other in order to protect themselves and their allies. During this time people lived in fear that any day nuclear war would break out.

People in Eastern Europe had their freedoms severely restricted during the Cold War, freedoms we may take for granted, such as freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, freedom of the press. But in the mid-1980's things began to change on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. People wanted freedom and they began to protest against their governments. I remember watching images on TV of huge crowds of people protesting against their oppressive leaders in eastern European nations such as Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. This civil unrest led to

monumental events, such as the easing of travel restrictions between East and West Germany which ultimately led to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

When the wall was opened, people streamed through and over top of it, excited to get to the other side. They climbed up on top with hammers, chisels, picks, and axes, chipping away at the barrier of concrete. People now had access to each other in a new way. People from the west and east could meet one another. A new way had opened up for people who had for many years been divided. Over the next several months the Iron Curtain fell as oppressive governments crumbled in the face of popular demonstrations across eastern Europe.

In light of last week's celebration, it was interesting to read this week's passage from Hebrews, which refers to the opening of a new way, a new way to access God. Until that time, access had been restricted. Access to God was possible through sacrifices which only priests could offer. This *new* way is through the sacrifice made for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The writer of Hebrews describes how a way has been opened for us through the curtain. This is a reference to the curtain that surrounded the innermost part of the temple, the sanctuary, where only the priest could go and make sacrifices to God. There was a restriction on who could enter this area, meaning there was a restriction on who had access to God.

But now through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, there is no longer a curtain. Christ is our priest, and through him we have direct access to God. No more hierarchy, rituals, or barriers. God opens up a *new* way for us through Christ. This new way gives us confidence that we can approach God.

Think of the confidence of the people of eastern Europe when the Berlin Wall was opened, and people were given access to freedoms they had not known for many years. There was also confidence ninety years on the first Armistice Day. Now known as Veterans Day, it

was a day which commemorated the end of World War I. At that time people believed that we would never have to send soldiers to war again.

But the unfortunate reality is that we continue to send soldiers to war, oppressive governments remain in power, and hostilities and divisions persist. It seems that for every new way that opens up, a new barrier goes up in its place. God is in the business of opening up new ways, while we human beings tend to be in the business of closing them. When walls fall down and we have access to one another, it seems like there are new walls being built right behind them.

This happens in our relationships too. We put up walls in our relationships that keep us from speaking the truth to one another, and accepting one another. Without these walls we would have to risk being open with one another. We risk being rejected. We risk not liking what we hear or see in another person. When we do open up with one another we often close ourselves off again.

If God has given us access through Christ, then ideally the church could be a place where our relationships would reflect such openness. If God has opened up a way for us to access him, wouldn't we as God's people give that same access to one another? Sometimes that happens, and it is a beautiful thing. But it can also be scary, risky, and even a bit messy, so we withdraw, closing ourselves off. We put up curtains around our lives so people do not have access to who we truly are. We don't want anyone to know how bad we really are, how messed up our lives really are. We try to make it look like we have it all together. After all, doesn't everyone else have a normal life? Though the more I live, the more I wonder, *just what is a normal life?*

Song writer Mark Hall of the band "Casting Crowns" wrote a song that expresses a longing for more authentic relationships in the church. It is called "Stained Glass Masquerade",

and it describes our tendency to put on masks that hide who we truly are. The words of the chorus go like this:

*Are we happy plastic people  
Under shiny plastic steeples  
With walls around our weakness  
And smiles to hide our pain  
But if the invitation's open  
To every heart that has been broken  
Maybe then we close the curtain on our stained glass masquerade*

We all come here with broken hearts, but we hide them behind walls and forced smiles. But what if we accept the invitation to open up our hearts and let others have access to who we truly are. Then true community is formed. This happens when we trust in God's grace. God accepts us, and when we let that reality take hold of us, we can accept ourselves and one another. We will run and embrace each other, just like what we saw in the images at the Berlin Wall twenty years ago. People could not wait to get to the other side, to run through the opening.

It would be like the second verse of "Stained Glass Masquerade":

*But would it set me free  
If I dare to let you see  
The truth behind the person  
That you imagine me to be*

It would set us free, as we allow ourselves to enter into deeper relationships.

In light of our access to God, our passage from Hebrews also urges readers to not neglect meeting together. These words were directed toward the early Christians who were falling away from their faith. They were facing pressure to conform to society instead of living out their faith. Part of living out their faith, which remains true for us today, was meeting together for worship, for meals, for building community. But some were not doing that. However, it is only when we

meet together that true community can form. It is in our meeting together that we can know others and be known by others. It happens in worship, Bible studies, small groups, Sunday School, dinners, mission trips, hospital rooms, and living rooms. When believers truly *meet together* then the masks can come off, the curtain can be lifted, and the walls can be broken through. And the more we truly meet together, the more we will *want* to meet together, because we will be changed. We will *want* to meet together again and again, even when things get messy, because we will be encouraging one another.

And we will meet together more and more, even as the Day approaches, says the writer of Hebrews. This reference to “the Day” is the Day of the Lord, the end of time, when God has the last word. The original readers of Hebrews, the early Christians, thought the Day was coming in their lifetime. They thought that Jesus would come again soon and time would come to an end. The Day did not come, and it has not yet come, and we don’t know when it will come or what it will look like.

Or do we? Maybe the Day *has* already come. Maybe the Day came twenty years ago when the Iron Curtain was lifted, or forty years ago during the Civil Rights movement, or ninety years ago when World War I ended. Maybe the Day came when a father picked up the phone and heard the voice of his estranged son wanting to come home again, or when an addict recognized her need for help and reached out, or when a friend who felt betrayed offered forgiveness. Maybe the Day is *still* coming, and maybe it will be the moment when the people of God *truly meet together*, when the masks are removed, the curtains are lifted, the walls have crumbled, when we can truly know and be known, when we accept each other just as God accepts us. Maybe that is the Day that is approaching. If so I pray that it comes soon, for it is then that we will know what grace means.

Amen.