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Reconciliation
Ephesians 2:12-22

Building walls and drawing dividing lines is just part of human nature.
 As much as we'd like to have it, true peace is elusive and mysterious.
 Reconciliation can seem like a far off dream.
 At times peace and reconciliation appear impossible.

Even after countless peace talks,
 the middle east is the epitome of conflict and hostility.
 Jerusalem means 'city of peace',
 and yet in the city of Jerusalem hardly a week passes
 without some kind of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.
 After each violent incident, you know what happens? Municipal
 cleaning machines marked with the words "City of Peace" come to wash
 blood from the streets. Peace seems like a dream...

It is all too common for us to be divided---
 just choose a difference and we can hold it against each other....
 We have racism, classism, sexism, ageism, nationalism...
 the list goes on and on.

So often we hold onto the conflicts between us, refusing to let there be peace....
A teacher once told each of her students to bring a clear plastic bag and a sack of potatoes to school. They were instructed to call to mind every person they had a grudge against. ... and label a potato with the name and date, and put it in the plastic bag. They were told to carry this bag with them everywhere,...beside their bed at night, on the car seat when driving, on their lap when riding, next to their desk during classes. Some bags became quite heavy. Lugging this around, paying attention to it all the time, and remembering not to leave it in embarrassing places was a hassle. Over time the potatoes became moldy, smelly, and began to sprout "eyes."

During Jesus' time the Jews and Gentiles had an almost insurmountable divide.
 Jews looked upon Gentiles as swine.
 If a Jew married a Gentile, the funeral of that Jew was carried out.
 Even to go into a Gentiles house rendered a Jew unclean.

When Jews and Gentiles alike came to accept the good news of Jesus Christ
 they continued to be divided and fight—

over circumcision, food sacrificed to idols, leaders, the resurrection.

In the temple courts, the Gentiles were only allowed into the outer courts,
while the Jews could enter the inner court of the temple.

Archeologists have even found inscriptions describing the punishment of
death for Gentiles who dared to cross the dividing line.

It was much like our history of segregated churches, schools, restaurants,
blacks in the back of the bus, using separate facilities
treating people like second class citizens

To understand the walls between us,
Our Lenten devotional writer James Harnish invited his congregation
to say “Lord, have mercy”
if he described a wall in their life.

I’d like us to do the same
So, when I say *Let us pray to the Lord,*
you say *Lord have mercy*
if you hear something familiar.

So, if you have ever felt estranged from another person
because he or she was better looking, better dressed,
had a better job, house or car,
Let us pray to the Lord, *Lord have mercy.*

If you have ever felt alienated from another person solely
because that person was rich, poor, black, white,
Hispanic, Asian, Republican, Democrat,
or because they cheered for a rival football team,
let us pray to the Lord, *Lord have mercy.*

If you have ever had a night when the bed in which
you and your spouse were sleeping was about ten feet wide;
if you’ve ever thought your parents are out to destroy your life,
or your kids were determined to ruin your retirement,
let us pray to the Lord, *Lord have mercy.*

If you have ever felt so alone that you felt like an alien,
 a stranger, hopeless without God on your side,
 let us pray to the Lord, *Lord have mercy.*

We need God's mercy, don't we?
 We have all experienced the pain of walls and division.
 Sometimes we even erect them for self-protection,
 in hopes that it will prevent us from getting hurt.

So what is the solution?

How do we break ***down the barriers*** between us?
 Paul says we have to go to Jesus Christ—
 he is the one who brought Jews and Gentiles together.
 He is the only one who makes reconciliation possible.

Here in Ephesians Paul makes it clear that
 Gentiles have been brought into the family of faith through
 Christ's death on the cross.
 In his death Jesus brought the two together,
 and made them one people, no longer Jew or Gentile,
 but Christ followers, Christians.

Ephesians says, *that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death the hostility*

And remember Paul's strong words in Galatians 3:28,
 there is no longer Jew nor Greek,
 male or female, slave or free..... you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The dictionary defines peace as—
 a state of harmony, the absence of hostility, or violent conflict.
 It can be a relationship between any people characterized by respect,
 justice, and goodwill.
 Peace can describe calm, serenity, and silence.

Reconciliation is defined as the process of
 making consistent or compatible (dictionary.com)

But for Christians the *definition of peace* is different.

Our definition of peace is a *person*—the person of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:14 says For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us.

Our definition of reconciliation is

to be brought together through the forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ.

For us, Peace is not just absence of conflict—*it is the presence of God.*

It is the presence of God in the midst of our divisions,
breaking down the walls that separate us.

Peace is when God breaks through the walls that divide us.

And Jesus is the author of all reconciliation—

Bringing enemies together as one.

He has shown us what it takes to break down the walls,
in his self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

So what about the walls in our lives?

How can we find God's peace in our own broken relationships and divisions?

First, we have to *invite God* into the separation.

We have to welcome the peaceful presence of God
right into the midst of our conflict and division.

So we pray, we study, we get wise counsel from other believers

We open ourselves up to the possibility of reconciliation,

No matter how impossible it may seem.

Then, we have to *follow the example* of Jesus Christ,
and his self-giving, self-sacrificing love.

God is not asking us to be a doormat or a victim,

God is asking us to give of ourselves,

to give up our own way so we can make a way to reconciliation.

The Irish call reconciliation 'chancing one's arm'

On display in St. Patrick's cathedral in Dublin hangs an ancient door with a rough hewn, rectangular opening hacked in the center.

It's known as the "door of reconciliation"

In 1492, two prominent Irish families, the Ormonds and Kildares, were in the midst of a bitter feud. The Earl of Ormond, and his followers took refuge in the chapter house of St. Patrick's cathedral, bolting themselves in.

As the seige wore on, the Earl of Kildare concluded the feuding was foolish. Here were two families worshiping the same God, in the same church, living in the same country, trying to kill each other. So he called out to Sir James and promised no more violence.

Ormond did not respond. So Kildare seized his spear, cut a hole in the door, and thrust his hand through. It was grasped by another hand inside the church. The door was opened and the two men embraced, thus ending the family feud. From Kildare's noble gesture came the expression "chancing one's arm." Diana Garland, Family Ministry (InterVarsity Press, 1999), p.358

Peace and reconciliation is a **process**.

It takes a lot of **hard work**,
and a great deal of God's grace.

But the good news is that it is **possible**.

Even in the worst circumstances.

We've seen peace knock down the dividing walls.

We've seen Martin Luther King, Jr. use love to stop hatred.

We've seen Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela use peace
in South Africa's fight against apartheid.

We've seen incredible stories of reconciliation after WWII.

Tubingen, Germany was a place where anti-Jewish doctrines thrived, especially during World War II. Today, however, the Jerusalem Post reports that not only has a tiny Jewish community returned to the town, but there also exists the Tubingen Offensive Stadtmission Church (TOS). The church has grown to about 250 members over the last 20 years, and each of its members possesses a heartfelt love for both the nation of Israel and the Jewish people. The church meets in a large tent built on top of the same railroad tracks that once deported Jews from Tubingen to concentration camps throughout Germany and Poland. The mission of the church is to confess and repent of the sins of their forefathers.

In 2007, TOS organized a March of Life to coincide with Holocaust Remembrance Day. Their march, which covered the roughly 350 kilometers from Bisingen to Dachau, followed the route many Jews walked as a death march in early 1945, just months before World War II ended.

TOS held a special meeting the night before the march began. Four members stood before the assembly and told stories of their own family's participation in the Nazi regime. One woman, who now sings in the church worship group, had recently discovered that her grandfather was an SS guard who beat Jews and other prisoners. She and three others then followed the example of Jesus by humbly washing the feet of several Jewish guests, including some who were Holocaust survivors. The Jewish guests then symbolized their forgiveness by washing the feet of their German hosts. Rose Price, a survivor of six concentration camps, embraced and comforted several Germans who had broken into tears.A man from Syria witnessed the event and observed longingly that if Germans and Jews could be reconciled, perhaps it could happen between Arabs and Jews.
source: Will King, "For Zion's sake," www.jpost.com (5-30-07)

Perhaps you've seen **marriages** come back together,
 Alienated relatives making amends
 church members who agree to disagree,
 or neighbors who decide to bury the hatchet.
 It is possible—it is possible with the help of our reconciling God.

I love the story of Cindy and Chip Altemos, who were in the process of getting a divorce. ...Five years into the painful separation, Chip had kidney failure...and his soon-to-be ex-wife came to his aid. "He was still my husband. There was no way I could walk around with two kidneys, and he had none," She agreed to donate a kidney, telling Chip there were no strings attached—no written agreement concerning a better share in divorce court.

The transplant took place on February 21, 2007, and a funny thing happened as they both recovered in the hospital: they fell back in love. Chip thought to himself, Why would I want to date someone else, when I have a woman who would give part of herself so I can keep living? The two will be married 17 years in October. Associated Press, "Kidney Saves Marriage," (5-6-07)

Reconciliation is possible, but it requires taking a **risk**—and stepping out in faith.
 Humbling ourselves enough to reach out.

After a sermon, Pastor Gordon MacDonald received a compliment from a female Nigerian Dr. at a large teaching hospital in the U.S. She gave him a very American name. So he asked her, 'what is your African name?' She gave it to him, it was several syllables long with a melodic sound to it. "What does that name mean?" he asked, She said "It means '**child who takes anger away**'. "My parents had been forbidden to marry, but they did anyway and were ostracized by both families. But when I was born, and the

grandparents met me and held me for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. So that's the name my father gave me".

What if we were to become *peacemakers*?
'people who take anger away'

What if we became *reconcilers*?
people who don't want walls between us

In Matthew 5:43 Jesus tells us to love our enemies,
 To pray for those who persecute us.
 Anyone can love their friends,
 but we are called to love our enemies.
 We are called to tear down the walls that divide us
 And break through the barriers between us

Perhaps one of the ***most powerful stories of reconciliation*** is about Holocaust survivor Corrie ten Boom. She and her family secretly housed Jews in their home during WW II. Their "illegal" activity was discovered, and Corrie and her sister Bessie were sent to the German death camp, Ravensbruck. There Corrie would watch many, including her sister, die.

After the war she returned to Germany to declare the grace of Christ.

Listen to her story.....It was 1947, and I'd come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth that they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture, of the sea ... I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, 'NO FISHING ALLOWED.'"

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a cap with skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush; the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. That place was

Ravensbruck, and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard; one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course.... But I remembered him. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

After the war, he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein; again the hand came out; "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there; I whose sins had again and again been forgiven; and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place. Could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could have been many seconds that he stood there; hand held out; but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

..... "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling." And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!" For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even then, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit.

Is peace possible?

Is reconciliation just a dream?

Can the walls that divide us truly come down?

Friends, hear the good news of the gospel

By the grace of God and the hard work of love

Peace and reconciliation is possible—no matter how great the divide.

If we have the courage to welcome God into our division

If we will rely upon the power of Jesus Christ
to make friends out of enemies

We too can see the miracle of peace and reconciliation
The power of God at work in our broken world.

In the name of the one who breaks through all barriers
By the power of the cross, Amen.