

SERMON
November 15, 2015
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson

Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

Break down the walls that separate us.

A Prayer for the Human Family, remembering especially the people of Paris and Beirut and Syria. Let us pray.

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

It's difficult to know what to say. The news is still pouring in from Paris. After a catastrophe, any catastrophe, there is a silence, a respectful silence. For those who died, for those who were injured, for the first-responders, for those whose lives have been turned upside down.

The streets of Paris were quiet last night. It takes time for shock and fear, disbelief and anger to dissipate. After 9/11 there was silence, as the dust continued to fall. Silence. And prayers. Let us pray.

O Lord, hold back the hands that kill and maim; turn around the hearts that hate. Grant instead your strong Spirit of Peace, peace that passes our understanding but changes lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

One of the things that we do as faithful people, when everything seems without hope, is to remember. We remember and rely on the how God and time, in God's good time, things change. Let us pray.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ, give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

Bill Howie, who has worked in University of Maryland's Shock Trauma for about 30 years asked for a copy of this prayer. I believe he posted it on the bulletin board in the this critical care unit.

We remember that time passes and that things change.

One of the things we do as faithful people, when everything seems without hope, is to remember. Our faith is built upon remembering. *Salvation History* it is called. We remember how God has saved us in the past. How he brought the people of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt. How he lead them through the Red Sea on dry land. The story of the Exodus is iconic. It is at the core of our faith. We remember that on the night before he died, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it and said, *This is my body. He took the cup and said, this is my blood. Whenever you do this, do this in remembrance of me.* We remember that after he died, three days later, he was raised. We remember that through him the church was created. And in the remembering, we call upon God to be with us again, and again, and again—as we face the trials and perils of our day. Remembering is at the core of our faith. It is the path to hope. It is hope that revives us and makes life possible.

August 13, 1961. Berlin. The preceding days were filled with torrential downpours, but this August day was clear and hot. There was nothing disturbing about the sight of cremes and concrete slabs quietly resting near the edge of the city. As darkness fell, it seemed like a thousand other evenings. But at midnight, military units were authorized to begin sealing off the city.

First, by miles of jagged barbed wire. Soon these were replaced by a much more ominous and lasting presence—the Berlin Wall. The Berlin Wall, a motionless concrete snake rising ten to thirteen feet high, winds and bends; turns corners, crosses streets and backyards, curling through Europe’s third largest city. Behind the wall is a no-man’s land patrolled by armed guards and dogs. The grounds are dotted with machine guns and in some places, land mines. There are 285 elevated watch towers. The Berlin Wall was created in a panic by a county desperate to retain its own citizens; citizens who were fleeing at an astounding rate.

But, on November 9, 1989, people of both East and West Berlin, together, danced along the top of the Wall. Singing and embracing, families and friends, and strangers, reunited, cheering. With hammers and chisels, fingernails and an overwhelming sense of hope, Germans from East and West began tearing down the Wall. From the rubble rose a new symbol for tomorrow, an icon for future generations.

Here is a piece of that wall. Holding it my hand is a way of remembering—to remember struggles turned to triumphs, grief to joy, despair to hope and fulfillment. Reunification.

This piece of the Berlin Wall is smaller than what came in this box. A few years ago, a friend of mine. Mahmud, a Palestinian muslim, was visiting my home in Maryland. He lives in Samaria, in a beautiful town where his parents and grandparents lived before him. I met him there in the year 2000. He is an antiquities dealer. He sells such things as the *widow’s mite*, like the one I wear around my neck—a 2,000 year old coin referred to by Jesus in the teaching we heard in last week’s gospel lesson.

Mahmud called me from his home a few years ago. He told me there were tanks in his front yard and his children couldn’t go out and play. It was hard for me to imagine. He asked if we would consider sponsoring him and his family for citizenship. We did. He moved his family to Alabama where other family members lived. On this particular visit, he told me about the wall that was being built near his home, a barrier through the town of Nablus. He was deeply troubled. I took this box down from my bookshelf to show him the piece of the Berlin Wall. I broke it in two, and gave him a piece of it with which to remember that even this wall came down — and this small piece of it a token of hope. He held the piece of cement as if it were a precious gem.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall. That's Robert Frost. It's true in nature, true in Germany, and true in Israel/Palestine. Mahmud held the piece of cement and wrapped it carefully in tissue paper. He wrote this note and placed it in the box.

*I am taking a piece of the Berlin Wall to Palestine
so the people there will learn that there is always a new day.*

“Break down the walls that separate us.”

Imagine Jesus sitting with his disciples in the corner of the Temple Courtyard in Jerusalem watching people come and go. Jesus' disciples were country folk. Here they were in the Holy City, at the Temple! They were impressed with rich men in long robes making big donations. But Jesus pointed out and honored a poor widow putting in a few coins—everything she had. They were impressed with the grandeur and permanence of the buildings. The disciples were like tourists in the big city, necks strained, eyes looking up—WOW! The Western Wall of the Temple Mount was 1590 feet long (the length of about four and a half football fields). In the center of the Mount is the back of the Temple. It stood about 10 to 16 stories tall. Each stone was huge, bigger than a luxury car, stacked upon each other. Tremendous. Spectacular. Grand! If they had had smart phones, there would have been no chance for Jesus to get their attention.

In today's Gospel, Jesus walked his disciples out of the temple into the courtyard. While they strained their necks and oohed and aahed, he told them, “Not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down.” Are you kidding? That could never happen. If anything was permanent. This had to be it! But buildings made of stone do not last, just as walls do not last. His words were alarming. Later Jesus is accused of being an insurrectionist because of these words. Did he say he would destroy the temple? No. He was preparing his disciples for the changes that would come. Changes there were inevitable.

First, the temple would be desecrated by the Emperor and his army. Then in the year 70 it was destroyed. Today, all that remains is the Western Wall. And it is here that people come from all

over the world to remember and to pray. It is a reminder of the glory days and also of the diaspora. For us, this piece of the temple wall is an invitation to hope—as followers of Christ, around the world, even to this day. “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” With this Jesus prepared his disciples for the days ahead.

There will always be disasters, catastrophes, unimaginable things. Life is not easy. Bad things happen. And then the sound of silence. “Where is God?” the people ask. “Do not be fooled,” Jesus answers. “Beware that no one leads you astray.” “I am with you.” “I am the alpha and the omega. The beginning and the end.” Philip asked Jesus, “How are we to know the way?” And Jesus replied, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” And again, Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I in you.” And again, “For God so loved the world....”

His words are precious remembrances. We hold these words carefully in our hands and share them with each other—repeating them, memorizing them, giving them to our children. Unlike walls and buildings made of stone they will last forever.

Remembering is at the core of our faith. It is the path to hope. And it is hope that revives us and makes life possible.

AMEN