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Reading the newspaper or listening to TV or NPR these days is really the opposite of reading today's scripture. Let me share with you familiar stories from the last few months:

- The Pope reiterates that women cannot be ordained, and that the topic is completely closed. Jesus only selected men for disciples and so that clearly indicates that he only wants men to serve the sacraments, visit the lonely and ill, preach, teach and spread the good news.

- The Hutu refuse to be ruled by the Tutsi, and the Tutsi refuse to be ruled by the Hutu, and so of course there can be no peace, no compromise, no safety for either party. The massacres continue.

- The African American and the Caucasian communities differ drastically on what they think concerning OJ Simpson's possible guilt. This is causing accusations of racism, and accusations of blindness from the different groups, and the media plays it up for all it is worth.

- Or did you read about the gay man who is being asked to leave the military because he announced his sexual orientation? This will become the test case for the constitutionality of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

- And, of course, the boundaries for the former Yugoslav states cannot be settled for these people who cannot live with one another based on past history, past experiences, and religious beliefs.

It is scary and depressing to read and hear the news these days. everything seems to boil down to people trying very hard to set barriers between one group and another, or maintain territories, or protect power, or keep domination or control.

The human heart seems to need to protect itself, as if new or different or unusual or strange was equivalent to bad or wrong.

Women wear pants? Oh, my God! Do they have any idea what a scandal it was when women started to want to dress more comfortably, in less restrictive garb? Women were considered lewd, loose, and trying to be like men, which was a horrible thought. I was in 7th grade before our school system would allow girls to wear pants to school, and then it couldn't be jeans, but had to be something dressier. Do you remember what it was like to wear a dress on top of snowpants?!

Or the fight that ensued, and still rumbles around, when the reform Jews stopped keeping Kosher homes. They mixed meat and milk. They ate pork and seafood. It was not, and still is not OK.

Or, in a more sober light, a picture I saw at the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, where we stopped with the workcamp group. This is a museum built in the Lorraine Hotel, the blacks only hotel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. It is now a very fine history of the struggle of African American people all through the centuries. There is one picture that leapt out at me, that I will never forget. It is a close-up of a portion of a sit-down strike/protest. An African American man is seated, in a neat suit and tie, with hands folded in his lap, and head slightly bowed. Standing over him, shouting, with a face yelling out its hate and hostility and cruelty is a Caucasian man. As he stands there, he is grinding a lit cigarette out in this man's hair.

Or the Episcopal seminary student, female, who told me that she was not allowed to serve communion when she was menstruating. She was unclean, unfit to touch the elements.

We are so good at building walls, at raising our defenses when we feel threatened, of creating division when there need not be any.

The scriptures today talk about the household of God, of the people who are one in the name of the Holy One. The David story follows right after last week's lesson, where David was dancing in the streets, rejoicing in the God who brought the people out of slavery into their own land, and who had anointed him to be King over the tribes. He spent that evening in prayer. David and the priests had guided the moving of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, and now David told God that he intended to build a temple, a place to truly do honor to the ark and all that it was. He was going to build for God a dwelling place for all people to come to.

But God told him to not to do it. God wasn't all that interested in a house -- God instead told David that God would create a house out of David, make David's line to last throughout all generations, so that by the time the final son was ruling, that that child would be God's most precious son, the one that would finally establish a house for God. It was both a promise of a dynasty, and the beginnings of the messianic days.

The Ephesians passage talks also about that house for God. But it is clear that this house is the one built on Jesus the Christ, the one with no walls, not partitions for separate rooms, but one gathering place for all of the people of God. In God's household, there would be no divisions of Jew or Gentile, male or female, in or out, but all would be one in the faith. The letter writer proclaims that Christ breaks down the barriers of hostility and hate, and knits people together in new and unbelievable relationships. Even the barriers of privilege get knocked down!

This is the good news.

The problem is that sometimes we look in vain to find that household. Somehow, it doesn't seem as though what is described in the Bible with such power and beauty can be found in our real lives. I had a friend call the other night to complain about her new job. She works with a company that has done special training for its people to empower them, to help all employees take part in decision making, to help all the workers at all levels of management to express concerns, feeling, ideas, and the like. And so she was most distressed at the fact that her boss just yelled at her for asking a few simple questions, being new and all. She was even more upset to find people lying about her and to her. When she went to the personnel director, she was told that everyone was empowered, and she called to ask me why she didn't feel empowered by all of this!! Where is the household of God, with its acceptance and encouragement in that situation?

Or where is the household of God when not all Christians can sit down at the table of our Lord together, to share communion as one fellowship? Why is it that catholic and Protestant, orthodox and Mormon have separate ways of celebrating that exclude all others?

Well -- I believe that it is still there. I believe that the reality is there for people to claim and join if they so choose. We can proclaim that the walls came a tumblin' down, but we can't make people act that way if they don't choose.

I remember one meeting of the Executive Council. It was a pretty uncomfortable one, because Corem -- the Council of Racial and Ethnic Ministries -- was there, challenging the Executive Council to be more open in its decision making, more accessible to anyone who wanted to attend. and many of the members of the Executive Council were frustrated, because they felt as though they were being very open -- we had all of the quotas and them some for all of the groups needed to fill the EC. We had open meetings, and anyone was welcome -- if they could get to Anaheim, or Cleveland, or New Orleans, or Chicago, or wherever we were meeting. We conducted our meetings in a fair and reasonable manner. What was the issue here? Corem was trying very hard to get a voice on the council They didn't ask us to pay their way. They didn't ask for a vote. They were only asking for the chance to be present at every meeting, and for voice when they were there. 3 people, that was all. And for some reason the EC was just twitchy about it. The discussion went on for a ridiculous amount of time, and finally one woman from Corem stood up, put her hands on her hips, shook her head, and said, "What is it that you will lose by letting us come? What will you have to give up anyhow? What harm will it do you?" And then she sat down in total exasperation.

She hit us square between the eyes. We were acting as though by including others, we would have to give something up, as though there was only a limited amount of power, or a limited number of voices that could be part of the mix. And we were wrong, about 30 seconds of dead silence followed, and then someone said, "I move the previous

question." We voted, and the issue was over. Noone had lost anything, and the council had gained new people and perspectives to add to the richness and wealth of its mix.

What do we lose by letting in those who are different, who don't function like we do, who don't work like we do, who don't dress or eat or talk like we do? WE lose narrowness. We lose rigidity. We lose class barriers, race barriers, cultural ignorance, ethnic stereotypes. We lose unbelievable baggage, and what do we gain? Richness. From just our little trip to New Orleans, we added etougge and jambalaya, mufallettas and po-boys, crawfish and dirty rice to our diets. We gain new ways of looking at life. The Congregational Church of South Africa has created a new way of doing theology that is going to greatly enliven the church in the western world. We add beauty. The chants of Southeast Asia, the pentatonic scales of Japan, the rhythmic instruments of Africa, the non-tonal music of India -- all of these add incredible beauty to the music of the church and the euro-centered west. As we gain knowledge and understanding of one another, the differences of race and class, style and culture, are deprived of their power to provoke rivalry, hate, and hostility.

But the household of God is made up of people, who must choose to join the family. The letter to the Ephesians talks of the household of God being grown, not built. We don't add people to it like bricks, counting each one off. Instead we grow people into it, getting folk to know one another as friends and companions in the faith, so that sharing one roof is not so scary, so that there is no longer anything to lose, but only wonder and excitement and peace to gain. May the diversity and beauty and variety of people come to you and beckon you close, so that together we might all be a dwelling place for God, who, of course, needs no walls, but only the human heart. Amen.