

“What the Man in the Bowtie Did” from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

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Mark 6:14-29

Matt Matthews

There has always been much division in the world. Parties, nations, religions, people have always been facing off. The haves and have nots. Blue states. Red states. Black. Brown. White. The Hatfields hated the McCoys. Cardinals fans don't like Cubbies fans. There are those in Illinois who are pro-union, and those who are very much anti-union. Some Palestinians and some Israelis seem to be saying that they will hate each other perfectly and forever, which is the sort of thing some Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland said about each other not so long ago.

In Mark's gospel today, we find Jesus is seeking rest with his disciples. They have returned after having gone out into that divisive world two by two. They have visited the Hatfields and McCoys. They have walked the walls that divided Samaritan from Jew, slave from free, Greek from Roman. Jesus sees all of these tribes and people of diverse loyalty as part of one and the same flock. And his disciples, then and now, see Jesus as the Good Shepherd of all nations.

But division remains.

The writer of Ephesians (we'll call him Paul, though the author is probably a disciple of Paul who wrote later) says it well: there is a dividing wall made by the bricks of our hostility. That wall is solid and high. That wall has been there a long, long time, and despite our best efforts that wall seems like it'll be there a long, long time to come.

It seems hopeless. Who can change the unchangeable? Can one person bridge the gap that separates whole groups of people? How might we ever find unity in a world so fractured with such caustic division?

Paul answers with a single name: Jesus.

Jesus brings peace not only with words of gentleness and hope, but with his flesh and blood. He brings peace not only by way of his teaching, but by way of the cross.

When we look at the cross, we see where our unresolved conflicts lead. Our unresolved conflicts all lead to the same place: to the place of suffering, shame, isolation, and death. In the cross, the world can see how fruitless and torturous our conflict is. In the cross we see human failure.

But the cross shows us something else. The empty cross shows us God's success, power, and purpose. *On the third day, Jesus rose again from the dead.* Death, division, and hostility will not have the final word. God's love is sovereign, not human hate.

So . . . it is with the cross in mind that the church advances the causes of reconciliation. We endeavor closely to follow the one who, when he encountered a wall, knocked it down.

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This passed-around story has been shared from pulpits for a long time. At an old, big steeple congregation, Church People were all dressed in their Sunday clothes and sitting comfortably in the Sunday pews as the minister read the Sunday scripture.

When she began preaching, the back door of the church banged open and a disheveled young man stumbled awkwardly in. He didn't fit in with that crowd. He was almost 40-minutes late, for one thing. Neither was he dressed properly for this upscale congregation. He was pierced and tattooed. He smelled of summer heat and sweaty clothes and melting streets and shame and beer and centuries of neglect.

As the man walked down the center aisle looking for a place to sit, nobody scooted over. Nobody let him in. All eyes were on the stranger. Since nobody budged to let him into their padded pews, he got all the way to the front without finding a place to sit. So, he sat on the floor—right in front of the pulpit.

Preachers work really, really hard not to get flustered. She kept preaching. She preached like a pro. She was talking about Sunday things: Sunday love, Sunday justice, Sunday hospitality.

The preacher got impossibly off track, however, when the most respected elderly man in the church got up from his place at the center of the congregation, carefully stepped around his pew-mates, and made his way to the center aisle. He wore his customary sky-blue seersucker suit and peach bow tie; he looked like an ice cream cone.

The preacher thought he might be leaving. But he wasn't. The old fellow steadied himself on the end of each pew as he limped without his cane to the front of the church.

The preacher couldn't take the disruption anymore, so she quit talking and watched with everybody else, wondering what the old guy was going to say to the young guy sitting up front on the carpet. Everybody had a pretty good idea. The respected elder was going to ask the young, poorly dressed, tattooed, pierced, smelly man what *they* wanted to ask him. He was going to ask the stranger to leave. This was, after all, a proper church.

What the man in the bowtie did instead was this: When he got up to the young fellow sitting on the carpet, he put his hand on his shoulder, and slowly and painfully lowered himself to the floor. The old guy sat down next to the young guy. The insider wasn't going to let the guest feel like an outsider.

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Next time you find a wall that divides people, for God's sake—knock it down.

In the name of the Father,
and the Son,
and the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Mark 6:30-34 ³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.