

I'm guessing that a lot of you can pull up an image in your mind of the fountains in front of the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas. Maybe you've been there and seen them first hand yourself or maybe you can perfectly picture the guys of Ocean's Eleven standing in front of them, taking in the sight of them, basking in the fact that they are now millions of dollars richer. It's an immaculate sight, especially at night. This huge pool in front of this glittering hotel, and every hour, music echoes off the surrounding buildings, Frank Sinatra crooning his best Vegas vibes, while the fountains literally dance to the music. They shoot up and around and through each other, and it is just a gorgeous thing to behold.

The fountains actually had been shut down through most of Covid and had only been open for a few weeks when we were there, so at 10:00 we joined the veritable throngs of people around the basin to watch the show. It was an absolute mass of humanity. Hundreds of people all gathered around to watch the fountains. You could kind of get lost in the moment, just listening to the music and watching the water. Once they finished, we circled around the basin to head back into a casino and walking along the sidewalk, I felt like my heart had about dropped out of my chest.

There along the sidewalk adjacent to the fountains were people...sleeping. All of their things gathered around them, some of them

had sleeping bags, others had things propped under their heads to keep them off the sidewalks. Tons of people curled up, attempting to get some semblance of sleep in the midst of the Vegas cacophony. I looked around and was entirely stopped short by the absolute absurdity of humanity and the world we live in. Here I was, in the middle of Las Vegas, surrounded by people who were throwing hundreds, if not thousands of dollars, into slot machines in the scant hope they hit it big, while outside these glittering bastions of glamour lived a whole other segment of our world. People who couldn't fathom having enough money to just casually throw it away with the roll of the dice. People who were clamoring for a little bit of food, while inside all of these hotels, buffets were spilling food for sixty-five bucks a person. My brain couldn't compute the utter dichotomy that was in front of me, and there on the Vegas strip I was wracked with guilt that I had literally done all of those same things, blown cash in a slot machine, ate a dinner bigger than I possibly needed, dressed in one of the gads of outfits I had packed into my suitcase, while here, on this sidewalk, my siblings in Christ were just trying to figure out if they would be safe for the night sleeping amidst the chaos of the drunken Vegas strip, knowing that sleeping here might be their best bet for a little bit of support from the people who flooded by them on a constant basis.

It's an image I couldn't get out of my head for the rest of vacation, and as I sat in the middle of O'Hare airport wondering what in the world I was going to say today, I kept circling back to that image, and the words of our second lesson. Words about dividing walls and one humanity under Christ, built together with Christ as our cornerstone. Suddenly, in view of what I had seen in Vegas, those words from Paul hit a little bit differently, a little bit deeper than they had two weeks ago when I first sat down and looked at them in preparation for this Sunday.

The situation that Paul is describing in Ephesus is a common one around the early Jesus movement, no matter where believers found themselves. There was a definitive dividing line between Jews and Gentiles, those who had always believed in God and had been anxiously awaiting the Messiah and those who were brand new to the concept of monotheistic faith. Those who bore on their bodies outward signs of their identity as God's chosen people and those who had never done anything to their bodies in an act of faith. Those walls were big enough to seem unmanageable before you even threw in there the social and economic differences that would have existed between this new community of believers. What they were attempting to do made no sense in the world they lived in. They were all too different, too on opposite sides of anything to be considered a family. Life

was hard enough for all of them, faith was hard enough for all of them, without throwing into the mix the idea that they all needed to love each other too, that they all needed to see each other as equals, seen as one precious humanity before God. It was enough they were taking this huge risk of coming to Christ when that was a wildly unpopular and frankly dangerous kind of faith, how on earth could they be expected to throw all of their social conventions out the window too?

Paul knows what he's working with when it comes to this community. He's seen it everywhere he's preached, they all are one in faith, and yet they can't let go of the divisions and walls that they feel innately must keep them separate from one another. But frankly, Paul doesn't have time for this. When it comes to the issue of division, Paul doesn't mince words or try to sugar coat the path ahead. He doesn't give them caveats and excuses and ways to work around the situation they're facing. He just lays it all out there: Christ has broken down the dividing wall. He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. The Holy Spirit gives us all equal access to the same God, who sees us all as equal, precious parts of a humanity that was created for good.

They have to start thinking about their world in different terms, their old ways will no longer work. Their old ways had done nothing but tear

people apart, create chaos and harm, strew discord amongst God's children, and bring anything but peace. Paul tells them that Christ is their peace, and in that there is hope for who they can be together. Christ is the one who has seeped between those divisions and healed them, brought them together.

Christ is the one who didn't look from one child of God to another and say I save you, I don't save you, I save you, I don't save you, but who simply and completely saved all, regardless of what they had believed before, how they looked, how much money they had, where they fell on the societal food chain, who they were, what their hearts carried. Christ said I choose you all, exactly as you are, and Paul wants this new community in Ephesus to use that same mentality as they build their new life together.

It feels like the most basic thing to say, doesn't it? In Christ we all are one. Christ sees us all as children of God, equally loved, equally chosen, simply equal. Yet...we know the world we live in, the world we have created, frankly the world we thrive in. It's a world that has created a dichotomy of people sleeping on the sidewalks while others throw money away like it's a candy wrapper. We say that Christ has broken down the dividing walls between us and I think we all believe that, but then we are super adamant about building them back up ourselves. I mean, in our hearts I think we would all say that every single person gathered around those

Bellagio fountains were children of God. No dividing walls there. But then our human minds start churning: well, some people work harder than others, some people are more deserving of things than others, some people get what they deserve because of who they are, life is the decisions you make and if that puts some higher or lower than others than so be it. We love to build those walls back up. We're all children of God, sure, but dang if we aren't all different and that makes all of the difference in how we operate with each other in the world. The world is what it is, right? Rich, poor. Male, female, non-binary, transgender. Gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual. White, black, Latino, Asian, Native American. God sees us as one, but there's no way we can see each other that way, right? I mean come on, we just aren't made that way.

But then, legitimately, why in the world do we believe and profess what we believe and profess? In a few minutes, we're all going to declare that we will love and support, Parker throughout this walk of faith. Will that still be true if Parker grows up differently? If his life is easier or harder than anticipated? If he grows up to look, love, believe differently than we think he will? What happens to those promises then? Do we revoke them? If we legitimately and honestly believe that Christ has broken down the dividing walls, died on the cross for all, loved us all equally, saw us all equally, then

it is high time we start putting our money where our mouths are. It's time that we stop paying lip service to beliefs that we aren't interested in living out in the world we live in. If we believe these things, then we have to start living them. Plain and simple. What use is a faith that says a bunch of things but then goes out into the world and does the exact opposite? God loves you, but I sure don't. What's the point? Honestly, I'm not really sure, because that's just not the world God envisioned for any of God's children.

I want you to imagine that scene in front of the Bellagio fountains. Hundreds of people, some dressed up and glamorous, some ragged and needing a shower. Some sober, some decidedly not. Some with a place to go at night, others already where they will sleep. Do you believe that each person gathered around that fountain is a child of God? Hopefully yes. Now what happens when you find out some are atheists? Still yes? What about when you see that half are of a different color than you are? Still yes? What if you find out that a good portion are gay? Still yes? What if you find out a lot of them are addicts? Still yes? What if you find out that at least one of them is the exact polar opposite to who you are in every way, shape, or form? Still yes? For God...the answer is always going to be yes. But the question remains...will it be yes for us or will we build those dividing walls back up? **AMEN!!!**