

Home Church – July 21, 2024

No Longer Strangers

Ephesians 2:11-22 (NEV)

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,^[d] but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by^[e] the Spirit.

Introduction

It's been a challenging month, as you may know. In addition to encountering a rabid fox and having to get injections, my granddaughter Elizabeth arrived two weeks early. So, I've spent a lot of time in various parts of the Atrium health system. But I did find time to go to the Kaleideum's Digital Dome for a laser light show by Pink Floyd. Yes, I am *that* old. I am happy to report that it hasn't been updated since 1980! It was still beautiful to sit and watch the intricate designs and listen to old favorite songs by one of my favorite bands.

Of course, included in the show were songs from the Wall, including every teacher's favorite hit "We Don't Need No Education." If you've ever seen the Wall or listened to the concept album, you know that it is the story of a young man who is suffering from alienation and mental illness. At each stage of life, he responds to trauma by isolating himself from the pain of the world. Year after year he adds another brick to the wall that he has built around himself until he is in a pit of despair. At various times he tried to break out of his wall by using love, music, medicine, violence, and even fascism, but in the end those things just added new bricks to the wall. He could not break free.

It is a tragic and disturbing story about the crises faced by people in our modern times. We continue to struggle with the isolation caused by mass media, social media, consumerism, polarization, and the list goes on. Pink Floyd reminds us that some of the walls that isolate and divide us are walls that we build in our own minds and souls. In trying to protect ourselves from the pain of the world, by becoming comfortably numb, we stop loving, stop living. We live as strangers and aliens in a world that we perceive as hostile and threatening.

Ephesians?

The letter to the Ephesians was written 1900 years before Pink Floyd's The Wall, but it addresses a similar issue. It is not just modern technology, politics, and institutions that create walls of hostility. Our lesson for today tells us that Christ has broken down the wall of hostility and is building us into a new temple of God.

Before digging into this wonderful passage of Scripture, let's take a brief look at the letter to the Ephesians itself. It is one of the most beautifully written parts of the New Testament. Greek scholars tell me that it is much more sophisticated in style than other New Testament books. Unlike most of Paul's letters, the letter to the Ephesians is not motivated by a conflict in the church that Paul is trying to solve. It is not as emotional as the letters to the Corinthians. It is more like a short summary of the essential teachings of Christianity that Paul had taught his followers. Even though it says

it is a letter to the church in Ephesus, it feels like it was written to be read in every Christian congregation. The “Ephesians” in this letter represent all congregations of Christians.

By the time Ephesians was written, most people in the church were Gentiles rather than Jews. The separation between the church and synagogue in most regions was pretty much complete, which was not true of Paul’s early letters. It sounds like the Temple had already been destroyed when Ephesians was written. Certainly the letter talks about the building of a new temple of God, a temple that was not made of stone but of believers united in a common purpose.

I think this historical context is important because our passage uses the present perfect and past tense a lot. (Sorry for the grammar): “you *were* at that time separated;” “you who once *were* far off *have been* brought near;” “he *came* and *preached* peace.” Our lesson is talking about things that have already happened that continue to affect our present reality. The letter is not trying to resolve a conflict or division between Jewish and Gentile Christians; it is reminding the Ephesians that Christ has already done that. The letter reminds all of us who are Gentiles by birth that our salvation came through the new covenant signed with the blood of Christ.

Wall of Flesh/Law of Moses

Our passage starts with an unusual turn of phrase that is obscured in many English translations, which are sometimes squeamish about the body. The letter is addressed to people who are Gentiles *in the flesh* and are called uncircumcised by Jews. When I was teaching at Salem Academy the young ladies would try to embarrass me by asking know what circumcision was. I always sent them to the dictionary in the library to find the answer. This morning let’s just say that circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel, but it was not a covenant made on paper; it was in the flesh. Male children were circumcised on the eighth day after birth, and they carried this mark into adulthood. It marked a man as a Jew, and, more importantly, as one who was obligated to follow the laws of Moses in the Torah. There wasn’t a similar mark for women, but

that's a topic for another day. Some of us today use tattoos to make a permanent mark on our skin as a way to remember important people, events, or changes in life. Circumcision was kind of like that, but it wasn't an individual choice. It was a community norm. If a boy was born to Jewish parents, he was marked as Jewish.

Notice that the letter of Ephesians assumes that none of its readers are circumcised. None of them were born into the covenant with Israel. You may ask why it says "are called uncircumcised" instead of just saying "are uncircumcised." Mostly likely it is because Paul had taught that spiritual circumcision or circumcision of the heart was more important than a circumcision in the flesh. Or, as Jesus put it, what is inside you is more important than what people see externally. Christ is concerned about your thoughts, attitudes, desires, and action rather than your clothing, skin color, or other markings. Gentiles did not need to undergo surgery and become Jews in order to follow Christ; they simply had to have faith in Christ and follow his path of righteousness and peace. Faith is an inner transformation, not an outward sign.

The letter reminds the Ephesians that before Christ appeared on earth, they did not know God. They could not truly have faith in the God who creates, redeems, and blesses because they were worshiping a plethora of imaginary deities. They were focused on appeasing the gods in hope that the gods would grant them gifts of wealth, power, victory in war, love, and fertility. The Old Testament tells us that the one true God revealed himself to the patriarchs of Israel, rescued the Israelites from bondage, and gave them a covenant on Sinai. Ephesians says that ever since the time of Moses, the world was divided between Jews who worshiped the Lord, and people on the outside of the Temple. Jews followed the laws of the covenant while gentiles searched the stars for guidance, offered sacrifices to idols, and listened to oracles. Gentiles declared that their kings and rulers were gods, but Jews refused to worship politicians and plutocrats. For over a thousand years, there was a wall of division between the people of the covenant and Gentiles.

Christ

Christ put an end to this division between Jew and Gentile. Ephesians says that Christ tore down the wall of flesh that had divided humankind into two factions. Although that division was necessary for a period; it was now abolished. In Christ there is no Jew or Gentile. In Christ, there is a new law that is not carved into flesh or chiseled onto stone tablets; a law of love written in our hearts and revealed in our actions. Christ makes us a new creation and welcomes us into a new way of living.

But Christ did not tear down only the wall of flesh that divided Gentiles and Jews, he tore down the walls that divided men from women; slave from free; Roman from Barbarian; Black from White; Asian from European. Our physical, ethnic, racial, and national identities are precious to us, but they are not important in Christ's church. We are all baptized into the death of Christ. We are all raised to a new life with Christ. We are all called to live a new and better life. Christ did for the Ephesians and for us what Pink Floyd could not do for himself. Christ tore down the wall. The bricks of fear, hatred, ignorance, and arrogance were removed. Christ brought us into the light, into life, and he invites us to love one another as he loves us. This was not an easy thing to do Christ gave his life to reconcile us to God and to one another, but we still build walls of isolation and despair.

Antisemitism

I need to say something about the long history of antisemitism and hostility to Judaism in the history of Christianity because this passage has been misused by so many people to claim that Christ abolished the religion of Judaism or that Jews must give up their laws and live as Gentiles to be saved. Christians have sometimes tried to force Jews to stop being Jews. We don't need to go into the horrifying history of the Inquisition, pogroms, and holocausts that have been inflicted on Jews by Gentiles claiming to be Christian. You know enough of this history. Sadly, we can see this violence and anti-Judaism in our daily news. I'm not talking about legitimate political disagreements over the policies of the state of Israel, but attacks against Jews and synagogues.

This is the exact opposite of what Ephesians is saying! Ephesians is addressed to Gentiles who have been brought into the covenant through the work of Christ. We were the ones who were far off and have been brought near. Christ broke down the wall of hostility Christ to bring peace between Jews and Gentiles, not to add to the sufferings of the children of Israel. We do not need to close the synagogues to build up the church. What we need to do live in peace with one another, to walk in righteousness with one another, and to pray to our Creator with one another. Count Zinzendorf believed that it was important for Jews to remain faithful to the Torah and the teachings of Moses – even if they had faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Christ’s death tore down the wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, Christians need to stop building it up again.

No more strangers

And now we come to the heart of this passage. “You are no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens of the commonwealth of God.” The words used here specifically refer to people who have immigrated into a foreign land, a place where no one knows them. If you’ve ever moved to a new place or simply visited a foreign land, you know that it can be terrifying. When you are frightened and unfamiliar with your world your life is diminished. It is tempting to stay in your room with the curtains drawn - like Pink Floyd sitting behind the walls he built in his own mind. But Ephesians tells us that this sense of alienation is an illusion, at least within the church. We are not strangers. We are not aliens to God or to one another. We have *all* been redeemed by Christ. We have been rescued from the powers of sin, death, and evil. We belong. You belong. We are citizens of the heavenly commonwealth. Christ has done this; all we have to do is accept it, believe it, live it, and manifest it on this earth.

Sadly, churches have often ignored this instruction to trust the grace of Christ. Through the centuries Christians have built walls of flesh excluding people based on their gender, ethnicity, nationality, and political views. For centuries churches denied some people Holy Communion, the rite of marriage, and even baptism because of what

their bodies looked like, because of race or gender or other distinctions. It is so tempting to fall back into ancient prejudices or create new prejudices rather than relying on the reconciling love of Christ, but Ephesians tells us to celebrate what we have in common rather than focuses on what looks different. All of us are being built into a temple of God.

Conclusion: Feeding of the multitude

I want to end by bringing us back to the beautiful story of the healing of the multitude in our gospel lesson to remind us that Jesus was tearing down walls of hostility and division even before his death on the cross. Who did Jesus heal in the wilderness? Was it Jews or Gentiles, men or women, slaves or free? The Bible doesn't say. The Bible doesn't care. Jesus healed those who were hungry. That was the only criteria. The people in that multitude in that moment were no longer strangers and aliens; they were the children of God who were loved by the Lord. That is what the church should be; what the true church is.