

"Having Been Brought Near"

Ephesians 2:11-22

July 19, 2009, Proper 11 B

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Ephesians 2:11-22

So 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—remember 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For 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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Prayer.

We continue our discussion today on the letter of Paul to the faithful in Ephesus.

As I mentioned last Sunday, the Church has traditionally recognized the apostle Paul as the author, sometime around 62 AD while he was in prison in Rome.

Modern scholars have questioned this assumption, placing it's author sometime between 80 AD and 170 AD.

A theory that makes sense to me is that there may have been an original letter from Paul, But that over the years, various editors, like Ignatius of Antioch and others from the church itself, brought Ephesians together into a more completed document as we know it today.

Regardless, for ease of use, I'll simply refer to Paul as the author.

If there would be an overall theme to Ephesians,

It would be the unity and reconciliation of the whole creation through the agency of the Church and Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church.

Last Sunday we heard about the blessings the gospel reveals;

The source of these blessings,

The means by which they are attained,

The reason they are given,

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And their final result.

Today, we hear of how the spiritual position of the Gentiles as changed
As a result of the work of Christ.

From our text this morning, we can see how well the apostle Paul knows his people in Ephesus.
As Christianity spread from Israel to other lands,
To Africa in the south,
To Persia and south Asia in the east,
And to lands of the Mediterranean basin in the west,
The composition of the faithful began to change.

The Hebrew, Jewish complexion became diluted with new believers who had not come from a Jewish background.¹

Those of Jewish heritage were increasingly becoming a minority.

Non-Jews, known as Gentiles, living outside of Israel, were being converted and baptized at an accelerating rate.

To uninformed outsiders and potential converts,
The Church appeared to come from pagan origins.

So the apostle Paul stresses the fact that

The Christian Church has its origins with the chosen people of God, the people of Israel.

All that happened in the Hebrew scriptures was a part of their story and heritage.

God didn't make a fresh start with Jesus.

Rather, Jesus begins the next unfolding era

When aliens from the commonwealth of Israel,

Strangers to the covenant of Abraham,

Gentiles

Have now been brought into the fold.

As Paul puts it, "you Gentiles by birth," ...

"have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

You can probably understand the result of the changing nature of the Early Church;
When majority founders, deeply rooted in their cultural origins, are progressively replaced by a growing minority of faithful who don't come with the same cultural baggage.

All the essential ingredients for conflict are brought together.

Fuel, oxygen, and a source of ignition are poised for a light.

Gosh, are we so much different today?

The growth of United Methodism, like other denominations,

Is taking place in Africa, Korea, and Latin America,

Making American Christians increasingly a minority,

With the associated loss of power and authority.

New Christians come from different backgrounds,

¹ Much of this original thought comes from Arland J. Hultgren, Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, as found at:
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=7/19/2009#

Bring different cultural assumptions to the table,
And conflicts arise.
Social discord on issues of abortion, homosexuality, and leadership
Simply point to deeper changes in the diverse complexion of the Church.
Young bucks want to stretch their wings;
The old guard simply refuses to die.
Indeed, we have much in common with the Early Church;
Making Ephesians just as relevant today as it was 2,000 years ago.

So what is Paul's approach?
Paul makes the observation that
The one who brings diverse groups together
Is also the one who is the source of our peace – Jesus Christ.
Jesus breaks down all the dividing walls,
All the excuses for us to disagree and argue about,
By bringing peace and reconciliation to the world.
How does Christ do this?
We "have been brought near by the blood of Christ."
Divided groups are brought together "through the cross,
Thus putting to death that hostility through it."
Paul compliments our understanding of
Forgiveness of sins,
Redemption,
Atonement.
The cross becomes something more than just a means of personal justification.
The cross becomes for Paul the means of peace to a conflicted world,
Reconciliation to God.
When conflict, hostility, violence, and disagreement are made null and void;
When all that separates us from God is removed and we return to God like the penitent
prodigal,
And we are allowed to do so because of the redemptive cross of Jesus Christ,
Then peace comes.
Holy peace is established.
Walls are broken down.
Conflict and hostility ceases.
And the peace of Jesus Christ is established over all the land.
Until, of course, we muck it up all over again!

This is the signature of Christ's peace:
Peace is proclaimed far off and near at home.
Access to the same Lord and Spirit is given to one and all.
Aliens become citizens.
Foreigners become nationals.
Strangers become friends.

All become saints and members of the household of God.
Doesn't this make us reconsider our views on immigration and naturalization?
Doesn't this require us to reconsider our resistance
To Christians of different backgrounds, values, and beliefs?
Different skin colors, gender, orientations, and political persuasions?
Doesn't this require us to sift out all those long standing but non-essential biases
To focus on that which is core
to who we are, what we do, and why we do it -
Jesus Christ our Lord?

This is the signature of Christ's peace:
When we share the same "foundation of the apostles and prophets,
With Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."
This masonry metaphor is important
and shouldn't be lost to most of us
who have never constructed a foundation for a building
in an era prior to concrete,
in a temperate climate like the Mediterranean basin.
Laying the cornerstone was perhaps the single most important step in constructing a new
building.
Its function was to set the pattern for the building as a whole.
If it is crooked or out of alignment, the rest of the foundation will be weakened and the building
may fail.
Get it right, and the rest of the foundation will be solid, secure, and true.
Jesus is that cornerstone.
He tells Peter "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."²
Now the apostolic foundation is broadened.
It includes the whole collection of apostles and prophets,
Giving the foundation the necessary breadth and depth,
Making it catholic: unifying all diverse communities of faith into one
Making it apostolic: unifying all communities of faith throughout the generations
Giving the foundation the necessary breadth and depth
To live and grow strong,
Surviving and thriving the test of time.

Dearly beloved,
Let us consider this sacred Biblical text,
Words from the apostle Paul
Spoken to us this morning,
Spanning time, language, and culture.
You and I have been brought near.
We have been adopted into the family of God,

² Matthew 16:18

Each member of the family coming from a diverse background,
Yet all united by the cross and empty tomb of Jesus Christ.
That which unites us is much, much stronger than that which divides us.
So let us cease the blaming, the finger pointing, the predigest;
Let us end the hostilities, the fighting, the ultimatums;
And allow
The unity of the cross,
To wash over us,
To cleanse us,
And to bring us peace.
Amen.