

Sunday, July 21, 2024

Morning Message

Will you pray with me? May the hearing and sharing of your Word break down any dividing walls between us, O God, for Jesus Christ, your Living Word, is our common peace. Give us ears to hear and hearts that will move us to respond, I pray in Jesus's name. Amen.

Last Sunday we began a look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which provides wonderful images of the church to motivate and inspire us. As I shared with you last Sunday, it was the only one of Paul's letters that was intended for multiple churches, to be widely circulated. Clearly, it was an important document that reveals some of the ongoing struggles of a faith community that are familiar to us still today. It expresses the need for the community to focus on developing authentic relationships rooted in love. In it, Paul praises God and the people of God. He lifts up Jews and Gentiles united in Christ, emphasizing the themes of unity and harmony in Christ. Looking particularly at Ephesians 2, its first ten verses (which were not part of today's shared reading) describe a world caught up in conflict and hostility, a world torn between sin and grace. Paul addresses his intended audience as those who were once dead in their sins, those who had been living according to the desires of the physical self, but became alive in Christ, re-created for good works. Jesus Christ is the dividing point between who they once were, and who they are now.

They then – and we now – are called by Paul to remember. He knows that if the Gentiles to whom he was writing forget who they were, they will soon begin to assume that God has always been theirs, and because of that, God owes them stuff. Paul reminds them that salvation has come to the Gentiles by grace through faith – not as the result of human efforts, but as a gift from God. They – and we – are warned: do not forget the gracious gifts of God. They – and we – are warned: do not forget the gracious acts of God. Remember that there was a time when the “chosen,” or “circumcised,” denounced you, Paul says, and called you “uncircumcised.” Let us be reminded that there have always been people who were viewed as “less than” because of something. Here in Ephesians 2, it's something that seems to us pretty unimportant and – well – personal! Through the ages it has been a whole host of things, many of which seem pretty inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. It makes me wonder what future generations will think of this time and the things that currently mark people as “less than.” But back to Ephesians, where Paul implores them/us to remember that they/we were without Christ, alienated from him by others, and strangers to Christ's covenant – utterly apart from God and lacking

hope. And then Jesus brought them/us into relationship with him and with his followers, into the very presence of God. Jesus did not make peace between them/us and God; Jesus is the peace between them/us and God. Remember also, Paul says, that they couldn't enter the temple, the holy place. There was a barrier between them and the Jewish people, even in God's house. Through Jesus they/we have been granted access to God. They/we are aliens no more, but rather citizens and members of the household of God. They/we have been adopted by God as God's children, as we are told in Ephesians 1. And while it's sometimes hard for us to accept that we are God's children, it's harder by far to accept one another as our siblings because of it! We are called to live, as we are led by Christ, as brother and sisters – as siblings – in the family of God. The way we treat those we love – and those we don't even like, really – measures the effect that God's grace has upon us. Dorothy Day said, "You can only love God as much as you love the person you love the least." Ouch. Think about that for a moment...

The grace that has been lavished upon us by God changes us, when we accept it and live into it. It enables us to hope even when we face the toughest parts of our own lives, the toughest parts of life in this world in which we live. And it is unbelievably tough right now. These days, polarization defines our culture – polarization in which people are pitted against each other according to a myriad of differences. Some are real and observable; many are invisible and assumed. We are coerced into believing that only two ways of thinking exist on many fronts, many issues, and that we must choose one or the other of them. While we remain locked in such thinking, and in the animosity that it manifests, there will always be "strangers and aliens," in Paul's words. Unity, whether in the world in our nation, or even in our churches, seems to exist as a lofty and unattainable dream of a better world. And here's what bothers me the most. After decades of work for ecumenical Christian unity, some Christians have resorted to condemning others who don't believe as they do as not being good enough Christians, and even not being "true" Christians. Whole denominations are coming apart at the seams as a result. Binary thinking too often devolves into a vilifying of "the other" – that is, defaming and slandering someone for the sole and simple reason that they don't believe as you do.

Ah! But here in Ephesians, in contrast to binary thinking, Paul suggests only one way of thinking about the world. This one way frees us from the limitation of the two choices with which the world might present us. This one way can free us for multiple ways of thinking and being. This one way can free us for creative thinking and creative solutions. "He [Jesus] 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” [Ephesians 2:15-16]. As this one way, Paul offers Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone – the Cornerstone that erases categories like circumcised and uncircumcised, black and white, male and female, resident and immigrant. Jesus the Cornerstone recreates all of them as the one household of God, which doesn’t erase our differences, but rather enhances them and celebrates them.

This passage calls us to remember...again and again. The Ephesians needed to be reminded of their heritage story – one of exclusion that became one of inclusion. This message is, I believe, at least equally as important for our nation and for the Christian church in America today. Our heritage as a nation is a story of exclusion that became a story of inclusion. Our ancestors came to this country seeking religious freedom from governmental laws and mandates. To impose our own particular religious faith upon all who now reside here and to use it to exclude “strangers and aliens” is not of God. Such proclamations of some Christian churches would lead you to think that we Gentiles have always had equal access to God. Most of us are not reminded often enough that we Christians are the Gentiles in the parables, stories, letters in the Bible!

The Gospel passage we heard earlier from Mark 6 tell us of Jesus’s continued work of tearing down walls and extending God’s mercy to those who were scattered and alienated. He had compassion on the crowds that came to follow him wherever he went because he could see that they were like sheep without a shepherd. He taught them, the lost and leaderless, the alienated and disinherited, that God had come near to even them. And he healed them. The good news of our Christian faith, according to the teaching and healing of Jesus, and according to Paul’s words to the Ephesians, is that in this broken world, reconciliation and unity is no longer a dream, no longer a mere longing for what once was and a hope for what someday might be, but rather it's something that already is. At least for those who are making a life in Christ, even if it’s not yet a reality for our too divided and too hurting world. In our humanness, we forget that in our divisiveness, greater separation is caused than wars between races, nations, political ideologies. Our divisiveness alienates us from each other and from God. It is only our unity in Christ that can reunite us with one another and is the path to unity in and with God.

We are called to remember our past because it helps us appreciate and not take for granted “the mighty acts of God through Jesus Christ.” Once, we did not belong. Once, we were strangers and

aliens. But Paul says, “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 are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” This is great good news – that in the midst of whatever the world tries to convince us of, God dwells in our bodies, our minds, and our souls. We can move beyond binary thinking that would separate us from those who are not, and do not think exactly like us.

You all embody the living example of this...