

7-18-21

Pentecost 8

Ephesians 2:11-22

Brought Near

Most of us who have been in the Church for any length of time have heard more than we want to know about the distinctions and the divisions between Jews and Gentiles in Jesus' day. We like to think that that's all just history, that we would never participate in a system that kept people separated from one another. But I suspect we know better.

We find ourselves living in the middle of some of the most polarizing times in our history. Every issue has become political, whether it needs to be or not. The way we use language, the way we perceive one another, the way we understand the world and our participation in it—all those things and countless others have divided us in ways we have not been divided before. It's hard to find much that's positive about all this, but maybe from this place we can understand more than we have before about how things were for our ancestors in faith before Jesus came.

This letter to the Ephesians spells it out pretty clearly. To the Gentiles, it says, there was a time when they were aliens, strangers, people who had no hope, people without God. Those are hard words to hear about anybody.

It's can sometimes be a little too easy for us to think we understand someone else's experience. And there's a lot of that going on in this text. I wonder if the way Paul, or whoever wrote this letter, saw the plight of the Gentiles was the way they perceived their own situation. I wonder if they saw themselves as without hope, as strangers, aliens. I wonder if they wanted what the Jews had or if they had been shut out of it for so long that they found other ways to give meaning and purpose to their lives. I wonder about all the people we think ought to be here among us.

Do they think of themselves as we do, as people who are missing something in their lives because they don't believe what we believe, or are they perfectly content to fill their lives with other things? We think of those who don't have a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ in much the same way Jews tended to think of Gentiles in Jesus' day. We even use similar language. We call them lost. And, of course, we are found. They are the unsaved. We, the saved.

But I wonder how they see themselves. Maybe if we spent more time with them, and they with us, we'd come to understand each other better.

We encounter those people in all kinds of places. We go to meetings with them. We belong to clubs with them. We socialize with some of them, which means we try to be careful about what we talk about and what we don't when we're together. The distinctions are not just between those who have a relationship with God and those who don't. We don't even do a good job of relating to others who share our faith—just other brands of it.

I've told you before about a destination wedding I did for a couple I didn't know while we lived in Florida. She was Korean-American (she was the American part; her parents were Korean to the core. That side of the house was Presbyterian; her dad was a minister. The groom was Hindu. They had three weddings that weekend, a traditional Korean ceremony with her dad presiding, a traditional Hindu ceremony with whoever presides over those, and then the one I did which, by their decision, was pretty much straight out of the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship. I signed a marriage license for them at the end of that service. I wasn't invited to the other two ceremonies, but I heard about them. Just before we started the service in which they became legally married, a woman I didn't know came to me and asked if I minded telling her what this service was going to be. I explained that it would be a pretty typical Presbyterian wedding service, with the addition of a Black women's gospel choir. "Well, Good Lord," she replied. "I guess I won't know much about

what's going on in this one either. I went to the first two and didn't have a clue what was happening. Now you tell me this one is Presbyterian. I'm a Pentecostal, so I guess I won't understand this one, either!"

I couldn't find her at the reception to see if what we had said and done made any sense to her, but when I got home and Deanna asked how it had gone, I told her that I had gotten along well with the Koreans and the Hindus, but the Christians I wasn't so sure about.

This Ephesian letter cries out for us to do better. For us to find unity in Christ that takes us beyond our sectarian, denominational, or other kinds of division and creates a Church which can be a house where God lives, a dwelling place for God. That's a tall order!

I can only imagine how difficult it was for those who attempted it first. We can all be grateful for their effort. We hear the writer of this letter remind his Gentile audience that there was a time they would not have been included in anyone's understanding of God's people. What we tend to forget is that those people are our ancestors. Had people like Paul and Peter and others not taken the brave and unpopular route of bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles, most of us would still be on the outside looking in. The Jews were God's Chosen people and, as far as we can tell, they didn't have an Outreach and Evangelism Committee. They were content to be the Chosen Ones. And that worked well for them for generations. But then Jesus came. And Jesus insisted that God's love was for everyone and that God's people needed to first understand that themselves and then find ways to help others understand it, too. And that threw everyone for a loop.

The Jews had their own issues with that. Those of us who gather to study Scripture together on Thursday mornings have just seen that in our reading of John's Gospel. Everywhere Jesus went, people wanted and needed things from him. Healing. Reassurance. Compassion. And he freely shared those and other gifts from God with those who came. And the very people

who should have seen him as the One God had sent to bring these gifts to people were the ones who couldn't accept what he was doing. One of the things they criticized him most for was that he wasn't choosy enough about who he spent time with. He ate with sinners. He welcomed outcasts. He healed lepers. He refused to condemn a woman caught in adultery. He just wouldn't play their game. But even some of those who were outsiders and needed his help the most were hesitant to ask, thinking the things he was doing, like everything else in their world, was not for them, that it was for those on the inside. So sometimes Jesus went to them, knowing their hesitance to come to him. And those outsiders had been outsiders long enough that they thought that's who they were supposed to be. Until Jesus came and assured them that God's family was broader than anyone had ever perceived it to be, that there was a place in that family for them, too.

There was a wall between those two groups of people, and it appeared that nothing would ever be able to scale it or remove it. My favorite American poet, Robert Frost says, "something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down." And after hearing Jesus and experiencing new possibilities in what he said and did, some people then began to think that way, too. Maybe it really is God's intention for that wall to come down. But by the end of Frost's poem he thinks in less radical terms and remembers that "good fences make good neighbors" and goes back to the world he knew. And many, even in the young Christian Church thought the same way. If the Gentiles want be part of this they'll have to become Jews first, then we'll see what happens. Those struggles were part of life for most of the earliest Christian communities.

By the time the Ephesian community was struggling to understand itself, people who had once been Jews and people who had once been Gentiles were worshiping together, learning together, coming to the same Table together, hearing and believing that the love of God was for all of them. As you might imagine, this was not an easy time for them. Jews knew what

they were feeling. Gentiles were skeptical. But these people kept up their struggle until they found a way to be not Jew or Gentile but Christian. Part of a community in which former divisions were broken down. Walls fell. Assumptions changed. And new understandings developed. A new community was formed.

The hopeful part of that sounds like something we need to tap into. As we continue to experience division in our lives more than unity, maybe we need to look closer at how those people were able to do this difficult work.

The thing we discover is that they didn't. At least not on their own.

The language of Ephesians is not language about how much better these people were than others who tried to follow Jesus in their day. Nowhere in this letter does it say, "You have brought yourself nearer to what God intended for you." Nowhere does it say, "You have broken down the walls that divided you. You have found ways to reconcile yourselves to one another and to God."

They didn't do any of that. Jesus did. "You have been brought near!" this letter reads. The walls that have come down came down by the Word of Jesus. The division that can no longer be tolerated has been abolished by the Word of Jesus. The reconciliation that brought opposing forces together to the same Table is the reconciliation that Jesus brought. Jesus has proclaimed peace to those who were far away and to those who were near. By his Word and by his willingness to demonstrate that Word in his own gracious and welcoming life, he had brought access to one Spirit that is broader and more inclusive than anyone ever thought could be.

The fractured nature of humanity we have come to accept is as much a part of the life of the Church as it is any other part of our culture. If the Church is to be the way the world finds its way out of the mess we've made, we must be bold in our witness and brave in our practice of the faith of Jesus. We must become that community that welcomes all who come in search of God's love and care. We must nurture those who seek to know God's love

as a foundation for a new way to live. That doesn't mean that we give up expectations or doctrinal standards, but that we continually examine those things and all things about our life together in light of what Jesus said. Jesus said a lot of things, of course, and people have lifted the ones that suit them up above the others for long enough. Just before he went to the cross, he told those who were trying to follow him then, and we believe that what he said to them he said to us—he said that the most important thing he had ever told them or us was that he called us to love one another. Everything else comes after that.

The Ephesians found a way to do that. They became a community in which people who once despised one another came to the same Table and found nourishment they could not live without. They became people who found a new way to live in what Jesus taught. And now they commend that way to us.

What we do with this hope and promise will determine who we become going forward. We have been brought near. Jesus did that. The next steps are ours to take. We must decide if those steps will follow where Jesus leads or go somewhere else. To follow Jesus is to walk a path of love and of inclusive grace and mercy. Don't let anyone tell you he calls us to walk another path. His path always leads us to grace. Always. When we become that kind of community, then God will always live among us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Loving God who sent Jesus to save us, we give you thanks that we are not strangers or aliens our outsiders or any of the things

we might have been before we knew you. We thank you that we are your people, your children, people who belong and who invite others to be among us. We thank you that you have formed us into a place where you are pleased to live among us.

We pray for those who lead us, that they might always be led by your voice over the many competing voices of our culture. We pray that we might not be caught up in success or in anything other than faithfulness to your Word of grace and truth. We pray that we will always be a place where you are pleased to live among us.

We pray for all pastors and teachers in your Church, here and everywhere, that they may faithfully listen to your Word and tend to those under their charge, always mindful that they are called to nurture people in you and not in them. Help us always follow those who follow you, those who create communities where you are pleased to live among us.

We pray for all who are poor and in need of help of so many kinds. We pray for ourselves as we strive to find ways to care for them. We can't meet all the needs even in our own community, but you can, and we can continue to point people to you.

Together with you, we can continue to be places where you are not ashamed to live among us.

We pray for victims of violence of all kinds. For those who live in danger of war, for those for whom even home is not a safe place to be. For children who fear those who should care for them and for aging parents who fear all kinds of things about the future. We pray for some way to understand what we must do about gun violence in our community and across the country. Too many have died too early. Help us to find ways to stop killing one another senselessly and to create communities where you want to be among us.

We pray for all who are sick. These new virus strains scare us, and then there are all the other forms of illness and disease that scare us, too. Be with those who need care and those who deliver it. Be with those who are afraid and those who try to speak peace to their fear. Help us, even in scary times to create

places where we know you are among us to comfort, to heal, and to bring hope. Be with those who are recovering and those who are not sure whether they will or not. Be with those who welcome new life and those who watch life slip away. Be with us in all these and in all things.

We pray especially for our children in this week when we will spend special time with them in your Word and in the joy of your love. Help us to welcome their friends and to share your love so that they might continue to grow in it and eventually lead this community as it continues to share your love and be your home. Good Shepherd, you have brought us together, sometimes in spite of our efforts to resist your call. You have broken down anything that would divide us, and, too often we have set those things back up. Show us where we need to join you in ending division and becoming the place where you choose to live among us. We pray all these things through Jesus Christ, who is our peace and who calls us to share peace with one another, and we pray in the words he taught us when he said: *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.*