

Sermon 8-02-09¹
Psalm 78:23-29
Ephesians 2:11-22
He is Our Peace

Last week, we spent a considerable amount of time looking at the importance of story within our lives; specifically, seeing our stories in terms of the larger story of God's salvation and redemption of the world. In our passage from this week, Paul continues his discussion from the previous section; building on references to the past life so that he can explore and unpack what it means to have new life in Christ. While in his earlier discussion, he looked at the complete story of humanity, the universal condition of humanity under the oppression of sin and death, now he turns the corner to look at the old life in terms of the divisions between Jews and Gentiles picking up a different aspect of the human story; one that reflects the deep divisions both between human beings and with God.

Paul basically says to the Gentiles who make up the Ephesian Church, "it wasn't all that long ago that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about who God was or the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ power in the world. You were separated from the people of God, and at the time you were okay with that because you just didn't know any better. But not having the Lord God in your life (only having your petty pagan gods) you missed out on the wonderful hope and glory that comes with knowing God."

If you've been raised within the faith most of your life, then you're probably having a rough time identifying with what Paul is talking about in this passage. And yet, in one way or another, this is a part of our story; a part of the heritage we are called to remember because without it our faith is shallow and empty. Without remembering the deep divisions Paul is referring to, we cannot understand the sheer depths God has penetrated to bring upon the redemption and reconciliation of humanity.

At the heart of this passage, Paul is dealing with the reality that human beings are broken deep down within our core. Because of the reality of sin, death, and evil, there is something fundamentally broken at the core of our beings that apart from the ministry of God we are unable to forge any real and

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lasting relationships without a sense of discord. What Paul confronts in the opening sentences of this passage is the sort of “us-them” mentality that has existed for most of human history. We’ve always set up these dichotomies in our conceptions of the world that reflect this brokenness: the all-too-often strained relationships between blacks and whites, rich and poor, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic, Irish or English, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat; in all of these we operate with some sort of “us-them” mentality. Pretend all you want that we don’t do this, but it’s a naïve way to approach the world.

One my favorite musicals is *West Side Story*. Not only did Leonard Bernstein leave the world with such unforgettable music, but the story itself strikes to the heart of the divisions we create in our lives; the “us-them” ways of thinking that destroy relationships. In the battle between the Jets and the Sharks, reminiscent of the Shakespearean battle between the Capulet’s and Montague’s, dividing lines are set up, lives are lost, and in the end a new relationship between the two warring parties is forged in the death of Tony, lying dead on a playground as Maria berates both sides for their inability to see their common humanity. It’s not only a story of “two star-crossed lovers” but a story of our deep brokenness as human beings; a brokenness that is only healed through the mission and ministry of God penetrating to the depth of our brokenness in, through, and as Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul cuts between the deep divisions that exist in humanity by boldly proclaiming, “But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once 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.” In his bold proclamation, Paul to the radical way of living that completely and fully reorients our lives around the saving, redeeming, and reconciling life of Jesus Christ our Lord and in that radical way of living redefines our understanding of peace in terms of Jesus life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

In our common ways of thinking, we often talk about peace in terms of the cessation of hostilities; two warring sides putting down their guns and working out a way forward that doesn’t involve a constant state of fighting. This understanding of peace is almost laughable for me, only because I have

never seen it truly modeled in anything. For my entire life, I have heard politicians and religious figures talking about peace in the Middle East. I've seen peace initiatives aimed at stemming violence in our streets that look towards creating opportunities for kids to be involved in activities or asking adults to take a proactive role in cleaning up the streets. Many Christian denominations including our own work towards peacemaking initiatives that often support this view of peace. Yet deep down, while this desire is full of good intentions, it is ultimately fruitless because of one simple thing: it fully misunderstands what peace really means.

For Paul, peace is so much bigger than merely the cessation of hostilities, an end to violence, or the changing of opinions about a neighbor or colleague who is of a different skin color or cultural background. Peace bigger than some program or policy aimed at keeping people from fighting. Peace is the one through whom all the world was created, peace was in the beginning with the Father in glory, peace slithered out of the womb of Mary, born into the house of David; peace walked the roads of Galilee and Jerusalem; peace was nailed to cross, bled, and died; peace was resurrected and ascended for the glory of God; peace has a name, and his name is Jesus Christ.

So what does any of this have to do with us? Being so far removed from the controversy that Paul was confronting, what difference does any of this make in our day-to-day, ordinary lives? In part, it's being refreshed and renewed again and again by the knowledge that we really and truly belong to God as those joined to the living, reigning, active, and present life of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is real, honest to goodness reconciliation between humanity and God because of the ministry of Jesus. We can never hear enough that Jesus is our peace, that he is the center, that upon him we cast our lives trusting in his grace and compassion.

One of the things that Christians are so good at doing is walking around with a tremendous burden of guilt on our shoulders. We feel guilty for the things we've done and we feel guilty for the things we've left undone. We feel guilty for the actions we've taken or the things we've said; we feel guilty because we feel like God couldn't possibly accept us as his own. We shoulder such immense guilt sometimes all

because we've placed ourselves in the judgment seat expecting that God will inflict us with his wrath to bring us into line.

Yet that isn't the witness of the scriptures, that isn't the witness of the psalmist who proclaims, "my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever;" that isn't the witness of the apostle proclaiming that just when we feel so far off or separated we are drawn near by the blood of Christ Jesus for he himself is our peace, he is our refuge, our salvation. We aren't strangers to God standing on the outside looking in; rather it is Christ himself who takes hold of us, draws us near to his life, takes the burden of guilt off of our shoulders and clothes us in his peace, reconciliation, love, and redemption – revealing to us that in him we have new life, a renewed sense of purpose and a deeper meaning to everything we do. Because Jesus is our peace, we are joined together, each one of us, growing into a holy temple of God; built together as an organic dwelling place for the Lord almighty.

There is a shocking and radical nature to the Christian life that we all-too-often overlook. In the midst of our worship we celebrate the passing of the peace. While this is a time to greet one another and to share in one another's lives it is also a time when we celebrate the shocking new reality that we share in a common life together centered in Christ. We aren't a bunch of individuals who gather together in the fortress of the church on a Sunday morning to share warm fuzzies by ourselves with Jesus in the corner; rather we are renewed and refreshed by the ministry of Jesus as our peace, breaking down the dividing wall of our individuality; breaking down the dividing walls of our guilt and shame that we might be opened up to what it truly means that we are brothers and sister in Christ, held together by Christ who is our peace and our cornerstone. We share in a common life together; there is not such thing as individuality in the church – much to the chagrin of mainstream 21st Century Western Culture. That's part of what makes the Christian life so radical; forcing us to see our lives in terms of Christ's life and ministry and sharing it with the world around us. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.