

## Ephesians 2:11-22

Today we cover the second chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians as we launch into our second sermon in our preaching series on Ephesians.

Last week I introduced this book of the Bible by explaining that Ephesians is a love letter – helping us to hear and understand the incredible love and grace that God has for us. So now, the second chapter of this letter is actually an invitation to reconciliation between hostile groups within the church community. Again, the context is this incredibly pluralistic society in Greco-Roman culture— where we have deeply committed Christians in the Church now coming from backgrounds of either paganism -those involved in the cult of Artemis/Diana in Ephesus as well as those from the Jewish community. There is a wide variety of backgrounds and Paul is aware not only of the current divisions that existed between the members, but of the potential for a deepening of these divisions into greater hostility and fracture of the community. So Paul's point is to bring these divergent into the understanding that it is only in Christ Jesus that the community can find unity and peace...that Christ alone is the source of reconciliation.

St. Paul writes, "For Christ 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." This is a radical call to unity.

Think now about the cultural gaps and the divisions that we're experiencing and that exist in our own community and the wider church in America and in the Church in the world, as well as any division or major differences you may have with someone or some group personally. And then think about the way this community in Ephesus and the early church overcame the widest cultural gap we could imagine by clinging to Jesus and trusting God in Christ to bring and hold them together as one. It was possible then – it is possible now.

I attended General Convention in Anaheim back in 2012 – and it was a rather rowdy Convention because there were so many other Christian or church groups present who were outside the Convention Center protesting the Episcopal Church for a whole host of reasons – everything from human sexuality to issues in the Middle East to even women's ordination. So anytime I walked into or out of the Convention Center, I would hear these people yelling and insulting members of our church. I tried to keep my distance and walk as far away as possible lest I get yelled at (I had my collar on which is like a bullseye). Their signs declared that we were heretics, that we didn't believe the Bible, and that we were all going to hell. It was a spectacle and media were there to cover it. But at one point as I watched from a distance, a young man that I knew from our Diocese walked up to the protestors, took a seat, and began talking to a group of them. I assumed he was going to argue with them and I thought it was probably pointless but I applauded his courage. I noticed he was speaking very calmly and that it was calming down some of the protestors. I couldn't hear what he was saying but I noticed that after talking to him for a while, some of the protestors got up and just left. I was so puzzled – so I had to ask him later what he said to get them to leave. He responded that the key was asking them about Jesus and talking about Jesus and helping them all discover that they all actually agreed on the basics of Jesus and that their shared goal was to follow and love Christ. Once they could no longer demonize this Episcopalian young man and once they realized they all had something more important in common than divergent beliefs on some particular issues – they no longer felt the need to spew hatred or insults and simply decided to go home.

I was utterly astonished. This young man had accomplished something huge – not through clever debate or by convincing them who was right and who was wrong on any particular issues- all he did was talk about Jesus. Jesus alone is the reason we, any of us, became Christians...it is Christ who is our peace and who unifies us as the Church above anything and everything else. We can only be one when we abide in Jesus and share of the one Spirit. As Paul writes, "for through Christ both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father."

Now again, I don't believe Paul is at all saying we shouldn't hold different opinions or even passionately defend our beliefs, but what we cannot do according to the theology of this love letter - is to hate, vilify, or use our opinions and beliefs as weapons against one another in the Church. We have to love the other as fellow members of the one body of Christ even if we think they're nuts-even if they are wrong...don't give up on them. Our identity above all is rooted in Jesus and when we stand in that truth - we are empowered and enabled to love each other again - to see the dividing walls between us fall down. I dare say, no one, no concept and nothing else can do this but Jesus. And this love letter shows us the way out of hostilities into reconciliation.

This December, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry will be preaching and teaching here in San Diego at our Good News Festival. You probably know that he loves to preach and teach about unity in Christ and says things like "...we are all in the Jesus Movement. What God has brought together, let no one tear asunder.... I don't care whether your label is traditionalist or progressive, if you've been baptized into the Triune God, you're in the Jesus Movement."

One of my favorite things about the Episcopal church is our practice of coming together to the altar to receive Eucharist as one body in Christ ...it's one of the reasons I missed it so much when we were couldn't gather in person. The Eucharist is always a visible reminder that the Church is wide and big enough to hold together followers of Jesus from across the spectrum no matter who we are. Together we pray, together we sing, together we listen, and together we break bread at Christ's table and receive Jesus together as one, in the bread (and wine again soon?) before we go our separate ways. This is such a rich sign of our unity in Christ and with one another. Bishop Curry tells the story that his parents became Episcopalians back in the 1940's because even though they were the only black couple at church, they were welcome to share the one bread and cup with their fellow churchgoers. His father said, "any church where people of different races can do that, must know something about the Gospel."

We are not just disconnected entities and individuals or divergent groups of people. We do not need to participate in the culture wars- and the letter to the Ephesians reminds us of this. As Paul writes, "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..." My friends Jesus is our peace and our unity - so let's live it out, so the whole world can see what the Gospel really looks like. More next week. AMEN.