

Pentecost 8th Sunday “Alive Together with Christ” July 18 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

I have excerpted the key thoughts from the beginning of Ephesians chapter 2 through the end of today’s Scripture reading, as follows:

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked...⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. It is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

¹³ Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, ¹⁴ who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

In the first verse of chapter 2 notice how we were dead, helpless, spiritual corpses. And if you follow the progression of the text through the next nine verses, you will find that by verse ten we were alive and well, standing up, off life-support, doing the things which God had established for us to do. This is a gracious action by God upon us which is the key to understanding this chapter and the whole of the Gospel.

A similar situation exists today between the new Israel, that is all who receive adoption through faith in Jesus Christ, and those who have not. They are like the Gentiles of old, separated and cut off from God, alienated, strangers to Him, having no hope beyond this world, no peace, no answer to death. And they have enmity toward God and toward His people, duplicating the wall of hostility that exists between them and God due to their disbelief, and projecting it against all who believe in the One who created them.

The world delights to define me and you by our differences: rich or poor, status, race, gender, political party, education, etc. And even among ourselves religion divides us, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, even ELCA vs. LCMS. There are so many ways to see that we are different. But even worse, the world does not only note the differences but it exploits them – setting us against one another, having us see each other as competitors and enemies.

Some of those differences and antipathies are real and stubbornly resistant to any change. For instance, we cannot change our race, gender, heritage, nor most of our physical characteristics. Nor can we change the fact that some people with whom we share some of these characteristics may have at some point, throughout all generations, abused some people who share some of our immutable characteristics. And this can be exploited to create an enmity which we find very difficult to get past.

All this seems to be too much for us to fix. Are we doomed to eternal enmity and violence? It feels that way. Haven't we learned anything from the past? It seems that we have not, when even the Church, and our own LCMS, reflect the same miserable divisions.

This is a universal problem. The human tendency to create divisions and distinctions is ever present. In the first half of the first century the struggle was located in the relationship between Jew and Gentile. This conflict had plagued much of Paul's ministry. It is reflected in his letters to the Galatians, Romans, and Colossians. The first Council in Jerusalem in Acts 15 was summoned to deal with it. Paul was arrested to save him from a mob of Jews in Jerusalem who sought to kill him over this issue. It was a big an issue in Paul's day as it is for us today.

But God is uniting all things in Christ. And this is not our doing but God's doing, and He is not listening to the world. He made us to be one and He is working out that plan in the person of Christ for his own reasons – namely His love for His creatures. This is a gracious thing.

We are unable to overcome the enmity, but Christ is not limited by our power or our vision. He has, by the sacrifice of his body, made Himself our peace. He died for me and you and for our enemies. We all need and get the same Jesus, and now we can see one another through that holy lens.

God is uniting all things, even his broken church, in Christ. Having united us with Him in our baptism we are also united with Him in His resurrection (Rom 6 and Eph 2). Death is the ultimate reset button. Our enemies and we, both quail before its power and submit to death's inevitable claim. If someone wants to exclude me from the dead club, I am all for it. But the world does not have that power. We are all mortal. We don't get the choice. But Christ has gathered us all up and made us into one new and Easter people through His death and resurrection, a holy temple, a church in which He dwells through the Spirit of God.

Paul's logic is brutal. Death has proven to be the ultimate equalizer. No one is excluded from that pit, and it has rendered the old prejudice and enmity meaningless. The Jews and the Gentiles, once foes, are now of the same household in Christ.

Paul speaks of a unity that is established by the body and blood of Christ which was broken and shed on a cross. He speaks of a single building which was erected on the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, the Bible. This is really core Lutheran stuff, but we struggle with the point that Paul wanted to make.

The point is that we are made one, united in the flesh of Christ. He becomes our unity/peace. We have access to God in the Spirit. We are no longer far away, but close. The dividing wall of hostility has been broken down. Jesus, in His body, on the cross, has killed the hostility. Hostility is dead to me just as Jesus died for me. In its place, resurrected, is shalom/peace. The beauty, potency, and love of what Paul has to say here are timeless and appropriate to every age because divisions remain and we have not learned how to do this yet.

Paul speaks to the Jewish and Gentile issues, but where does the divide occur today? So many people do not equate Christians with openness and inclusiveness. And shouldn't they? The parable of the prodigal son suggests that God forgives everyone outrageously. Is there anyone whom God has not loved in Christ?

If there isn't anyone, why do some people not know it? Jesus, whom Paul proclaims here, is the one who is our peace and who has broken down the walls of hostility.

Christ has eliminated the hostility; He has become our peace. We do not get up this multi-cultural diversity, despite what the diversity training at our jobs may tell us to do. What is more, when Paul wrote, this was an ongoing process of reconciliation. It took time; it did not happen overnight. Paul addresses this because it had been, and would be for some time, an issue which these people faced. Failure does not mean it is impossible; indeed, the best things often require us to fail and try again. Try and fail and come to the Lord for forgiveness for us who have the promise.

This can seem insurmountable, and Paul knows it. The temple of Herod had a dividing wall which separated the ethnic Jews from the proselyte believers. A Gentile, even one who had been circumcised and was practicing Judaism, was not allowed to cross over that boundary. Archeologists have found signs that indicated that the punishment for crossing that wall without being a Jew was death. Paul says Jesus breaks down the wall; He ripped the curtain in two!

Paul apparently lived this radical re-estimation of all humanity. In Acts 18 it appears a Jewish leader in Corinth, Sosthenes, tried to kill him. Yet in I Corinthians, written a few years later, he would call Sosthenes a brother. In Philippians 1 he can look at the fellows who take advantage of his imprisonment and be glad because they preach Christ. In II Corinthians he says that he sees no one in the same way. They are all a new creation in Christ (II Corinthians 4-5). At the end of Philippians he enjoins two women to reconcile. He thought others also could live with this new estimation of all humanity.

And of course, the reality is that we all have access to the same Father, by the death of the same Son, through the gift of the same Holy Spirit. God really is the unifying force here. When **He** grabs hold of folks, that is a powerfully transformative experience.

It would be good to remember the story of Robert E. Lee, the famous Civil War general who fought to maintain the right to own slaves.

In his later days, he attended First Presbyterian Church in Richmond, VA. It was segregated and the black members of the congregation had to commune after the whites did. One day a black man came down from the balcony and presented himself at the altar with the white folks. Silence fell over the assembly, and no one knew quite what to do or even think about this until a white-haired gentleman got up from his pew and slowly walked down to the front of Church. There, Robert E. Lee knelt beside his fellow Christian, a black man, and there he communed from the same cup from which that man had drunk a moment before. It was a powerful witness. Perhaps we should put up a statue of such a man.

Christ works this change in us. Christ is our reconciliation as well. We are given a new way to see people. We are all simply the folks for whom Jesus died. All of us, dead in our sins, but called to faith, gathered, and sanctified by God apart from works. And that doesn't change, no matter what we have done. Praise Jesus!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!