

9th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Today, we begin our second Sunday of a 7-week stroll through the Book of Ephesians. Last week, we talked a bit about what it means to be adopted into the family of God and about how, through that adoption, we have received an inheritance, an inheritance of love and hospitality that we called to share. Jesus Christ is the sole vehicle of that inheritance and we are called to be bound in Christian unity in order to pass that inheritance along in ever wider and wondrous ways.

This week, Paul continues to flesh out his theology of Christian unity in the Body of Christ by moving from the subjects of adoption and inheritance to the peace that is to be found through these gifts. Let us now listen again for the Word of the Lord.

Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were 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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so 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. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 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 also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

What does peace look like and feel like? What does it smell like and sound like? When was the last time you felt at peace? Peace with the world? Peace with your spouse, your family, your friends, your church family?

I'm sure that if I asked each and every one of you what peace feels like, I would receive hundreds of different answers.

Perhaps peace looks like a nice quiet evening on the back porch with a finger or two of your favorite bourbon watching the lightning bugs dance as the sun retires.

Perhaps peace smells like the aroma of fresh bread drifting through the house.

Perhaps peace tastes like that juicy brisket you've been nursing for the past 16 hours.

Perhaps peace sounds like your favorite hymn being sung from the heart and not just the head.

Perhaps peace feels like the warm sun on your skin as you take the kids to the swimming pool in the last weeks of summer.

All of these things are peaceful, for sure. But they're not the kind of peace that Paul is talking about in today's passage. Often when we think about peace we think of it in rather individualistic terms. Which is all well and good. But the peace that Paul is talking about in today's passage from Ephesians, this peace that is the result of our inheritance and adoption into the family of God, is a much more *communal* peace. It is a peace that is much more community-oriented than the peace we might describe when curling up on a couch with a good book or enjoying a nice walk in the woods.

The peace that is mentioned four times in today's passage is a peace that has to do with what happens when walls crumble. It is ironic, then, that Paul would equate peace with tearing down walls when most of the walls that are so divisive in our time were erected under the argument of "maintaining peace."

The 19th Amendment was ratified by the states in 1920. It tore down a wall that was built up with the rationale that in order to maintain "peace," women should not have the right to vote.

Jim Crow laws enforced racial segregation in this country. The Civil Rights movement sought to tear down the dividing wall that was built up with the rationale that in order to maintain "peace," white people should be "here" and black people should be "there."

Before 1956, the Presbyterian Church had erected a wall that kept women out of the pulpit because it maintained "peace."

Before 2015, the Presbyterian Church had erected a wall that kept persons in the LGBT community out of the pulpit because, again, it maintained "the peace."

Many of these walls, whether they be physical or metaphorical, stood for so very long because people were worried that tearing them down would "disturb the peace."

The uncomfortable truth is that too often you and I equate peace with the status quo. Too often, we equate peace with comfort. Too often, we equate peace with the absence of conflict. However, the peace that Paul describes in today's passage from the Book of Ephesians is a peace that is gifted to the community that breaks down walls instead of building them up.

There was a HUGE wall at the time this passage was written. It was a wall that existed between Jews and Gentiles. A few weeks ago, we spent some time in the passage where Jesus calls his disciples to cross with him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. More specifically, he led his disciples from the Jewish (west) side of the Sea of Galilee to the Gentile (east) side of the Sea of Galilee. And what happened to them when they crossed from Jewish to Gentile? A storm of epic proportions. A storm perhaps not unlike the storm that has robbed us of electricity this morning. A storm that Jesus was able to quiet with a simple vocal command.

The Ephesian congregation was in the middle of the storm transitioning from a Jewish community to a Gentile community. The Jewish identity is a rich and robust one. It was "their thing." Circumcision was a very physical sign of being a part of "the club." The cultural and religious Jews that found themselves a part of the early movement of Christianity were understandably hesitant about letting the Gentiles in because, well, so far this had been "their thing." They were hesitant to draw the welcome circle wider. But the animosity was not one-sided. Gentiles were judgmental of the Jewish Christians as

well. Many in the Gentile community criticized the Jewish Christians for being “unnecessarily exclusive” and arrogant.¹ Some of the Gentiles thought that the Jews were “freeloaders” because in some cities the Jews did not have to pay local taxes for religious reasons.²

All this is to say that both sides were equally guilty of fostering animosity. And yet, here they were being gathered to worship together as the same family. Needless to say, it was not always an easy transition. As I said in a sermon a few weeks ago: change is hard. The people needed guidance in the midst of social change and today’s passage from Ephesians is part of that theological response.

Today’s passage has a three-fold movement. Verses 11-13 identify the problem of segregation. Verses 14-18 identify the resolution to be found in the peace of Christ. And then verses 19-22 identify the result of Christ’s peace.

So first, the problem. Paul speaks to the Gentiles, reminding them that, for the longest time, they were not a part of the club. They had been ostracized from the Body of Christ because they were considered strangers, aliens, non-citizens, illegals, undocumented. They were once “far off” from the covenant of promise made to Israel. But now, Paul insists, the times, they are a changin.’

In verse 14, Paul says to the Gentiles: “no longer.” No longer are you on the other side of the dividing wall because Christ has brought down the wall. Peace has come, Paul says, because Christ has destroyed the hostility among you. Christ has disturbed the status quo and has created, in himself, one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace. Christ, through his death and resurrection, has reconciled both groups and given us peace.

Then, finally, in verses 19-22, Paul says that because we had been separated from one another, and because Christ has brought us peace by breaking down the dividing wall between us, we are no longer strangers and aliens. We are now citizens of a higher realm. We are citizens, together, of the household of God. Our citizenship is bestowed upon us through no merit of our own.

And what, I think, is the most remarkable thing about today’s passage is that the peace that we receive when the walls come down allow us to build something better and more beautiful in its place. Many of us, including myself, are very good at criticizing what is bad, or evil, or unjust. But what we aren’t as good as doing is celebrating what is better! That’s what God does time and time again in the bible: God both denounces that which is destructive while God simultaneously calls us to live into that which is better! Today’s passage invites us to wonder not only about the walls that the Church is called to dismantle but also to wonder about what new structures we are called to build up in their place.

Perhaps instead of bigger walls, you and I are called to build bigger tables with more seats for everyone. Perhaps *that’s* the kind of peace that this world needs right now. Today’s passage reminds us that we are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are together citizens of the family of God. And it’s high time that we started acting like it!

So, friends, be kind and courageous as we work together to dismantle walls and build bigger tables. Christ has already removed the hostility between us and many of us, myself included, often forget that. Let us together build one another up instead of wasting so much time and energy on tearing one another down. Christ has brought us together and there is much work to be done! Alleluia!

¹Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, U.S., 2012), 66.

²Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, U.S., 2012), 71.

