

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Ephesians 2:11-3:6

"Made One"

God has a plan, Paul has told the Ephesian Christians, to *"unite all things in heaven and earth under one head, Jesus Christ."* Last week we saw how part one of that project was to reconcile us to God and God to us, through the redemption and forgiveness that Jesus brings to those who have faith in him. Now Paul reminds these one-time pagans and Gentiles that the second part of God's reconciliation project is to unite Jews and Gentiles.

Why was that needed? Several reasons. Both were alienated from God in their different ways - Gentiles by their paganism, their lack of hope; and Jews by their pride, prejudice and nationalism. And of course Jew and Gentile were alienated from each other. The common Jewish term for non-Jews was "dogs" - and as I have reminded you before, dogs in the 1st century were not sweet lap-dog pets, but feral scavengers who ran in packs on the streets and often attacked people.

And of course non-Jews in Greco-Roman culture despised Jews as separatists with ethical hang-ups, mono-theists who would not worship the Roman gods of hearth and home or pay homage to the emperor, unpatriotic, not "real Romans." The Greek-speakers of the 1st century divided the world into "Greeks and barbarians;" the Jews divided it into "God's people Israel and Gentile dogs." If they had invented suicide-

bombing, there were surely groups who would have used it.

1) *Made One*

But of course from the Jewish point of view, which Paul knows well from his pre-Christian upbringing, the real trouble with Gentiles was that they were *"without God"* - the sort of people that in recent history Christian missionaries called "heathen," or Muslims today call "infidels." Gentiles were outside the covenants and the promises God made to Israel, were excluded from citizenship in "God's chosen nation;" foreigners and aliens, *"No God, no hope."*

"But now, in Christ..." Gentiles too can be reconciled to God, and therefore can also be reconciled to Jews who have been reconciled to God. As Christians, each group now has a new relationship to God and therefore to each other. In Christ there is *"neither Jew nor Greek, male or female, slave or free.... all are one in Christ Jesus."* The formerly alienated are reconciled by the work of Jesus Christ in dying for all of them!

What is more, Jesus has destroyed the barriers of division and hostility that kept them apart. He has done away with Jewish identity markers like circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance, ritual purity. In fact Jesus, according to Paul, has annulled Torah! He has destroyed not just the symbolic markers, or threatened physical

ones like the barrier that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts in the Temple; Jesus has attacked the heart of what it means to be Jewish: he has declared Torah no longer applies. The Mosaic Covenant is at an end; Jesus has instituted a New Covenant, as the prophets had foreseen, and ratified it with his blood. All this because Israel had become part of the problem, not part of the solution; so he, Jesus, had in effect taken the place of Israel.

So unlike his argument in *Romans*, where Paul tells Gentile Christians that they are "grafted into the olive tree" of Israel (even while some/many of Israel's branches are being broken off); here in *Ephesians* Paul says Jew and Gentile Christians now make up an entirely new entity - a "third race" as some early Christians called it - a "new body," a "new people." Together they are now all "fellow citizens, part of Gods' household, all having the same access to God, made one."

And this "household of God" is like a building under construction out of "living stones," built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, the apostles and prophets. Those who are now "in Christ" are together being built by God into nothing less than "a holy temple... where God will dwell by his Spirit." Even the Temple in Jerusalem - the most visible symbol of Israel as God's chosen people - will soon be destroyed, and will be replaced by a new temple, not made of stones but of people, a community - the Church - in which God dwells by his Spirit.

All this is by grace, by God's work, in Christ; the start of God's plan to re-unite "all things in heaven and earth under one head, Jesus Christ."

2) Then And Now

That, says Paul, is how things were, and how they are now, thanks to the work of Jesus

Christ to "make us one." "He is our peace" - he is not just the one who came to preach peace, or make it happen, but to personify it. He reconciles us to God and to each other.

So how are things for us, 20 centuries later? If we are reconciled to God through our faith in Jesus Christ, are we reconciled to other people? How are we doing at the "Jew/Gentile" level? It would be easy to leave this in the 1st century, and say "Jew and Gentile was a special case" where God *had* to get his chosen people back on track as "a light to the Gentiles."

But if this was just the first battle in God's long campaign to reconcile *all things* under Christ, then it has to be a model for all other reconciliations! Where do we still need reconciliation across boundaries of hostility, with groups that have a different ethnicity or religion from ours? What's the most obvious and dangerous division in our world? Is it any part of God's plan that Christians and Muslims, Anglos and Arabs, today see each other as bitter enemies? What are we doing to help bring reconciliation?

Does this mean I am talking politics? I don't think so! I'm talking about understanding, as a first step! Are we, for example, clear in our heads that all Arabs are not Muslims, and all Muslims are not Arabs? Do we know Sunni from Shiite? Do we know that "fighting them over there so we don't have to fight them here" is a recipe for mindless xenophobia? How can we help Arab and Muslim nations recognize that Americans are not on a Christian crusade; that we have a common enemy in Al Qaeda (as Pakistan and Yemen and Saudi Arabia are slowly coming to see)? Can we be cheerfully content, as one famous country song says, to "not know the difference between Eye-Rack and Eye-Ran," when such ignorance may get us all killed? Should we be teaching Arabic in our high schools instead of French and German? Can

we grasp that not knowing a Shiite from a Sunni is like deciding you will invade Ireland without knowing the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant, and then wondering why the place is so hard to govern?

Now is this politics? No, it's about basic understanding of other people; and so it's at the very *beginning* of what the New Testament teaches about our calling to be part of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ. If Jew and Gentile can be reconciled, then Christians are now called to a ministry of reconciliation at every level. Don't say it can't be done! The British, the French and the Germans fought each other for a thousand years; thank God they have now joined themselves together in a way that makes that unthinkable!

What about local divisions? What can and should Christians do about the hostility that exists on Long Island between Anglos and Hispanics, or between Blacks and Latinos (talk to a Riverhead police officer if you want to know how that's going!). How well do "Wasp" Protestants get on with Hispanic Pentecostals? What about "mainline Protestants" and Fundamentalists? How about the different symbols and actions other people use to express their Christian faith? Are we still divided by "the way *they* do things"?

Now by asking such questions, are we just stirring up trouble? Or are we asking whether we really believe that Christian faith is about *reconciliation*? Or is it about fighting to win? How about at community level? Shall we soon enter our annual season of insanity as school budget and school board votes come around? Do we believe in reconciliation? Or only in winning? Is there such a thing as "the common good" any more, or only "my group against your group?" Are we still all-too-comfortably

divided by nationality, ethnicity, birth, education, ability, income, religion, politics? Or do we understand that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to work with him to break down barriers and end hostilities? Do we believe in reconciliation, or in winning?

Finally - if 1st century Jews and Gentiles who became Christians formed a "new people," *a new temple*, do we retain any sense of that? That as a Christian *community*, we are where God dwells by his Spirit? That we are called to be a place where divisions are healed and God's presence is known? That this is almost the definition of a church for Paul - a group of people reconciled to God and to each other, a place where divisions are healed and God's presence is known, and where both of those are obvious to anyone? People who come into our church community should sense this healing presence, and feel "at home" in the household of God. May it be so!

Let us pray...