

Ephesians II
Epehesians 2:11-22**Pastor Wayne Peterson**
July 18/19, 2009

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, 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.

On this day twenty-one years ago, I sat in front of the television and was transfixed for fifty minutes by one of the greatest speeches I have ever heard. The speaker was the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the setting was the 1988 Democratic convention in Atlanta. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Rev. Jackson’s political views, any one who heard him that night knew they had heard a man who is blessed with a gift for public speaking. I wish I could preach like Rev. Jackson, and no doubt, you wish I could, too.

Just to refresh your memory of the events of that summer, Rev. Jackson was actively seeking the Democratic presidential nomination that year, vying with Massachusetts’ governor Michael Dukakis. Jackson was far enough behind that he had little chance of receiving the nomination, but his vote totals were high enough that he was allowed to address the convention in prime time. His message to the Democratic Party that evening struck the theme of unity. He began by noting the differences between Governor Dukakis’ forebears and his own, how the governor’s had come to America on immigrant ships and his had come on slave ships – but that was no longer important, he said, because now they were in the same boat, pulling for the same goals.

He was speaking to a political party that is known for its factionalism, with single interest groups fighting for their planks in the platform. He noted that in the past when those groups had not gotten what they wanted, they worked less than enthusiastically for the party come election time, and the party had suffered.

Rev. Jackson then talked about how when he was young his family didn’t have nice blankets to keep warm. But they didn’t get cold, he said, because his grandma would take pieces of cloth of various shapes and colors, sew them together with a cord, and make a patchwork blanket. None of the patches was big enough by itself to provide any warmth, but when they were sewn together, they became a useful blanket.

Rev. Jackson used this analogy to remind the separate groups in his party – farmers, the disabled, teachers, labor, women’s rights, and others – that their causes were noble and right, but their patches were too small by themselves. They could never hope to achieve their goals if they did not work together and become one in purpose.

My purpose in recalling Rev. Jackson’s speech this morning is not to recommend his political views to you. I’m not in the business of making endorsements. But I mention it because the theme of unity he proclaimed that night is very similar to the theme Paul proclaims in the letter to the Ephesians.

The Democratic Party may have a tradition of factionalism, but the organization that really wrote the book on factionalism and dividing into special interest groups is the Christian church. It’s not just that Christians disagree and split into separate denominations, but even the denominations split up. There’s no better example of this than our own Lutheran church. In 1875 there were no less than 58 denominations in the United States that used the word “Lutheran” in their name. No wonder people used to say, “where two or three Lutherans are gathered together they form a new synod.” Even today, there are still 22 separate Lutheran groups in the United States, and some of them won’t even worship with the others. The Lutheran World Federation consists of 140 Lutheran denominations from 79 countries, but that is not the totality of Lutheran denominations in the world today. Some Lutheran denominations do not participate in this global Lutheran conference because they choose to emphasize their points of disagreement rather than their points of unity.

This is a very timely topic for our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America because next month our Churchwide Assembly will meet here in Minneapolis. One of the items on the agenda is consideration of a new social statement on human sexuality that has been eight years in the making. Here at St. Barnabas we have provided multiple opportunities to study the document and its recommendations, so I’m not going to take time to discuss it now, but simply note that this is another instance in which the church will wrestle with how much diversity of opinion and practice it can tolerate and still be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. No matter which way the vote goes, more factionalism is likely to ensue, for some will see the ELCA as being too tolerant and others will see the ELCA not being tolerant enough, and one or the other will leave.

Such factionalism isn’t a modern phenomenon. It didn’t even start with Martin Luther and the Reformation some 500 years ago. We can go all the way back to the original twelve disciples for the roots of factionalism in the church, when they would argue among themselves as to which of them was the most important. Or we can point to the first Christian community in Jerusalem soon after the Day of Pentecost, when one group complained that their widows were not getting the same financial assistance as widows in the other group.

When Ephesians was written, there were strained relations between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Gentile Christians were often made to feel inferior by the Jewish Christians because they were not part of Israel, God’s chosen people. The Gentile Christians would counter that the Jewish Christians were putting more emphasis on their heritage than on their relationship with Christ – and the argument went back and forth.

This is the situation Paul is addressing in the passage we’ve read this morning. He is appealing for unity among Christians, both Jew and Gentile, just as Jesse Jackson appealed for unity in the Democratic Party.

Paul does not downplay the differences between the two groups. In addressing the Gentile Christians, he reminds them that there was a time when they were on the outside looking in – they were “aliens”, “far away” from God. They were not part of God’s chosen people. Paul is himself a Jewish Christian, and he affirms that the Jewish people do indeed have a special relationship with God because of the covenant God made with them.

Paul then speaks of a wall separating Jews and Gentiles. He may have had a real wall in mind here, a wall that stood in the temple of Jerusalem and prevented Gentiles from going any further into the temple complex. But it is also possible that Paul is using the metaphor of a wall to speak of the Law, the Torah. God had given the Law through Moses to define and delineate the chosen people. But Jesus Christ has torn down this wall and it no longer defines who God’s people are. The people of God are now defined by God’s gracious act in Jesus Christ. Earlier in this second chapter, Paul wrote, “for it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing – it is the gift of God.” The wall has come down.

The basic thrust of Paul’s image of tearing down a wall is the same as Jesse Jackson’s images of being in the same boat and part of a patchwork blanket. The purpose is to show that what we have in common is more important than our differences.

There is one major difference between Paul’s message and Jesse Jackson’s message, however. Jesse Jackson exhorted the factions in his party to realize their unity by coming together of their own will and effort. Paul doesn’t tell his readers to break down the wall between them and others and start working together. He announces that the wall has already been broken down for them. Notice that Paul uses all passive verbs. He doesn’t say, “You decided to join the church.” Rather, Paul says you were “built”, you were “joined together”, you were “built together spiritually”. Your relationship to this people of God is not something you do. It’s something done to you – it’s grace.

It is here that this text seems most strange to us. We often speak of the Christian faith as something we do or decide, using phrases like, “When I gave my life to Christ” or “When I asked Jesus to come into my heart.” When we use that language, it’s all about me, myself, and I.

But Paul speaks about us in the passive voice and God in the active voice. It is God who has called us here. God made a decision for us. God has “built” us as parts of this new household. God has broken down the dividing walls between women and men, between the races, and the ages, and the social classes. If you are here in church today, following Jesus, it is because God in Christ has led you here.

This is the good news of the gospel – our relationship with God is not just a matter of what we feel or do or say, but is primarily a matter of what God in Christ, through the church, has done for us. When Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism for parents to teach the faith to their children, he expressed this wondrous truth like this: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith.”

I don’t always feel, act, or speak like a Christian, but that’s not the point. The point is that I have been called forth to be part of this strange, wonderful new divine experiment in human family called “church”.

Haven't you found this true yourself? How many Sundays have you come here empty, not really believing anything for sure? Then, through the music, or the reading of Scripture, or the singing of hymns, or maybe even the sermon, you have felt faith growing strong in you?

You might wonder if it is hypocritical to say the words of the creed, even when you're not sure about some of the things it says. To that I say, "It's not your creed – it is the faith of the church." Sometimes when we say the creed, you are anything but sure of your faith. But the great thing is that it isn't your creed. On those Sundays, the church is saying it with you, for you, until that time when you are able to say it for yourself.

Most Sundays we prepare for worship by praying a prayer of confession. You may not feel like confessing your sin. Fine. We'll do it for you. We'll confess and perhaps you will sense our confession as your confession, and you will join us in Christian honesty about sin.

This is what we mean when we say that the church is a "means of grace." By that we mean that the church is a human means through which God gets to us and does for us that which we cannot do on our own.

In such moments, we give thanks to God that we are fortunate enough to have been invited, called, built, joined into this household of God. We have not been left on our own, so far as our faith is concerned. God has built us into a structure called church, whose one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord.

Portions of this sermon are adapted from "The New Household" by William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, Vol. 28, No. 3, July 2000, pp. 17-18.

THIRD ARTICLE OF THE APOSTLES' CREED

A: What is the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed?

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen

A: What does this mean?

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.

Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins — mine and those of all believers.

On the last day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life.

This is most certainly true.

- Small Catechism, Martin Luther (1529)