

“The Hard Work of Peace”
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Reflective thoughts on Ephesians 2: 11-22

Church bulletin bloopers happen...

One such blooper in a church bulletin was more of an irony than a mistake, it read:

*“The Peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled **due to a conflict.**”*

Yes, peacemaking is hard work.

We live in a world conflicted and divided;

We are divided by **language differences, family origins, cultural practices, political leanings, philosophical understandings, sexual orientations**, and we are even divided by our sports teams rooting interests!

In the letter of Ephesians, we hear a heartbeat of one **transformed by grace**, and desiring of reconciliation and unity in the early Christian church-- especially, reconciliatory unity between Hebrew Christians and Gentile Christians (The early Christian church in Ephesus was attended mostly by Gentile (those born outside of the nation and culture of Israel) Christians.

The letter of Ephesians was written in the name of Paul and uses much of his theology as found in earlier letters attributed to him; so, even if the letter to Ephesians was not originally authored by Paul, **it nevertheless contains much of his original spirit and transformative theology** (namely, his **theology of God bringing people together--** even Jews and Gentiles.

What does the letter of Ephesians (or our Christian faith in general) tell us about how to deal with the current tribalism and divisiveness (that so easily besets and divides us)?

2:11: “So then [because of God’s grace], 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—¹² **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.”

There was a faction in the early Christian church that taught that to be authentically Christian required the **purity rituals, exclusive and narrow identity markers** such as circumcision-- one can only imagine how difficult the act of circumcision would be for an adult Gentile male wishing to convert to Christianity...

The problem with most religions, and human institutions for that matter, is the unjust discernment about **“who is in and who is out”**.

For the author of Ephesians, and indeed for the original and radical Paul, **Jesus had eliminated the unjust and arbitrary exclusion of outsiders and the marginalized.**

In fact, if God were to “choose sides”, God in Jesus, would chose (and did choose) the side of the **downtrodden, violently oppressed, and unjustly exploited**... God chooses the side of the underdog. Perhaps, the Ephesians felt treated like second class citizens in the early christian church.

It's **interesting to note** that the author of Ephesians **uses the language of migration and immigration** by comparing the Gentile Christians to that of resident “aliens” and migrant “strangers”; Gentile Christians felt excluded, the letter to Ephesians reminds them that **they belong to God's family**.

The peace of God, theologically, is about affirmation.

In Christ, *God affirms our humanity;*

In Christ, *God affirms our belonging in God's family;*

In Christ, *God wraps us in grace*, and transforms us by that same grace to selflessly affirm others-- in the same way that we are loved by God.

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the **blood of Christ.**”

The “blood of Christ” is code for martyrdom (resistance to the violent force of empire). Jesus was executed by the Roman empire.

Jesus' death “as God's Son is a parable of God's love for us. And a parable should never be literalized-- to do so would be to miss the point. Parables are about meaning” (*The First Paul*, Borg and Crossan, p. 145)

The meaning of the “blood of Christ” is that in Christ died at the hands of violent and oppressive empire, but also that what the empire meant as a tool of terror to silence revolutionary and nonviolent prophets like Jesus God instead subverted and used to reconcile those that are pitted against one another.

¹⁴ For he [Jesus] 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.

“Peace” in the kin-dom of God is unlike peace won through militant violence in the Roman Empire.

Rather than build a wall to separate the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the early church, Jesus was a bridge between the two to unite them in the grace of God.

The work of peace **builds bridges and not walls**;

the work of peace **mends and does not divide**;

the work of peace **heals and does not curse**.

As I ponder the early obstacles within the dynamic and makeup of the early Christian church (namely fellowship unity between Hebrew Christians and Gentile Christians), I am mindful of the deep divisions present in our day and age: i.e., Straight and non-binary LGBTQ, divisions of race constructs, and divisions of political partisanship (Republicans vs Democrats).

A part of the radical theology of Paul is Paul's binary busting up of divisive categories; in Galatians 3:28 the original Paul writes:

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

I can imagine, Paul in our day and age and in the context our present political climate, proclaiming, "***There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; [there is no republican or democrat], for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.***"

For the author of Ephesians, the practice of the teachings and way of life of Jesus was a call to nonviolent peacemaking and gracious affirmation of one another's sense of humanity.

¹⁵ He [Jesus] 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**, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through **the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it**. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed **peace** to you who were far off and **peace** to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father."

The mission of the kin-dom of God is to first lift up the oppressed, and then to make them full heirs and absolute equals in the family of God.

In the family of God there are ***no second class members***;

In the family of God ***the last are first***;

In the family of God ***"dividing walls" are "broken down"***.

The author of Ephesians again affirms that the Christian Gentiles belong to God's family just as much as the Christian Jewish believers:

¹⁹ . . . **you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens** with the saints and also members of the household of God,²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with **Christ** [Greek term for messiah, "The anointed one"] **Jesus** [Hebrew term for messiah] himself as the cornerstone."

²¹ In him [Jesus' message proclaimed and life lived as path of personal transformation] the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together **spiritually** into a **dwelling-place for God**."

Spiritually (outside of the conceptual frameworks of empire and society) speaking, our work as a Christian church is the work of breaking down dividing

barriers, lifting up the oppressed, including the outsider while being mindful that we too were once on the outside looking inside . . .

. . . and **God saw us, loved us, showed us grace and reconciled us to the family**-- where we are **equally and completely loved by God**.

Being a member of a church is being a part of a community where we are all come from different backgrounds (various faith traditions, diverse cultural experiences, different national origins, etc.), and yet, it is here in church where are challenged to:

to build loving consensus, resist being divided into opposing groups by the powers that be, to hear the lamentations of the suffering and oppressed, and to collectively and humbly be a "dwelling place for God". Amen.