

One New Man

Ephesians 2: 13-22

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 15 AD 2023
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So when the discussion of diversity in our church came up, one of the elders had a funny comment. “Yes,” he said, “Of course our church is diverse in its membership. All the SEC schools are represented here!” We’re considering today Paul’s words to the young, multi-ethnic church in Ephesus. He recognized how unique this community was. Jews and Gentiles from multiple social standings all worshipped together. That was not an easy pairing. For normally, the dividing lines between them were quite clear and uncrossable.

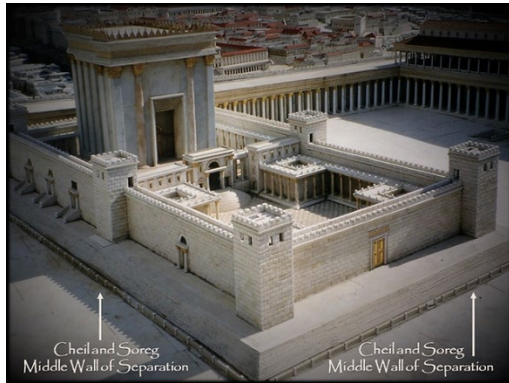
I was thinking this week about my best pal Brett Peterson. We were in every class together from kindergarten through ninth grade, and then we got to be better friends in high school and college. Well, in our elementary days, we would often sit together at lunch. One of our favorite things to do was to set up our lunch boxes together.



As I recall, one year I had the Beverly Hillbillies lunch box. Brett had the Flintstones. We don’t know why our moms wouldn’t get us Batman. Anyway, we’d set our lunch boxes up like fortresses. The thermos could be a tower. We’d add in the foil and cellophane for additional barriers. The idea was to cordon off a safety zone for us and our food. Keeping out all the people around us who had cooties. Or might want to steal our chips. We made dividing walls. It was so cozy. We were in. Everybody else was out.

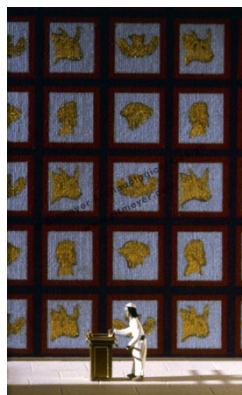
That’s a human trait. We figure out who’s “us” and who’s “other.” Sometimes it’s the invisible line in the back seat of the car with siblings. Violations

must be reported. “He crossed the line!” “She breathed on me!” “Yeah, but he looked at me over the line.” It ratchets up from there. To who lives where. Whose Daddy does what for a living. Who’s us and who’s “those people.” Just a year or so ago it was who’s not vaccinated and who is. Now it can be who’s a Maga Christian nationalist and who’s a rank lib progressive. We “other” people all the time. Like lunch boxes set up in the cafeteria, it can, for a moment, make us feel safe and cozy.



Paul used

the image of a “dividing wall of hostility” that would have existed between the Jews and the Gentiles in Ephesus. That was not just a colorful metaphor. Paul had in mind the literal wall in the temple precincts. It separated where Gentiles could go from where only Jews could go. It was low enough to look over, so pilgrims could see the temple. They could also see who went through while they were kept out. Dire warnings on signs threatened death if a Gentile should enter the temple. You can imagine how this made people feel about each other. Think how you feel when that little curtain is drawn across the first class section of the plane, then multiply by a hundred.



There was also another

dividing wall. Inside the temple. Even God’s own people could not pass through this wall. It was the great curtain separating the Holy Place of the temple from the Most Holy Place, the sacred space where the LORD I Am said his concentrated

presence, his name, would dwell. 60 feet high, 30 feet wide and half a foot thick, it was a forbidding barrier. Sinful man could not cross into the holy presence of God.

And that's really the summary of where we are if left on our own. We are divided from the God who made us and therefore separated from each other, often with great hostility. Paul understood that harmony between people could only arise if both parties first entered harmony with God. That's just crucial to understand. Natural enemies don't just start getting along unless something even deeper than human relations has changed in them. We're talking about the healing of the fundamental breach between humanity and God.

This reconciliation occurred in the person of Jesus. There God and humanity met in one person. There for the first time lived a man who fully, joyfully and faithfully lived in harmony with his heavenly Father. He was God coming over to man's side. Jesus lived out the faithfulness to his Father he had eternally as the Son of God. But now he lived it out as truly human. From our side, Jesus God's Son healed the breach by his obedient life.

And in Jesus, the hostility between God and his creation also met. God had a just wrath against his image bearers. We had marred creation. We had sundered communion with God. We had invited violence and death into the world. Nothing was as it was supposed to be. God remained opposed to the destructiveness of our sin. He remains adamant that injustice and crime and violation against each other could not stand. Because he is love, God has wrath against anti-love.

At the same time, humanity developed a rage against God. We don't like that God won't serve us. We hate that we can't live happy lives without him. And we hate that God has allowed us to exercise our free will and make such a mess of things. We rage against God for death, violence, deprivation and suffering.

Both this just wrath of God and the sin-soaked rage of humanity fell on Jesus. He bore the wrath of God against sin and injustice. The faithful Jesus knew only God-forsakenness on the cross. He became the scape goat. He became the sacrifice. At the same time, he received all the vitriol of a rebellious humanity. We extinguished the light of the world with our darkness. We spat at him, struck him and labelled him a danger. We projected all our hate onto him. This clash was like anti-matter and matter colliding. The sun went dark. The earth split. The Son of God died as the rejected Son of Man on the cross.



At just that time, the great curtain in the temple split in two. In Jesus' death, the great dividing wall between God and humanity gave way. So as Paul says, we "have now been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace." Jesus is himself the location where humanity gets reunited to our heavenly Father. As Hebrews tells us, in the tearing of the curtain that is his flesh, Jesus has made a new and living way to God (Heb. 10: 20).

To get in on that reconciliation, we must be joined to him. There is no reuniting with God apart from being taken into Jesus. The Spirit joins us to Jesus who is the eternal bridge, the everlasting meeting place, between God and humanity. Our atonement, our at-one-ment happens in him. Jesus alone reconciles us to his Father. As we've been saying in this series, we go from death to life. When we are joined to him by faith, we become a new creation. We share in this redeemed humanity of Jesus. This becomes the truest thing about us.



One of the most beautiful predictions of this reconciliation comes in Isaiah 49: 16. The LORD says to his exiled people, "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." How can we not think of the Roman nails in Jesus' hands? Those spikes were the pen and his blood the ink that wrote us into Christ. Imagine standing at the foot of the cross. You look up at Jesus, in his suffering. He looks down upon you. He gazes out to

the onlookers. "Father, forgive them," he says through the pain. As you stare up into the man bearing the pain of a love that will not let us go, you look at his hands. To your amazement, next to the spike, right in his palms, you see your own name written. He has taken this violence to himself in order that he might be our peace with God. Our rejection of Jesus has become his embrace of us, his writing in indelible blood our names joined to his.

You fall to your knees in awe at such love. Your heart melts for his sacrifice, knowing it is for you. You fall on your face at the foot of the cross. This man, this moment, is the truest thing about you. Nothing else matters like this. But then imagine that your heart melted, you look up again at him. You see now that yours is not the only name written on his palms. There are more, thousands, millions

more. Somehow all those names are engraved in his pierced palms. Who are these people who share this bond with you?

You look left. You look right. You see the multitude of others who have fallen to their knees before him. They have found their name in his hands too. Some you know. Most you do not. People of all ages. Speaking the name of Jesus in many languages. People of many colors. People of many sizes. People in all kinds of dress. People who clearly have suffered. People who have wielded power in the world. People who have suffered in body and soul and mind. So many are so different. But you don't care. You have this in common. Your names engraved in his hand. You catch one's eye. It's an old nemesis. "You too?" he asks? "Yes, yes!" you say, tears in your eyes. You see an ex-spouse. You see an estranged sibling. You see that loud obnoxious guy that lives behind you. You see scary ethnically other people now smiling at you. Everybody is different, but none of that matters. There's a communion in having your names written together in the hands of Jesus.

This is what Paul is talking about. Christ Jesus himself is our peace. He has made in himself one new man. He is the first of the new humanity, a people reconciled to God the Father. And we are joined to him. He has reconciled people of every nation, tribe, ethnicity and language to God in one body through his blood.

Our world grows increasingly tribalistic. We subdivide our communities into smaller and smaller affinity groups. We polarize against our enemies. We stay locked into our particular news sites and social groups. We think unity can only come when our side wins and make those others quit the field. But that will never happen.

The church of Jesus Christ, his body, his living temple is called together to model something different. The Ephesians were a shocking sight. Ancient enemies sharing the cup of salvation. People who usually cursed each other now blessing each other. Different ethnicities, different levels of wealth, different accents. They discovered at the foot of the cross that being engraved in the palms of Jesus trumped all other identity markers. When the world sees that, they see a kingdom harmony that no other religion or social philosophy can ever create. They see people who overflow with love.

Now this is hard for me. I like to stick with my own kind. I like to hang out with people like me. I don't like the discomfort of other tribes. I like to make distinctions and put up my lunch box fortress to keep out all the icky people. But

that's not the mission of the church. We're called to pursue relationships in Christ that cross all other divides. That's why our partnership with Abounding Love is so important. When pastor Albert and I meet over our shared ministry concerns, who we are in Christ and our calling to serve him tunnels underneath our ethnic distinctions. When Whitney as elder John hike together on the Camino in Spain, their identity as fellow pilgrims in Christ undergirds their relationship. Similarly, the very reality of the Gardere Christian School matters so much: it's a demonstration of a multi-cultural community of Christ. And think of the International Friendship Partners Ministry. We risk the discomfort of language and cultural differences to invite people from all over the world into our homes to hang out together. We Christians look at these visitors through the eyes of Christ.

Ephesians 2 propels all of us to find ways to cross lines of custom, or fear, or discomfort. A divided world needs to see what it looks like when people meet each other at the foot of the cross. Our shared need for a redeemer and our shared joy in finding Christ gives us a bond like no other. Ask God this week to open your eyes to a dividing wall you can climb over this week. Ask him to open your eyes to your fellow citizens in the kingdom of God. Ask him to show you how his body is being fitted together for one temple in the Lord.