

## Ephesians 2:11-22 – Reconciled in Christ

Last Sunday, the last thing we heard was that we were “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The first good work that God prepared in advance for his Church to do was overcoming the gap between Jewish and Gentile believers. This, of course, was no small task. The controversy of bringing together these two groups fills the New Testament.

The uniting of Jewish and Gentile believers into one church also implied the overcoming ethnic difference in general. Of course, overcoming ethnic difference is a profound change for the world. This is a change that we have not yet fully realized. We all start dead in our sin, struggling in the ways of the world, clouded by demonic forces, and pulled by our own sinful desires. In this passage we hear about how this sin results in our being alienated from God and each other. Wonderfully, our salvation does not only heal our alienation from God, but also our alienation from each other. Salvation includes reconciliation. We are here, in this church, the reconciliation of the Nations in Christ. This is the mystery of salvation, all things under Christ.

Let’s pray:

*Gracious God and Father of our Lord Jesus,  
give us a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Christ,  
so that the eyes of our hearts might be enlightened.  
Help us to know the hope to which you have called us,  
the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints,  
and the immeasurable greatness of your power at work in us.  
Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Hear God’s word: Ephesians 2:11-22

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Christ himself is our peace. The dividing wall has been broken down, and in him the whole building is joined together. This metaphor of the different members of the church, people from all nations, being built into God's new temple, is a profound image of what God's world should look like. Each person, each nation, coming together into one Temple, filled with the Shekinah glory, the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, despite this being the spiritual reality, the reality that God is building us towards, the sin of racism and tribalism is one that dies hard, even in the church.

Racism seems to be a constant sin throughout all human history. It seems to be inherent in the way humans think. We are constantly looking for people who look like us, or act like us. We want safety, and most often we feel that comes from people who are familiar. Even today, where we celebrate ethnic diversity more than any other time in history, we are still prone to this sin. All of this shows us how deeply we need Christ, and how hard it is to overcome sin. Paul's vision for the church in this passage is one that is able to overcome division through Christ. One new humanity created by the cross.

Paul clearly states in our passage that the church is supposed to be a place where there is no racism, we are "one new humanity." Yet throughout church history we see racism, especially between Jewish people and the Church. While in the beginning of the Church, when the Jewish people had the power, they were seen to exclude the Gentile believers (Acts 15), for the rest of Christian history it has been the other way around.

During the first crusade (1096) many mobs of Christians in the Rhineland attacked Jewish communities and killed those who would not convert. In 1290 all Jews were expelled from both

England and Spain. Throughout the Middle Ages rumours of 'Blood libel' would be passed around, saying that Jewish people would murder Christian children for satanic rituals. Even our own hero Martin Luther, who we honoured last Sunday for Reformation Day, wrote a treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies." While there are also many stories of the opposite side, where the Church did demonstrate God's desire for reconciliation, even from Luther himself, we should not forget these things or pretend they did not happen.

In our era, racism has become the chief sin. It is the one sin that I can talk about up here and have nobody bat an eye. If it is found out that a public official did something racist it is the end of their career. Because of that, we might too easily think that we know exactly what Paul is talking about and we know what the solution is. I don't think we should be too hasty. Our racism is sin. It is a spiritual condition. Our world might recognize the effects of this condition, but not its root. Paul is clear, our alienation from each other will never be overcome if we first have not been reconciled to God through the cross, which puts to death our hostility.

#### Slide 7

Paul begins by reminding the church that they were once alienated from God as 'Gentiles of the flesh'. This is another way of saying they are dead in their sin. Paul says that they were alienated from God because they did not have access to Israel's covenants. They were called "the uncircumcision." In the Old Testament, God had decreed that his people would be welcomed into God's covenant community through circumcision. Gentiles being excluded from the covenant life of Israel left them "without hope" and "without God." Apart from being God's people there, was no way for them to access the only true God. Gentiles were left alienated from God in their idolatry. They had no way to atone for their sin. Their sacrifices to their pagan gods may have shown they understood their guilt, but they did not have any way to make it better.

#### Slide 8

Recognizing our alienation from God is only the beginning though, as Paul says, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ." Now that the Lord has died as a sacrifice on the cross for their sin, they are able to come to God. Now that this sacrifice is made, they are no longer without hope. Now that they can claim Christ's sacrifice for themselves, they are no longer "without God," but have been, "brought near."

To overcome our differences, we first must recognize our place before God as being alienated from him, without hope and without God. Then, by being united to Christ, we are reconciled to

God and thus to one another. We must first recognize our own need to be forgiven, our own place as sinners before God, and then we can see our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember what Paul says being dead in sin means. There were three aspects, first, “the ways of the world,” then the spiritual/demonic, and last our own personal desires. It is only through the cross that these can be overcome. The first of the ways of the world is in the hostility between the nations, most prominently between God’s chosen people, and the gentiles. To show how this division is overcome by the cross, Paul uses the image of the temple.

#### Slide 9

When Paul says that Jesus “has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,” he is referring to an actual wall in the Jerusalem Temple. The temple is an especially helpful image, as it shows what God had done in the past, and what he is doing now in the church.

There was a time when God demanded that Israel be separate from the nations so that as a people, they could prepare the way for Jesus’ coming. If Jesus simply came to the world without there being a people set apart, there would be no ability to understand who Jesus was or why he was doing what he was doing. Even though the Jewish people of Jesus’ day rejected him by-in-large, through the legal and sacrificial system, the kings, and prophetic word of the entire Old Testament, they gave a context for Jesus’ coming.

While God did set apart Israel as his chosen people, this was always intended as a means to save all the nations. Even at the very beginning in God’s calling Abraham he says, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen.12:3). God is seen throughout Israel’s history bringing in outsiders into his people, always based on their covenant loyalty, and not their race. Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman are prominent examples of this. Isaiah proclaims that Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles. When the Spirit comes on the church at Pentecost, the first thing that happens is Peter’s ability to speak in tongues, in a language that every nation can understand. The salvation of people from every nation is God’s desire.

However, this biblical understanding of the purpose of God’s covenant with Israel did not sink into the community’s understanding of itself. Despite God repeatedly condemning Israel’s sin and telling them that they are not loved by any merit of their own, they felt they were the only people God cared about. At the time of Jesus, Jewish women were not permitted to aid gentiles in childbirth, as they are simply bringing more evil into the world. If a Jewish person married a gentile, the family would conduct a funeral on their behalf, as it was the same as them dying. We can be sure, that the feeling was mutual from the gentiles. Racism is no modern invention.

### Slide 10 & 11

The most striking example of this attitude toward the gentiles is seen in a partition wall in the temple itself that Paul calls here “the dividing wall.” When we look at a picture of Herod’s temple, there is a meter high and wide wall around the temple, but within the greater temple structure. On the wall it read, “No foreigner may enter the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” Paul had first-hand experience with the seriousness of this separation as described in Acts 21 when he is almost killed by a mob for supposedly bringing in a gentile into the temple.

### Slide 12&13

This wall is in complete opposition to what Isaiah 56:6-7 says,

“And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord  
to minister to him,  
to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it  
and who hold fast to my covenant—  
<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain  
and give them joy in my house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house will be called  
a house of prayer for all nations.”

This prophecy from Isaiah is fulfilled in the church. Even if Isaiah himself could have never imagined what it might look like to have a billion Christians all over the globe, this is what he is foretelling.

The era of Israel preparing for Christ is complete with the coming of Jesus, and so God’s covenant is open to all regardless of nationality. This is why Paul says that Jesus set aside the law. The studious among you might remember Jesus saying that he did not “come to abolish the Law or the Prophets...but to fulfill them” (Mt.5:17). It is helpful to understand a distinction in the Law. We typically call them the Ceremonial law, and the Moral law.

The ceremonial law is in certain aspects of the law that were there to maintain Israel as a people group. Things like dietary restrictions, ceremonial washings, sabbath regulations, and the sacrificial system. These things kept Israel distinct, and many of these things still keep Jewish people distinct from those around them. All these ceremonial laws are 'fulfilled' in Christ because their purpose for providing a way for the Messiah to come is no longer needed. The people group was maintained, and we now have the Old Testament to understand who God is.

The Moral law is seen in the commandments that have to do with the nature of the world, and how we should live in it. This is easiest to see in something like the Ten Commandments, where God tells us how to best live in his creation. The moral law cannot be abolished, it is based on God's nature as he demands goodness and justice.

Now that the ceremonial law is fulfilled, Christ has come, the dividing wall, along with the whole temple, had to be torn down because God needed a new temple for a new purpose. Jesus himself says in John 2 after he cleanses the temple, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." In Jesus' death and resurrection he fulfills the purpose of the temple in Jerusalem, and so much more. In the original temple Israel were able to make atonement for their sin, they would bring sacrifices and their relationship with God would be restored. But now, all these sacrifices, which were foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice, are no longer needed, and in fact no longer possible. Christ has torn down the temple, and rebuilt it in his Church. Christ's sacrifice gives the possibility of being filled with his Spirit, as the temple once was.

More than this, the dividing wall also represents enmity that different peoples have between one another. While it was necessary in the Old Covenant for Israel to remain separate, they did not see this as being for the purpose of evangelizing the nations, but used it as an excuse to despise them. Likewise, gentiles had their own dividing walls, especially for the Jews. All these must come down, and can only do so in Christ.

Slide 14

In our passage, Paul gives four important aspects about this new temple. First, it is built on the foundation of the "Apostles and Prophets." That is, God's word is the foundation. Here, even before the New Testament had been collected, Paul points the church to the preaching of the Apostles as the foundation of the Church. He adds this preaching of the Apostles, which his letter is a part, to the Prophetic word of the Old Testament.

Second, the cornerstone is Christ. In an ancient building like Paul is describing in his metaphor, the cornerstone is the most essential part of the foundation which holds together all the others.

It is the head, and all other stones must conform to it, or the building will fall apart. This stone would often have ceremonial writing on it, showing the purpose for the whole building.

Third, the stones of this temple are us. We make up this new temple, and as long as our foundation is God's word, and we are conformed to Christ, we are filled with the Holy Spirit and can take God's temple wherever we go. This is the way that we can fulfill the great commission. This is the way that we can unite all nations.

Last, we are built into "a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Just like the original temple that housed the ark of the covenant, we bring God's Spirit where we go. There is no longer a need for a specific temple, God has made us into his temple and he goes where we do.

In our passage Jesus is said to preach peace. Here is a direct quote from Is.57:19. Jesus is often said to be the bringer of peace. We greet one another with Christ's peace. He teaches us to forgive as we have been forgiven. But Christ's peace over more than simply interpersonal animosity. Remember the different facets of our sin that Paul mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. There were three dimensions to our being dead in sin, first our being entangled in the ways of the world, if there is any way of the world more than racism, I don't know what it is. For this racism to be overcome, there must be forgiveness of past sin. For us to forgive others, we must first look at our own sin, receive forgiveness for it from God, and then turn and forgive others.

Slide 15

In the early church, Paul's teaching on reconciliation the idea that Christians are a 'third race', that is a people that are set apart from both Jewish people who have not accepted Christ, and from Pagans. Justin Martyr, a teacher in second century said, "We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies." Christianity can transcend any culture or nationality, and bring all united in Christ, the universal King of all. The church is a foretaste of the Kingdom of God where all will be united fully in Christ.

This is part of what it means for Christ to be our cornerstone. He is the one who shapes all the blocks of the temple. If we hope to be a community that can transcend racial and national differences we need to be able to be formed by Christ into the building he desires. We need to forgive one another as he has forgiven us. We need to look at his sacrifice as covering over our neighbour's sin too. If we seek revenge for past sins, reconciliation will never take place.

This is why Christ's sacrifice must put to death our hostility, and in his resurrection create one new man. Our hostility would never be able to be overcome if we are not able to accept Christ's sacrifice on behalf of our sin. God's justice is the only path to peace.