

## FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**July 18, 2021, The 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/The 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time**

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56, Ephesians 2: 11-22

### **Christ Is Our Peace**

*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. Ephesians 2:14*

When I lived in Northern Ireland there was an elementary school teacher in the church I served who taught 8- and 9-year-olds in her classroom. She told me a story one day about two boys fighting in class. One was Protestant and the other Catholic and their disagreement was about a picture of a church with a cross on top of its steeple. "It's a Protestant Church" the Presbyterian kept insisting, "no it's not!" said the other, "its Catholic!" Back and forth they fought, as their teacher made her way across the classroom, to stop an argument that was about to get physical. But the fight stopped before she got there when a third boy shouted, "you're both wrong, it's neither, it's the building with a plus sign on it!"

We who gather to worship inside one of the many buildings with a plus sign on it, are in great need of the reminders from this morning's passage from Ephesians 2. Like those two boys from a divided Northern Ireland, we are a people divided. The fracture lines in our nation, our churches, our families and our friendships are all around us.

An out of town colleague called me several months ago, at the height of the pandemic, several weeks after the presidential election. She called to process a heart-breaking phone call with one of her church members. This member was in their 80's and had been best friends with another church member since their grade-school days. But because of their individual beliefs about Covid, and their chosen candidates in the presidential election, they were no longer able to talk to each other without it turning into a violent argument, so they had stopped talking. This person called my colleague in tears because they missed their friend, and missed sharing their life-time of memories they had created together. They called to weep with their pastor about the amount of pain they were feeling, because repairing the divide between them seemed impossible.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians was writing to people who knew about living divided lives, because they had always been divided. It wasn't new to them, like it is to us. They had been divided by religious beliefs, their ethnicities, and by their places of origin; they had never had a need to agree about anything because the things that divided them were a part of daily life.

But that all changed when both Jewish and non-Jewish, or Gentile, people became followers of Jesus Christ.

Their history of being divided changed when Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus came together in one church in Ephesus,

and tried to figure out how to be a family of faith.

But all they had ever known was division, and sticking to the beliefs that had formed them, and their ancestors, for generations.

Often, in these last 16 months and all they've held, we don't talk with each other about what divides us in our families and in our church families, because it feels too dangerous. It feels like too much is at stake.

But that is exactly what the author of Ephesians did.  
 He talked about their divisions,  
 because he believed that Jesus Christ, the One who unified them,  
 was stronger than the walls that divided them.

In Ephesians 2:14 we read: “For Christ 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.”

When the Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus got this letter, this sentence about the dividing wall would have put a picture into their minds that may not be immediately clear to us gathered here in East Moline in 2021. When the author says that Jesus broke down the dividing wall, both Jews and Gentiles would have thought of a very specific wall.

At the Temple in Jerusalem, the temple itself was built on an elevated area. The inner sanctuary of the Temple was surrounded by the Court, or courtyard, of the Priests, where only the priests could go. Beyond this was the Court of Israel that was only for the men, and then the Court of the Women where the women and Jewish men could go. All these courts were on the same level as the temple. Around all the courts, and around the Temple, about 14 steps below the main level of the Temple, was the Court of the Gentiles. From that courtyard, the Gentiles could look up at the temple and the Jews who gathered there, but they could not come near it, or even be on the same level as it.

They were separated from the Temple and from the Jews who worshiped there by a stone wall. There were signs on the walls in Greek and Latin warning that any trespassing Gentile risked being put to death if they went past the dividing wall,

Serendipity 301 Ephesians—*Our Riches in Christ*, Nashville: Serendipity House Publishers, 1989, 1998, 2012 pp. 31  
 See also: [https://library.brown.edu/iip/stories/temple\\_warning/](https://library.brown.edu/iip/stories/temple_warning/)

Those divided Jews and Gentiles now met on the Sabbath to worship God, all together in one place, at the church in Ephesus, and at many other churches that Paul had helped establish who read this letter.

But how do divided people worship God,  
 when all those divisions live on in their hearts and minds?  
 How do people who seemingly will never agree about really important things  
 come together as the one church of Christ?  
 How do people whose basic religious beliefs have been handed down for generations,  
 now find a new way of living and worshipping together with people who are so different,  
 and believe such different things?

The bottom-line answer is that they couldn't do it then, and we who know about division now, can't do it on our own. We are not strong enough, or wise enough, or creative enough to heal what divides us.

Many of us mourn how divided we are as a nation, as families, and children of God who gather inside these walls to worship God together.

We need to talk about the division so we can talk about Jesus Christ, the One who has the loving power to heal our divisions, even when that seems impossible to us.

Ephesians 2:14 calls out to us this morning with the truth that in Christ's death on the cross **he** becomes our peace, making both groups into one, breaking down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us.

These words may be nearly 2,000 years old, but they are reaching out for us this morning with hope that even the divisions of these days can be healed by the powerful love and peace of Christ.

This letter to the Ephesians says that the church then, and the church today is being made one

with God, through Christ. Verses 19-22 say that we are no longer strangers and aliens to each other but together we are being formed into the one household of God, because the dividing wall of hostilities has been torn down by Christ, not by us.

The foundation of this house of faith, here locally, and around the country and the world, is the apostles and prophets who started it all generations ago, and the apostles and the prophets from our own days.

And Christ is the cornerstone that holds the household of God together.

The letter says to us this morning in verses 21-22: "In Christ 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."

One author invites us to think of this household of God like a triangle. We start out far from the people that we are divided from by our beliefs, by our faith, by our politics, by our convictions. As we choose to move closer to God, guided by Christ's healing love and powerful peace, we will move closer to each other.

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p. 172.2-6

God is not the God of a divided Temple, with courtyards separating each group of people, with dividing walls threatening death to those who cross into each other's territories.

The household of God is a place meant for peace,  
 peace that was bought with Christ's costly death on the cross,  
 the only power strong enough to heal what divides us.

As one author writes: "Eliminating boundaries does not in itself create peace. Peace comes only by eliminating the hostility behind the dividing walls. God does not merely tear down walls, but unites people in Christ (the One) who is our peace, creating one new humanity."

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p.254.9-256.2

In these days of broken hope and divided dreams, and conflicted and separated people in families, and conflicted and separated people in churches, I hold onto this hope of our one humanity in Christ because I have seen this kind of fierce hope in action. I've seen it lived out in a place of profound brokenness.

One of the oldest centers for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland is the Corrymeela Community that was started in 1965, because of the divisions in that small land. It has been, and continues to be, a place where people come to learn about true peacemaking that heals divides, and then take that learning home with them.

In the year that I lived in Northern Ireland I visited Corrymeela, and was taken on a tour by a woman whose family members had been killed by the sectarian violence of that land.

Instead of retaliating, she chose to live and work true peace at Corrymeela, and down in Belfast, with teenagers who lived on both sides of the so-called "peace walls" that divided Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods in Belfast.

Each summer Christian high schoolers from both sides of the divide came to Corrymeela and their roommates were always someone from the other side of the wall. They spent their time at Corrymeela face to face with people they'd never been that close to before, because of divided neighborhoods, schools and churches. They shared a small room together for their whole time there.

They spent their days listening to each other's stories, listening to each other's faith, learning

about each other's families,  
 and learning the tools to work for true peace that they took home them,  
 maintaining those friendships and support across the divides.

The physical center of the Corrymeela Community is the Chroi (chree), which means heart in Irish. This heart shaped building holds the worship center, meeting rooms and a theater. It was built to resemble an actual human heart with different chambers all flowing into each other.

The word peace is written on the doorhandle that you grab to enter the Chroi. When I was there, the Chroi was a powerful symbol of Christ at the center of that community that has broken down dividing walls, and introduced strangers to each other, and helped them to see each other as children of the same God, joined and knitted together in Christ.

As for the word Corrymeela, it "is often translated from the original Irish as "Hill of Harmony" or "Hill of Sweetness." "But, (their website says), there is another and more probable translation. The name comes from a neighbouring townland, Corrymellagh, in the parish of Culfeightrin. Culfeightrin means in Irish "The Corner of the Stranger." Corrymellagh means "The Lumpy Crossing Place."  
<https://www.corrymeela.org/about/our-community>

What a perfect picture of the church of Jesus Christ, back in Ephesus in Paul's day, at Corrymeela, and here today; a place where differing groups, strangers to each other in many ways, meet. The crossing into the household of God is sometimes lumpy; it is lumpy and bumpy to become united with people who seem like strangers, but who are also children of God, just as we are. Children of God, we can finally truly see when Christ tears down the walls of hostility that divide us.

With Christ as the true center of our hearts, and the heart of the church, there is hope.  
 So may we choose hope.

We may choose love.

May we choose peace.

May we live inside the household of faith,  
 listening to each other,

may we who are gathered here today be the dwelling place for God.

"For Christ 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." (Ephesians 2:14)

Notes for another time:

v. 12 *atheos* without God, insult implied one was uncivilized...meant to be strong, strong statement of the separation. "This was not merely side-by-side coexistence, but active antagonism and hostility. To remove the dividing walls was no small feat; indeed, the cost was the blood of Christ. To make these hostile groups one is nothing short of miraculous. What had been separate for generations—indeed, for the whole of covenant history—was now being made into one body.... As much of the New Testament attests, this experience of the nearly church was one of the most profound gifts and surprises of new life in Christ.

"The irony of our time is that so many battles are being fought between those who think their rivals are *atheos*."

(Some say strong walls make for peace) "Eliminating boundaries does not in itself create peace. Peace comes only by eliminating the hostility behind the dividing walls. God does not merely

tear down walls, but unites people in the One who is our peace, creating one new humanity.” Tutu quote

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009, p.254.9-2562

Benediction:

My home church pastor used to send us out of worship with these words every week, they come to us from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and were used by Presbyterians since the middle of the last century:

Go forth into the world in peace.

Be of good courage. Hold fast that which is good.

Render to no one evil for evil.

Strengthen the fainthearted. Support the weak. Help the afflicted.

Show love to everyone.

Love and serve the Lord,

rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit;

and the blessing of almighty God,

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

Source: *Book of Common Prayer, 1892, 1928*, modified.