

Ephesians 2:11-22

61 years ago, back in 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed that it is a shame that the most segregated hour in America is 11:00 a.m. on Sunday mornings. That used to be the hour most churches met for worship services. According to the book *Estranged Pioneers* by Korrie Little Edwards and Rebecca Kim not much has changed as of 2024. (Edwards, KL and Kim, RY. *Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith, and Leadership in a Diverse World*. 2024. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Estranged_Pioneers/jLjuEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PA1&printsec=frontcover).

Race relations are not the only thing that divide us. What else is there that divides us as people in a community? I can think of so many things... stretching my mind back to one of my sociology classes I took in college, I remember that besides race some of the things that separate us are economic status, housing location, politics, gender, education, family relations, and language. You may be able to think of more that I haven't thought about. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:15-16 (from the reading we heard this morning) "He (Christ) 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."

Of course, Paul was speaking about non-Jewish people and the Jewish people who had both converted to Christianity. There was a major separation, a lack of acceptance of one another because of the laws of cleanliness. However, the words of Paul can be applied to anything that separates one group of people from another. Why should this make any difference to those of us who are gathered here this morning? Why should we listen to what Paul is telling the Ephesians? Because Paul's words are about unity, and if there is anything we need in this world right now, it is unity.

In today's passage from Ephesians, we hear that originally the Gentiles were aliens from Israel and in Christ they have been gathered into one group in the Christian faith. Originally there was a huge division between the cultures, however, Christ made the two groups one, breaking down the dividing wall. Paul tells us that Christ abolished the Jewish law that forbade the two groups from interacting. Because of the cross the two groups were reconciled in Christ and became one body of believers. Paul says that through Christ we have access to the one Spirit and Father, so that there are no aliens, no separation due to differences, but all are members of the household of God who build on the foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone. The church is a holy temple of the Lord in which we are all joined together in the Spirit. A single humanity has been created in one new body. Paul is stressing unity in the body of believers who are the church.

Now, to clarify what Paul said about Christ abolishing the Jewish law... Paul didn't mean that we don't do what is right in the eyes of God, that we forget about following the commandments, especially the ones Jesus gave us to love the Lord your God, and to love your neighbor. What Paul meant is that who we are as a person is not defined by what we have done. Our past does not hold us back from being loved by God; our ethnicity, it doesn't matter, our social status, it doesn't matter, the level of our education, our political beliefs, or who our family are, it doesn't matter, we are one people. The barriers have been removed, we are all equally near to God.

Our common belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, makes us one despite our significant differences. John Chrysostom, an early church father, used the example of a

slave and an adopted son. Initially the two were unrelated, one being a slave and the other a parentless child. They were both made heirs, both becoming trueborn sons. Through this they became a part of one family. Martin Luther explained what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. When Christ is in us, He transcends us and becomes an intimate friend. Luther says, "The union is so constituted that Christ is in us and is truly one body with us that He abides in us mightily with His strength and power, much more closely than any friend. When we strike each other or do honor to each other, we do it as to Christ too. We are one, like the ear and the eye, ...all part of the same body." (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 23, p. 150). This bit of information from Martin Luther makes it clear how much harm we do to one another when we do not treat one another with respect. When we belittle another, when we publicly humiliate another, when we make fun of someone, we are doing the same to Jesus. When we act in this way, we do nothing to create the unity that Christ so desires.

John Wesley, in one of his sermons, wrote a very short poem that captures the unity that Paul is speaking of: "Earth and heaven all agree, All is one great family" (*The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 5, p. 152). It's time we put our differences aside, pause before we speak, and use words that do not create division.

In his book *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* Ian Maclaren tells the story of a young woman. She was raised in a Christian home but left it behind in search of a better life, a freer self. She found the kind of life she thought was free, and she got herself everything that she had ever desired. But it was never enough, and what she possessed began to possess her. Finally, she didn't even know what it meant to be free.

One day she decided to go home. When she got near the cottage of her birth, she wanted to turn around. Her footsteps faltered. She began to turn her body. But then the dogs in the yard caught scent of her. They had not forgotten her, even though it had been so long.

Suddenly the light came on at the door and the porthole opened. All she could see was her father, bathed in the light. He called out her name, even though he could not see her face. He called out her name, even though he did not have a reason to expect her. He called out her name, and suddenly her feet were running toward him.

He took her into his arms. He sobbed out blessings on her head. Later, when she told her neighbor of that night, she said, "It's a pity, Margaret, that you don't know Gaelic. That's the best of all languages for loving. There are fifty words for 'darling,' and my father called me every one of them that night I came home."

The language of love. The dialect of compassion. The speech of reconciliation. It is all an echo of eternity. David heard it in the voice of Yahweh as they shared the throne of Israel. Paul wrote about it to the Ephesians who were trying to build a community of heaven in the nasty places of earth. Most of all, Jesus expressed it even when he didn't use words. He still does. And so can we.

All glory be to God.