

Practicing Resurrection...Peace in the Church
Ephesians 2:11-22
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While you're turning to Ephesians 2:11, allow me to tell you a sad story. An older woman walked into a church. The friendly usher greeted her at the door and offered to assist, "Where would you like to sit?" he asked politely. "The front row please," she answered.

"You really don't want to do that; the pastor is really boring."

"Do you know who I am?"

"No."

"I'm the pastor's mother."

"Oh...do you know who I am?"

"No."

"Good." And mom says he just walked away...

Alas, people often get their feelings hurt in church, yet according to Paul, we are much better off because Jesus has brought us together. Let's read verses 11-13:

*Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) —
¹²remember 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.*

The key word is *remember*. It's used twice.... you may want to circle it. In order that the Ephesian Christians grasp the miracle of belonging to Christ's church, Paul says to the Gentile believers remember your pre-church hopelessness. Before their union with Jesus Christ the pagans were excluded from God's people unless they converted to Judaism and adopted Jewish customs. They had no hope of knowing the true God because they worshipped idols. And we who aren't Jewish should remember that without the Jewish Messiah dying for all of us, we would be *foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world...but...* (verse 13)

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

Now no one needs be a foreigner to God's love, because *now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ*. As we explained last week, God has built a bridge across the chasm that separates people from Him; the bridge is the cross of Christ. And through that cross, holier-than-thou Jews and decadent Gentile pagans become brothers and sisters, because God pre-destined a pathway in which people are saved by grace, not by their good works; that no one should boast...

¹⁴*For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,* ¹⁵*by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,* ¹⁶*and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

Paul pleads with believers...recognize your passionate Peace-maker. The extensive list of dos and don'ts required by Moses' Law had a purpose, to help Jews maintain a holy life in regard to sex, money, and power. But among sinful people, the Law became a legalistic, graceless system, and it hindered Gentiles from receiving God's grace. When asked about the Jewish Law, Jesus said, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*" (Matt 5:17) Through his death, Jesus did what the Law couldn't do—reconcile sinners to God, washing us clean in order to become receptacles for his Holy Spirit. As verse 17 says, *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

So by fulfilling the intent of the Law, Jesus did away with the need to live under the weight of its rules. In union with Christ, Jews and Gentiles alike become brothers and sisters in the quest to become holy in lifestyle, God's powerful life within us makes us more like Christ in the way we manage sex, money, and power.

This is incredible news to share with everyone. And the best way to demonstrate God's peace is for diverse Christians to live together peaceable within a remarkable community called the church of Jesus Christ! Verse 19...

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Isn't this a beautiful image! No longer foreigners and aliens, but by grace we Gentiles are fellow citizens and members of God's household, being built into a holy temple in the Lord. And the last verse seems to describe each local congregation: *in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.* Folks, we should revere Christ's unlikely church.

The church of Jesus Christ was and is a miracle. Every other organization exists by keeping people out, and only letting people in when they have earned the right. It's unlikely to find organizations that are non-discriminating. The church welcomes everyone who accepts God's grace. Healthy churches are unlikely because when you let everyone in, people bring their baggage. The very reason you see hypocrisy, gossip, and immaturity is because we let everyone in! Back in Atlanta a local business owner called me to complain because the church member I recommended didn't work out; I understood her disappointment. Then she asked, "What kind of people do you have over there?" Without hesitating I said: "Sinners!"

Yet if disappointed members hang in with the church they discover that God is doing unlikely things through spiritual friendships. The Spirit is working to change them; some addicts are liberated from drugs, some sexual sinners are becoming more holy, some greedy people actually downsize their consumption, becoming more generous, and many angry people gain the strength to manage their emotions, all because the church is the laboratory of love. What threatens this transformation is people deciding that they don't need to participate in the church. Rather, we should revere the unlikely church. If we push the church out of our lives, we disregard God's gift of bringing us together. As Eugene Peterson wrote:

This is the church in its Isness. This Isness is previous to whatever we do or don't do. We do not create the church. It *is*. We enter and participate in what is given to us. What we do is, of course, significant. Our

obedience and disobedience, our faithfulness and unfaithfulness — what we *ought* and *ought not* to do — are part of it. But what I am wanting to say is that there is more—far more—to the church than us. There is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Most of what the church *is*, not all, is invisible. We miss the complexity and glory of church if we insist on measuring and defining it by the parts that we play in it, if we insist on evaluating and judging it by what we think it ought to be. (Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, p. 121)

Next week we will celebrate our nation's independence, and our legacy of freedom, wonderful gifts. But a sad byproduct of our emphasis on personal freedom is our individualism; when people in the church hack us off we're likely to say "See ya!", and look for another church or give up on church altogether. But that's just when the passionate Peacemaker wants to use the church to make peace in the church, in order to make us peacemakers in the world. So inspired by Peterson, I'm going to show you how Jesus' peace happens in Jesus' church, with a few specifics...

First, Jesus' peace is always personal. God becomes personal to us and he changes us by putting us with persons who scare us or annoy us. This is deliberate. The main way hostility is overcome is by coming face to face with your enemies. On my first Saturday as a pastor (24 years ago today) in 1986, I showed up at a church workday—figured I would make a good impression by helping to clean up the church grounds. On that workday I heard one of the elders make a racial slur about African Americans. I was devastated—my first day hearing a spiritual leader acting so ungraciously; terribly discouraging since many African Americans lived in our community and I nurtured the dream of serving a multi-racial congregation. But we didn't leave. God told us to stay in that little church. And nine years later, 25 % of the congregation were people of color, in large part because that elder and many like him grew spiritually. Facing his prejudice, he welcomed and befriended everyone. That's the peace of Jesus, which comes from Jesus. It's always personal. And it's always a process, it takes time, and it usually involves sacrifice. Whites like him gave up some of their Presbyterian traditions. The church changed a lot. But those who stayed experienced resurrected life and demonstrated the Kingdom of God to the neighborhood.

While that was back in the 80s, sinful division over racial difference still divide Christians, and people still ostracize each other if they aren't in the same social class. By God's grace, Trinity Presbyterian is a holy temple being built from people with drastically different income levels. And we are also being built by people of color who trust that this congregation welcomes them and respects their culture. Peace happens here through God's personal, sacrificial process.

What concerns me most is the ideological chasm that is growing in America, and the effect this chasm can have on Christians. It's never been easy for Democrats and Republicans to respect each other; there's plenty to debate on the issues of war, health care, energy, immigration, and financial reform. These debates are crucial for the health of our republic. But in recent decades some Christians have been losing perspective. In their passion to convince others, they often misrepresent the "other side," even spreading lies. Repeatedly I have seen ugly e-mails that Christians recklessly forward to the family and friends on their mailing list. Often the emails are false, or misrepresent a cause or demonize an opponent. The worst of them stoke fears into raw prejudice. Determine that you will not let Satan manipulate you. Before you forward anything, make sure that it's accurate and that you're acting spiritually mature, as chapter 4 of Ephesians says, always *speaking the truth in love*.

This peacemaking doesn't just happen in the church; it happens within the church in order to make peace in the world. That's why some of Trinity's members helped to organize an interfaith festival today at the

Melbourne auditorium. We don't hide our faith in Jesus, but in Jesus name we build bridges with Jews, Hindus, Muslims, and neo-pagans, because the Gospel of Jesus' peace is personal, it's a process, and it involves sacrifice.