

Welcome, Stranger

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

Crossroads Christian Church
July 19, 2015 Pentecost 7B

Think back to a time when you were a young adult and you first left home. Maybe you went away to college, maybe you enlisted in the military, maybe a new job took you to another town. What did you feel? Excitement, dread, homesickness, loneliness, hope, fear of not fitting in?

As you touch upon those feelings, those memories, you will be better able to understand really deep down what our passage from Ephesians this morning is all about. Paul was addressing Gentile Christians, people who had come to Jesus Christ without being Jewish. The Jews were insiders, people of the covenant, worshipers of the one true God, and the people who God worked through to bring salvation to the world. Paul had been an insider even within the Jewish faith, a scholarly rabbi, until the risen Jesus Christ gave him a new way of looking at things. Between the insiders and the outsiders there was a great wall, a dividing barrier. A small part of that wall was custom and tradition. Jews and Gentiles didn't eat together, for example. But the greatest part of that wall was a sense of separation from God. Gentiles were aliens and strangers to God's love. They were separated from God by sin. They were a people without hope. That terrible high wall was something they couldn't tear down. Then God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, tore down the wall that separated people from one another, but more important, that separated people from God. The wall came a-tumbling down. As the Message translates it, "you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything. ... Christ brought us together through his death on the Cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility." (unquote)

We Christians have been insiders for so long, that we lose something of the power of this passage, because we forget that we Gentiles were the outsiders, that Paul wrote these words not just to the people of Ephesus, but to us, as well. That's why I said earlier that you should be in touch with your feelings about what it meant to experience being an outsider in order to experience the power of what Paul is saying here. We were out, now we're in. We were in sin, now we've been saved from sin's power. We were strangers, now we're family. We were without hope, now our hope is secure.

Think about the setting in which this letter was written. It was written to a church in Asia Minor, part of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire was a very top-down hierarchy with the Emperor at the top, senators and generals underneath, all the way down to the powerless, the slaves and prisoners. Everybody had their strict place in

society, and walls of class structure, ethnicity, economics and power kept everyone in their place. Peace—Pax Romana—and order were the words of the day, and peace was seen as the gift of the divine emperor to all his subject peoples, whether they wanted it or not. In that setting, here is a letter that talks about peace as a gift not from the emperor, but from God through Jesus Christ. Here is a letter that talks about all those walls that supported the empire, walls between Jew and Gentile, broken down. It's easy to see how the powers that be could get rather nervous about this new religion when they heard about teachings like these!

Back when I was a young preacher, I was in a chancel drama called Construction. In it, a group of strangers had come together in a foggy land, where they couldn't see very far. They try to get along the best they can. There were piles of building materials all around, like at a construction site--stone, boards, tools. And far off in the distance they hear voices of other people. They were afraid. Will the strangers come in and take over, or even kill them? So they started to build walls for defense, to keep others out. Then someone new came, and said that he was sent by the builder. He showed them the blueprints. What the builder wants is not walls, but bridges, so that people can connect with one another. In the play, the messenger from the Builder gets crucified on the building beams.

That was the play. And that is our story. But that's not the end of our spiritual story, for God used that act of violence, that act of fear, that act of anger, to tear down the wall. And we who were outsiders can come in.

In a sense, what Paul describes God as doing by tearing down this wall of separation for all of humanity, is similar to the story that Jesus told about the prodigal son. The son who left home became alienated, a stranger, he lost track of who he was, and ended up in misery. He was afraid that he wouldn't be welcomed back, but he was willing to be accepted as a slave, as a servant, and he started the long road home. He had messed up big time, and didn't deserve to be his father's son. But the father had other ideas. He ran out and hugged him, and didn't even give him a chance to recite his speech. His father's love tore down the wall.

Walls created by human sin have a way of tumbling. Think of the walls of race that were built up when our country brought in slaves from Africa to do its work. The Civil War ended slavery as an institution, but new walls were built up, the Jim Crow laws, segregation. Brave Christian African-Americans such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks helped us see that the wall of segregation was evil, and needed to be torn down. In South Africa, the

wall of Apartheid was torn down. In Berlin, the wall that separated east and west was torn down.

God doesn't want us to hide behind the walls of our church. God wants us to help tear down the walls that separate people. God doesn't want us to be aliens and strangers, one to the other. Rather, God wants us to be agents of reconciliation. God became our friend, our parent, and God wants us to welcome others.

This same attitude is found in our Gospel lesson. In Mark, Jesus and the disciples are incredibly busy. "Immediately" is one of Mark's favorite words. But in this passage, Jesus and the disciples need a break—a rest—a retreat. They need stillness; they need calm. They head for a deserted area in one of their fishing boats, to find a beach where they can have time for contemplation, rest, and prayer. But the crowds gather again. Rather than feeling frustrated or angry, Jesus feels compassion for the crowd. Compassion may be too weak a translation, because the Greek word literally means a churning of the gut—his feelings were that intense. He felt compassion for these poor, hopeless, hapless people who were like sheep without a shepherd. He couldn't turn his back on the crowd any more than a parent can turn away from a sick child crying in the night. The lectionary skips the next part of the story—the feeding of the five thousand, because it'll get back to that in detail later. But after that miracle, Jesus and the disciples again try to leave, again by boat, and once again Jesus was surrounded by people in need of healing, and so, with compassion, Jesus reached out with his healing touch.

We learn from Paul, and we tear down divisions that separate God's children. We're followers of Jesus, so we reach out in compassion to help those in need.

In our divided society and world, we do what we can to bring reconciliation and healing. That can influence how we vote, what we write to our representatives, and how we reach out to help those who are still outsiders. Around us are broken, needy, wounded people who need a healing touch of grace—which is why we're a part of the Convoy of Hope Metro East.

And going back to Paul's teaching on hospitality--Remember a time when you were a stranger, maybe the first time you set foot in this church? How did it feel to be welcomed? How did it feel to be greeted just like you were somebody important? You are, you know. You're a child of God. Now it's your turn to pass it on.

God welcomes us, so that we're no longer strangers but family, and God challenges us to welcome others in Christ's name. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon