

Sunday August 21, 2022
Lesson 12: Loving Beyond Barriers
Scripture: Ephesians 2: 11-22

Context:

We continue to close our series with a unit titled “The Pursuit of the People.” The lessons and scriptures focus upon how Christ calls us to live in peace with those around us. Today’s lesson is to understand how God’s reconciling love through Christ changes how we relate to our enemies.

Today’s scripture comes from the New Testament and the letter to the church in Ephesus. The book of Ephesians is known as a book of ecclesiology, or the study of the church and who the church is called to be. The scripture lesson today continues an extended exposition of the topic of the church’s essential oneness despite the barriers of race and culture which kept apart Jews and Gentiles.¹ Both groups had equal animosity for one another with connections to past feuds and prejudices.

The Christian message to the divisions in the body of believers was for them to look at their own bodies and reflect on how the body cannot be divided and function. At the center of the argument is the verse fourteen “he is our peace, who has made us both one.” This statement declares to the readers of how being in Christ makes us a new state in which we are seen as part of a worldwide, transnational, and reconciling family.² This peace leads to three affirmations made throughout verses eleven through twenty-two.

The author first appeals to how the group known as the Gentiles were given a new identity and family in Christ. The physical act referred to in verses eleven through thirteen is circumcision. Yet the state of non-Jews went deeper as they lacked any hope in a Messiah, they were not a part of a citizenship within an elect nation and did not have knowledge of God.³ As such, they were left out and not considered a part of a group to claim them.

Yet the peace of Christ came to them and gave them an identity. Verses fourteen through eighteen speaks of how Christ came along and brought a reconciliation. Both the Jews and the Gentiles could be in relationship with one another because Jesus, God in the flesh, showed the connection of God to humanity in his life, death, and resurrection. Christ’s death has introduced men and women to God; and by the same token he has done way with barriers that kept Jews and Gentiles in opposite and opposing camps.⁴ God has made them as one body together in Christ.

Finally, in verses nineteen through twenty-two we learn the single foundation of the

¹ Ralph P. Martin, “Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 30.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

church is through Jesus Christ, by whom the whole body of believers has its foundations. The church is of course, made by all people, both Jews and Gentiles where God finds God's dwelling and lives to express to the world the ultimate worship of God.⁵ Those who were once enemies are now God's beloveds.

Application

Who are your enemies? For some of us, we might start global and name the various superpowers who we fear might threaten our existence. Others might go closer to home and discuss the various political parties who threaten the American way of life. Or we might go straight to the neighborhood we live in and talk about the neighbor who makes too much racket with their parties on a Saturday night.

I wonder what would happen if God were to tell us one day of how those enemies were going to be a part of our family. I think at this point we might look at God with a look reminiscent of "Come again?" Yet this is exactly what God does with the ancient people of the Jewish Christians and the Gentiles. God tells them as different as they may be, they are going to be family, rooted in Christ, and built up by the Spirit.

In this letter to the Ephesians, God reminds the people of how God likes to upset our notions of who is family and better yet, who is our enemy. Perhaps the reason we enjoy having enemies is it gives us a group or a person to focus all the negative attention upon. If we can just target them, then we do not have to love them or think about how to be in relationship with them. We can hide in our little bunkers, and even from time to time, throw a grenade their way.

Yet Jesus does not come to hand us a grenade or a sword to take down those who we deem enemy. Instead, Jesus comes as our peace, the one who by his death on the cross, ended a model of hostility for life together. The death of Christ and his example to all in his ministry testified to the one who loved people so much, he came not to condemn but to give eternal life. His message did not discriminate based on where people were from, the behaviors they demonstrated, or their family of origin dynamics. Jesus loved them and preached to all, making once declared enemies as family members connected in Christ.

Jesus offers this as a model for how we are called to live with one another. We are to see each other, especially those within our church body, as people to love and live beside as family members. Christ takes the barriers we erect and tears them down, revealing how Christ has united us to be with one another.

I once asked a mentor how to approach people who might be like the enemy neighbor who make a lot of noise and seem to be agitated all the time. They said for them, they tried to think about how God might see this person in their entirety. God would see their spiritual gifts, their strengths, their growing edges, their sins, and virtues, and how God loved them even still. And then, my mentor added, they tried to see how they could love those more complicated individuals, reflecting on how God has loved them and to think of those who have been the face of Christ to them. When we think of how Christ came for all, even those we do not like, it changes how we see them.

⁵ Ibid., 39.

It is a challenge for sure. I can only imagine the conversations and the realizations the early Christian community had to face in coming to love one another. For generations, they had been taught to see the differences and the prejudices roared from time to time. Yet time and time again the message of God was for them to love one another, remembering the peace of Christ which all of them had been given. Perhaps we should embrace the tension and realizations of our earlier ancestors and trust how again, Christ will build up his body.

How do you treat those you label as enemies? Have you ever had someone who was once an enemy become a fellow member of your church? Why do you think Jesus gave his life for all people? What are ways you can see your enemy as how God might see them? Who might God be calling you to love as hard as it might be?

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