

Ephesians 2:11-22 - 7th Sunday After Pentecost (Redeemed by God)

Last week the Book of Ephesians was introduced. The books of the Bible were given names many years after they were written. Many of the so-called “books” were letters written to individuals or groups. In the fourth century the writings were “canonized”, brought together into a single book, the Bible. Religious scholars of that time determined which writings would be included and which would not, and gave names to the books and letters, relying upon their best judgment and understanding. This is the case with the “Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians.”

Ephesus was a city of the Roman province of Asia Minor with a population of around half a million. Most of the information and details we have about Paul’s missionary work is actually found in the Book of Acts, where we read that Paul spent at least three years at Ephesus, giving him the opportunity to know the community of believers in Ephesus very well.

Paul was not considered to be the actual author of the letter. Although the letter had been written in the style of Paul, and most of its language agrees with Paul’s other writings, it had some exceptions and ideas that are peculiar to the letter. Paul usually started his letters with personal greetings and ended with a benediction. That is not the case with this letter. The letter expresses a doctrinal difference from the authentic Pauline letters, and is not accepted as an authentic letter of Paul by most scholars.

The other question that has been raised is, to whom is this letter addressed? There is evidence that it was **not** written to the believers in Ephesus. Having spent three years in Ephesus, no community of believers was closer to the heart of Paul than that at Ephesus. But there is no mention of anything even close to that listed in this letter. In the authentic Pauline letters, Paul mentions several members of the local church. It was customary for Paul to give salutations to

those that he personally met, who were present with the community of believers in the various communities he had visited.

It's hard to imagine that Paul would spend three intimate years with the ekklesia in Ephesus and not mention a single person in his greeting. So the letter does not appear to have been written to the Ephesus church or community. It was written to some other group or church. Among the many early "church fathers", there is a suggestion by Marcion that this letter was written to the ekklesia at Laodicea. In the letter to the Colossians, we read: *"After you have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them"*.

This clearly indicates that Paul or the mystery author had written a letter to the believers at Laodicea and that the two groups were to exchange the contents of the letters. The believers in Laodicea were to read what Paul wrote to the Colossian believers and the Colossians were to read what was written to the believers in Laodicea.

Since no letter to the Laodiceans by Paul or any other writer has been found, this was probably that missing letter. Since original manuscripts did not actually identify it, and Colossians were instructed to read it, it became a circular letter that other communities could read, such as the one that was circulated among the seven ekklesiae in Asia by John in Revelations. So the letter titled "to the Ephesians" was the missing letter to the Laodiceans that is mentioned in the Colossian letter.

So why did Paul, or the mystery author, write this epistle? At the writing of this letter, Paul was free from having to run and hide from the Judean element that constantly followed him everywhere. He was now sitting in a jail cell, not having to run, so he could look at the overall condition of the ekklesia or church of Jesus throughout the Roman world in a very calm manner.

He could look on the wholeness of the ekklesia of Jesus to see the part it played in Yahweh's scheme of redemption and restoration of the entirety of Israel: to see Yahweh's purpose **in** the ekklesia, **for** the ekklesia and **its relation** to Yahweh.

The author is showing Yahweh's great eternal purpose which was to gather the house of Judah and the house of Israel back together into one body. Now Paul was writing to churches that were primarily made up of "Gentiles". The equivalent Greek word is "ethnos" and the Hebrew equivalent is "goyim", both better translated as "nations". To better understand this, we need to go back in time - back to Solomon, David's son.

Because of Solomon's idolatry – 300 wives, 700 concubines, and pagan worship, Yahweh took away ten of the twelve tribes of Israel from Solomon. His son Jeroboam, became king and reigned over the ten tribes. Samaria was the "capital" of these "ten lost tribes", which were never lost to Yahweh. So, Yahweh had Assyria conquer the ten tribes and dictated into which countries, nations, or goyim, they would be scattered in captivity. They became the "house of Israel". The two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin became known as the "house of Judah". All twelve tribes had been together when Yahweh delivered them from Egypt. Solomon's idolatry caused the division of the two houses, the scattering into various countries, and Yahweh eventually divorcing Israel.

About 150 years after the split, Yahweh had the house of Judah taken into captivity by the Babylonians. But this time, Yahweh had a plan. They were to stay in Babylon for seventy years and return to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, which they actually did do. Jesus was to come through the tribe of Judah.

However, Judah was not any better than Israel. Both played the harlot. But, rather than divorce, another way to deal with a harlot, according to Scripture was stoning or burning. Around 70 CE Yahweh had the Romans subjugate Judea and stone and burn the

city of Jerusalem along with the temple.

The house of Israel in its scattered state, had intermarried with the inhabitants of those countries into which they had been scattered and had essentially become those nations and they adopted their pagan worship practices. In other words, the house of Israel became the “Gentiles” of the nations. So the scattered of “the house of Israel” were the “Gentiles”.

However, from both the house of Judah and the house of Israel, there was a remnant of believers who hadn’t turned to idol worship. Remnants of the two houses were to be reclaimed through faith and repentance. Yahweh was to make the new covenant with both houses. Yahweh was to bring the remnant of the believers of the house of Israel back together again with the remnant of believers of the house of Judah.

The two houses were to become one again. This was to be done in the spiritual realm. They were no longer to be two people, but one people. They were no longer to be a natural nation, but a spiritual nation. They were no longer to be a natural body, but a spiritual body.

The author of this epistle stresses that the Christian church has its origins within the history of the one people of God, the people of Israel, comprised of the people of the original house of Judah and the original house of Israel. All that happened in the Old Testament story was a part of their own story and heritage. God did not make a fresh start with the birth of Christianity. Indeed, Christianity fulfills the story of the Old Testament.

Last week we heard that the great mystery that is being revealed in the books of Laodiceans or Ephesians, and Colossians is that “*Christ is in you*”, applied to both houses that had been made into one. Yahweh’s eternal purpose was to gather into one the entirety of the believers from both houses. That would restore harmony

among his chosen people and also between them and Yahweh. That would be redemption.

Everything that Paul did centred on Yahweh's purpose. But there was discord between elements in the ekklesia and too much distinction between the believers of the two houses. All of this had to stop and both houses had to yield to the divine purpose which is the major theme of Yahweh in this epistle, where the author focuses on the reconciliation of the Jews – the House of Judah, and the Gentiles – and the newly established House of Israel, which falls within God's bigger move of reconciling humanity from sin and death to life.

Being saved is not just “getting a ticket out of hell”, or assurance of heaven. It is a movement from one sphere of life to another. Salvation involves more than forgiveness of the individual sinful self; it is the integration into God's work of redemption and reconciliation.

There was some concern about circumcision, and the Gentiles were referred to as the “uncircumcised”, while the “Jews” were referred to as the “circumcised”. *“Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called “uncircumcised heathens” by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.”* The circumcised and the uncircumcised are two separate groups within humanity. One group was considered outsiders, the other insiders with regard to the covenant with God.

This passage trumpets the good news that God has brought uncircumcision and circumcision together. One radical element of this message is that God's unification of the two groups does not mean “uniformity”. God in Christ has made one humanity of the two. Gentiles do not become Jews; Jews do not become Gentiles. Rather, both Jews and Gentiles become united in Christ as Jew and Gentile. The uncircumcised are welcomed into the story of God played out through the people of the circumcision, to play their own

part in the continuing story of redemption.

All of the believers from both houses were not only reconciled to Yahweh, they were also reconciled to each other, no more division of any kind. The relationship was peaceful, even though some were circumcised and some were uncircumcised. With that epistle being delivered from the Judean believers to the "Gentile" believers, there was "peace". That is a major accomplishment of the cross of Jesus. Both houses were considered to be "fellow-citizens" of the saints. Both were built in Jesus, the foundation that was preached by the apostles and prophets.

It was "in Christ" that both the house of Judah and the house of Israel were made alive, and Yahweh filled them with his spirit. Not only was the breach healed between the house of Israel and the house of Judah, but it was also healed between Yahweh's people and Yahweh himself. Yahweh completely broke down the separation between the Judean and the "Gentile". He broke down the "enmity" between the Judahite and the "Gentile", and also any that existed between his people and himself.

The author speaks eloquently of the "peace" which God has brought into the world through Christ. He asserts that Christ "has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us", referring to the house of Israel and house of Judah. In his coming to earth and through his death and resurrection, Christ "ended the whole system of Jewish law that excluded the Gentiles".

It is a sad fact that, even though the world is shrinking and we have possibilities of communication like never before, the world is fragmented into so many different groups and camps. The church can and should model the barrier-free life that Christ has brought.

That is so on a global scale. It is also the case in the congregation. We are all family, and no one is to be treated as a stranger or alien. Differences in race, class, gender, sexual orientation, economic

condition, politics, and opinion exist, but they are not barriers to living in unity in Christ. The congregation is a “laboratory for the kingdom of God”.

The congregation as a laboratory for the kingdom can also be a witness to the wider, secular society. Differences among persons exist, but community is possible when dividing walls, based on hostility, are broken down. The bonds of a common humanity tie us together for the good of all.

The author of this epistle goes to great lengths to emphasize the unity the faithful have in Jesus. This unity, is one in which the various categories we use to create divisions between people, separating “us” and “them”, are made null and void. Our differences should not divide us, for in Jesus we have peace and communion. This doesn’t mean that differences no longer exist or matter, for they most definitely exist and most certainly matter. We cannot pretend that there are no differences between cultures, genders, or generations. We cannot ignore the very real problems we have created from our differences. But, we can know that we are joined together in Christ as his body, and our differences can make the body beautiful.

Different ethnic or cultural groups have different characteristics and ways of looking at the world. It is important for us to understand these differences. Acknowledging our differences and appreciating the gifts that each brings is essential, as we make sure that we break down dividing walls and focus on our unity in Jesus Christ. It is in honouring our differences and celebrating our unity that a community in Christ is formed, where we “are joined together as part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit”. That is where genuine, authentic, faith is formed.

Amen.

THE PRAYERS for 7th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Holy God, in calling forth creation from the void, revealing yourself in human flesh, and pouring forth your wisdom to guide us, you manifest your concern for your whole universe. You invite us, as your people, to gather the world's needs into our hearts and bring them before you.

For the Church: that we may recognize our call to be children of God, be united in fellowship through the Holy Spirit and encourage one another as we follow God's call in our lives: for a spirit of wonder and awe: that we may behold the marvellous deeds of God in nature, in relationships, and within ourselves and be motivated to serve God with greater commitment and sincerity.

For new vision and understanding: For a deeper appreciation of God's covenant of love: that we who were once "no people" have become God's own and that we may live each day as daughters and sons of God: for peace: that God will bring new courage to leaders of nations working for peace and ending injustice.

For the grace to live in peace and harmony: that God will help us accept the differences in one another, understand the gifts that others bring, and give us patience as we strive to work together: for a new experience of grace and mercy in our lives: that God's love will free us from our past failures, give us courage to make amends, and hope to begin again in our relationships.

For all who are isolated from God and the human family, that they may experience welcome and acceptance as they encounter the Christian community; for a greater sense of community; that we may appreciate the wonder of each person and work together to address the needs and longings of all who enter our lives.

For all who are discouraged, lonely, suffering and ill, that the Spirit of God's love will strengthen them and bring them to wholeness quickly: for all whose lives are disrupted by violence: For all who have lost homes and community and become refugees: that God will protect them, guide them to food and shelter and help them develop new relationships.

For all who who are affected by floods and fires and having to evacuate their communities; for those helping them in their distress; for the firefighters and emergency responders; protect them all and give them strength as they respond to these disasters.

For all your children facing wars, violence, and conflicts not of their own making; For those lacking food and water and droughts due to climate change; let those who are able, reach out and help them.

Holy God, fill us with strength and courage, with discernment and compassion, that we may be your instruments of justice and love in this world, that it may be on earth as it is in heaven. **Amen.**