

Making Peace

Ephesians 2:11-22

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First Presbyterian, Luling

One of the things we did when I was chaplain at John Knox Ranch a month or so ago was to play “Would You Rather?” It’s a youth ministry classic sort of game and can be used for any number of lessons. We may have done it before here in a sermon. The way we played it at camp went like this: Would you rather vacation at the beach or in the mountains? People have definite opinions on this, even little kids. Would you rather go to the movies or watch a movie at home? Would you rather be by yourself for a whole day or hang out with your friends for a whole day? Soon the campers started defending their choices. Then, even with me explicitly telling them not to do this, they started denigrating the choices of the other group in order to defend their own. There was a fierce argument between two groups of middle school boys over soccer versus basketball, with the soccer players insulting the fitness of the basketball players, and the basketball players questioning the soccer players’ patriotism.

Lest we think that it’s only children who so easily divide themselves into two opposing sides of relatively unimportant debates, we need only to think about the question of how the toilet paper should roll—over the top of the roll, or under the bottom? Grown up, adult people will fight about this, certain that their way, and only their way, is the right one, and that there is somehow moral virtue in the way one arranges the toilet paper roll. More seriously, in Fayette County right now, where I live, there is a lively public debate over wind turbines verses fossil fuel energy. Yard signs and facebook posts and letters to the editor, each claiming to be right, and other people wrong. I have yet to see or hear anyone argue that maybe we could have both. We seem to be in a climate where conflicts have two sides, you have to pick one side, and anyone on the opposing side can no longer be your friend.

I haven’t even mentioned politics, but these dividing lines in our communities and in our country hardly need to be mentioned, they are so hardened and strident and entrenched.

Into this climate and culture, we hear these words from Ephesians. “[Christ] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” And these words: “He might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and

might reconcile both groups to God.” And then these: “He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.”

Christ is our peace. He has (past tense) made two groups into one and broken down the walls between us.

It turns out that we are not the first culture in the world to divide ourselves into groups and insult each other and exclude each other and build walls between us and other people that we have no idea how to go about un-building.

The early church was divided into two, separate, distinct groups. Those who had been Jewish before becoming Christian—these were the earliest Christians, the disciples, most of Jesus’s early followers. And the other group were Gentiles, those who had not been Jewish, but through the evangelism and sharing of the good news by the church, they had become Christian. Fairly early on, there was a big meeting where they decided that this second group, the Gentiles, didn’t have to become Jewish and follow the Jewish laws in order to be Christians. Meetings that make big proclamations don’t always get followed or practiced, and the divisions remained and even grew stronger.

Jewish people obviously thought they had the stronger argument, that they followed the law just like Jesus had. Jesus was Jewish, after all. The Gentile Christians were inferior. The Gentile Christians could point to the spreading of the gospel and the fulfillment of the Law by Jesus, and they may have felt like they should be included, but the fact that Paul had to write this letter shows that they weren’t. There were walls between people who all claimed to be Christians.

Christ is their peace. Christ is our peace. Jewish Christians did not get to tell Gentile Christians they weren’t equal. And Gentile Christians didn’t even get to tell Jewish Christians to back off. Their identity was ultimately in Christ, bigger than both of them. Jewish Christians didn’t have to abandon their heritage, nor did Gentile Christians have to get absorbed into the Jewish background of Christianity. Gentile Christians didn’t have to abandon their conviction that they were free from the Law, in Christ, but nor could they tell Jewish Christians they were being rigid or antiquated. All of those differences remained. They weren’t erased. But the dividing wall, which Paul identifies as hostility, did have to go away. Because they were one, a new humanity, in Christ, Christ has broken down that hostility. Hanging on to the hostility, the divisions between them, was a denial that Jesus’s work was effective or real.

It is no less true for us. Holding on to hostility and the walls that divide us from other people are a denial that Christ’s work of making peace was effective, a denial that he is our peace. And notice the plural pronoun there: our peace, not

my peace, not your peace, but Christ is our peace together. In the work of the cross, Christ has made us one. We don't get to decide who is in or who is out. We don't get to decide who is superior to someone else. We don't get to declare that our interpretation is the only right way to think and everyone else is wrong-headed and excluded if they don't believe exactly like we do. People on the other side of the walls that we have built are our siblings in Christ, and there is, or ought to be, peace between us.

Our identities are in Christ, not in the things that divide us, important though we think those things are. As Paul says elsewhere, anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. Let us stop reinforcing the walls that separate us and work instead for the peace that brings us together.