

**Pentecost 9 / July 21, 2024**

**Ephesians 2:12-13**

**“Remember you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.”**

### **Brought Near to each other and Reconciled to God in Christ**

St. Paul’s letter to the Christians at Ephesus and surrounding region is notable for several reasons. Foremost is its clear statement of the universality of human sin, the total sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice to atone for human sin and God’s grace to grant forgiveness to those who believe. Humans naturally approach God through our works. Paul plainly tells us our works are useless to bring us to God. We are all by nature “children of wrath...sons of disobedience.” Instead, God comes to us with His grace. He reaches out to us with the kindness of His love in forgiveness for the sake of Christ Jesus.

Our works and righteousness cannot bring us to God. Jesus’ work, fulfilling all righteousness in our place and His blood shed to atone for our sin, bring us to God in peace. In one of the most beautiful verses in scripture Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” These are words we should bind on our hands and write on the walls of our houses as a reminder. They speak the essence of God’s love in Christ, by whom He has reconciled us to Himself and brings us near to Himself and each other in the peace of forgiveness. He is our peace. He makes us one with the Father and each other.

The church at Ephesus was composed of a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish believers, called Gentiles. Gentile or ‘goyim’ in Hebrew, was a catch phrase by which the Jews referred to everyone who was not Jewish. Although it could be used in an insulting way, it was not a bigoted term in itself. It expressed a reality of faith and practice. The Jews of the first century were different than every ethnic group of the Roman world in their beliefs about God and their religious practices. The peoples of the Roman world believed in a multiplicity of gods. For the Jews there was only one God, the Lord. He alone was to be worshipped and adored. The peoples of the Roman world worshipped all gods. Unlike the Jews, who observed a strict religious diet, the Gentiles ate everything. They had little regard for sexual morality, many times incorporating it into their worship practices. The Jews took Saturday as a day of rest. The Gentiles worked every day. The Jews wouldn’t eat pork or food sacrificed to idols. They wouldn’t take part in community worship of the Roman gods, which involved eating food sacrificed in pagan temples. They seemed a little uppity and standoffish to their pagan neighbours.

There was always low-level antagonism between Jews and Gentiles. Sometimes it would erupt in violence against Jewish communities. To be fair, the Jewish people tended to look down on the Gentiles, whom they regarded as immoral, spiritually bankrupt and slaves to their passions. It took a long time for Jewish Christians to overcome their prejudices against the Gentiles and accept that God had granted them salvation through faith in Christ; and that through baptism, they were equal heirs with them of the promises of God. In the book of Acts whenever it says the Holy Spirit came upon Gentile believers, this was a sign for the Jewish believers that God accepted them as His people, for the sake of the blood Jesus’ shed on the cross. Christ had reconciled Jew and Gentile to the Father. There was no longer Jew or Gentile for they were one in Christ Jesus. Christians!

Ethnic groups have different foods, traditions and customs. Hopefully, we don’t look down on other people because they do things differently than we do. We celebrate our cultural differences. They enrich our lives. In the first century there were Jewish believers who wanted the Gentiles to become full cultural and religious Jews. This led to conflict in the church. There were some Gentiles, who having become Christians, wanted to continue in the cultural practices of the Roman world. This led to conflict in the church. The happy medium expounded by Paul was that no practice of the ritual law of Judaism could be demanded of anyone, Jew or Gentile. Christ has set us free from the demands of the law. Jew and Gentile were free to decide to follow or not follow their cultural practices, as long as they were not in themselves sinful. People were free to engage in their cultural practices as long as they were not a violation of the command to worship the Lord as the only God and did not take away from the full sufficiency of Christ as our Saviour. He is our peace. He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. Most importantly, He has broken down the division between us and God. He is our peace. In Him all baptized believers are equal members of the household of God, the Christian Church.

One of most visible effects of the gospel is its power to bring people together, despite differences in ethnicity and personality. In the early Christian Church people from all economic and social classes gathered for worship and fellowship around the body and blood of Christ. People had different gifts, talents and responsibilities in the functioning of the church, but all were one in Christ. There wasn't a church for the rich, another for the poor, others for slaves or for Jews, Greeks and other ethnic groups. The church gathered together to receive the absolution promised all baptized believers. All gathered around the Lord's altar and stood beneath the cross to receive the body and blood of Christ, under the forms of bread and wine, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. All were one in Christ. All are one in Christ. All were Christians!

All who are in Christ are made one with the heavenly Father. The true source of division among people is the separation between humans and God, caused by sin. Bitterness, divisiveness, anger, wrath, malice and every other sin, are an expression of the fundamental separation of humans from God. They are an indication of the sinfulness that continues to abide in the human soul, despite the reconciliation of the cross, the washing of Holy Baptism and the indwelling of the Spirit of Jesus. The effect of human sinfulness is separation from God. The symptoms of separation from God are sin and death. Paul reminds the Ephesians that before Christ came into our hearts, we were without God and without hope in the world. The Jews, although conceived and born in sin and naturally separated from God like everyone else, had an advantage in that God called them to be His people, made covenant with them through Moses and brought them into His family through circumcision on the eighth day of birth. The promise of salvation came first to the Jews. The promise that came first to the Jews now comes to the Gentiles through Jesus. All who receive Jesus through faith and are incorporated into His body through baptism, are reconciled to God in peace.

Paul's point in part, is that the Gentile believers, though greater in number than their Jewish brethren, should not use their numbers to dominate the Jews. On the other hand, the Jewish believers should not look down on the Gentile believers, as if they had a more genuine spiritual pedigree. All sin and fall short of the glory of God. All are declared righteous in forgiveness for the sake of His grace in Christ Jesus. Rather than dominating or arrogating ourselves over others, all believers bow in thankfulness beneath the cross of Jesus, in humble gratitude for the labour of His love. He who is eternal God, clothed Himself in our humanity and lived as one of us in this fallen world, under the dominion of sin, the domination of the devil and condemnation of death. He who had no sin, fulfilled all righteousness in our stead, so that on the cross He would offer the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sin and the sin of the world. He brings us near to each other and reconciles us to the Father in peace.

Jesus makes Jews and Gentiles one in the household of God, the Christian Church. He calls all people to Himself through the voice of the church. All who through the hearing of the word and the working of the Holy Spirit, receive Him as Saviour are reconciled to the heavenly Father in peace; united with believers from every nation, time, tribe, people and language in the household of God; given the promise of living forever in His presence in a world made new through His resurrection to everlasting life. He makes us one with each other and with the Father. He is our peace!

God, who gives us peace in relationship with Himself and with each other, bless us with His grace in Christ Jesus and preserve us in faith until faith is fulfilled at the return of Jesus. In His Name. Amen