



“One in Christ”

Ephesians 2:11–3:10

Jesus has torn down the walls that divide us.

There are certain themes to which Paul keeps returning over and over. Our unity in Christ is near the top of the list. Paul lived in a world alive with tribalism -- Romans v. “barbarians,” Jew v. Gentile, urban v. rural, men v. women, slave v. free, rich v. poor - perhaps not skin color, as we

seem to be increasingly obsessed, but tribal. Division, us v. them, is one of the most harmful manifestations of the darkness that lies in the human heart. Paul’s world was no less tribal than our own.

In the above passage from Ephesians, I would highlight some of the most striking phrases. Here are a couple:

- “in his [Jesus’] flesh he has made both groups [Jew and Gentile] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”
- “he [Jesus] . . . create[d] in himself one new humanity in place of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross

Where I’ve inserted Jew & Gentile, which is Paul’s focus, you can insert any two groups you like, including Black & White or Men & Women, Straight & Gay, or Republican & Democrat. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, we are all “one in Christ.” That’s it. That’s whom God has made us into. That is the consequence of our new birth in the Spirit. The old divisions, the old markers, they don’t hold us any more. We just have to know that—and then let the tribal markers go. All believers, all who have placed their faith in Jesus share a single over-arching identity—we are Jesus’ disciples. We are in his hand.

Jesus is our peace (v. 14), so what we share is not merely some sort of temporary truce. Let that rest in your heart: *Christ is our peace, he has knitted us into one body, where hostility and division are of the past and must remain so.* When we fail to live this out, we fail Jesus. George Stroup writes:

Because Christ is our peace, we as Christians understand peacemaking differently than do many other people. We recognize that peace has already been made, even if the rest of the world does not. Peace has already been made, even though hostilities and bloodshed continue, in the same sense that death is no more, even though people continue to die. The peace Christians have in Christ enables us to engage boldly, perhaps even foolishly, in what may appear to the rest of the world to be hopeless situations. Christians know it is not our task to bring peace to the world. God has already done that in the person of Christ. Luke reports that as Jesus approached Jerusalem and his passion, he wept and said, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42). For those who are in Christ, the things that make for peace are no longer hidden.¹

The household of God (v.19)

This unity in Jesus is loved out in the Church, in his Body, in this “household of God” of which we are all part. It is not a household comprised of buildings, not even beautiful sanctuaries. Rather, in Paul’s rich imagery, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ are the church, which is built on the work and words of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of it all. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed

¹ George W. Stroup, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B, 2009*, 3, 258.

and affirm our belief in “one holy catholic² church,” we mean the universal church, the body of Christ, the household of God – to which *all* Christians, *all* those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong.

Head . . . Heart . . . Hands

John Wesley’s solidarity with the poor had always distinguished his ministry and threatened his reputation among the “respectable” folks. One of Wesley’s regrets in his old age was that he himself had become “respectable” among the upper circles of London society.

But John knew that we are called to serve – to feed, to clothe, and to care (see Matt. 25:31-46). If that means we are viewed as odd or disreputable by the world, then so be it. Christianity is not just about what we believe or what we feel, but also what we do – the head, the heart, and the hands.

Wesley’s commitment to bring the Good News and a warm meal to society’s outcasts still permeates the UMC. We remain committed to justice. We understand that we are not just to wait for the full realization of God’s kingdom; we are to work toward it – every day and in every way and for all persons.

To hear the power in Paul’s words, we need to remember that the Temple in Jerusalem was understood by Jews to be God’s dwelling place with them. God’s presence, his Spirit, had dwelt in the Temple, but had left because of his people’s unfaithfulness to the covenant (see Ezekiel 10). But now, Paul writes, it is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ—a new creation, a new humanity—growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God’s Spirit has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God’s very presence dwells in us, the church—the people of God.

I used to be troubled by all the denominations that make up the body of Christ, but not as much as I once was. In his various letters to churches, Paul often talks about the diversity among God’s people. Some of us are given gifts of caring or leadership. Others are gifted teachers or leaders. None of these gifts are superior to the others; all are needed in God’s household (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 for example). God’s family is strengthened, not weakened, by the diversity of these individual gifts. I’ve come to see denominations in much the same way. Christ’s church is strengthened by the Roman Catholic emphasis on tradition and the Baptist commitment to evangelism. All Christians can learn a lot about the reality and power of the Holy Spirit from the Pentecostals and the Eastern Orthodox. The Presbyterians and Reformed remind us all of the importance of the Christian mind. Within this diversity, we seek unity in the essentials of our Christian proclamation while respecting, and using, our differences. It is in the seeking after unity that we United Methodists make our own distinctive contributions to the larger Body.³

“The Middle Way”

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was born the son of an Anglican⁴ minister and died an Anglican minister himself. Methodism was birthed in the Church of England. When the storms of the Protestant reformation swept across Europe, the English struggled to reconcile two polarized groups. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to stay part of the Roman Catholic church. On the other hand, there were groups like the Puritans who wanted to restore what they referred to as “primitive Christianity.” The leaders of the Church of England sought to find a “middle way.” This seeking after the center underlies the Anglican and the United Methodist churches to this day.

I couldn’t count how many “mixed” marriages I’ve met in United Methodist churches. You know what I mean – one spouse raised Roman Catholic and the other Southern Baptist! It seems that Methodist churches have enough liturgy and tradition to speak to the Catholic but enough revivalism to speak to the Baptist. This

² The word “catholic” does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church, but simply means “universal.”

³ If you would like an introduction to Methodism, William Willimon’s brief book, *Why I am a United Methodist*, is an excellent place to start.

⁴ The worldwide Anglican Communion consists of the Church of England and all its descendants. In the U.S., the Episcopal Church is part of the Anglican Communion. Methodists share in the Anglican tradition.

commitment to the “middle way,” or as Bishop Scott Jones puts it, “the extreme center,” is reflected in our theology as well as in our practices. United Methodists affirm that the Bible is the “primary criterion of Christian doctrine,” but we remember that our traditions, our intellect, and our experience all help to shape our understanding under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We try hard to avoid simplistic “bumper-sticker” interpretations and passing fads. We are committed to unity in the essentials of our faith, but remember that there is much that Christians can disagree about. As Wesley put it, “we think and let think.”

Breaking down walls?? When we turn to this topic, it is easy to think that the challenge before us is to break down the walls that separate us, one believer from another. But, no, that is not the challenge. Look again at the pivotal verse 14. Jesus has “broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.” Jesus has done this work!

We are so quick to try to do the work that is actually Jesus’ work. We are going to charge out into the world and save souls or tear down the walls that divide Christians. But these are his work, not ours. What we must not do is to strive to rebuild the walls that Jesus has torn down, as if we really could. The truth is that where there are walls in the household of God, there will be less and less of Jesus. He is our peace. He has given us new birth into this fellowship. Our tasks are to make disciples and to be witnesses to Jesus in an unbelieving world. Are there walls in this unbelieving world? Of course, for the peace of Christ does not reign in a world that scoffs and denies. That is why the Gospel must precede all else. It is only in Jesus that the walls will come down and stay down. May it be so!!