

YOU ARE A MEMBER OF A NEW COMMUNITY**EPHESIANS 2:11-22**

What's your opinion of the organization known as the United Nations? That might not be a question you're expecting at a Sunday worship service! I have mixed feelings about the United Nations. I wish them well in their efforts to help all the nations of the world get along better with one another. But I realize that peace and harmony among nations is impossible until and unless God changes the hearts of people through Jesus. When individual hearts are changed and the hearts of leaders change, it can then lead to the transformation of societies, cultures and even nations. The UN often finds itself in the role of peacemaker in different parts of the world. All over the planet you can find military personnel flying the blue and white flag of the UN trying desperately to keep people from killing each other. Don't miss the irony! Here's an organization called the United Nations working hard to keep people apart for their own good!

We live in a divided world. Racial divisions. Social divisions. Economic divisions. Religious divisions. That's true all over the world and right here in Northland or in the community in which you live. Does God have anything to say about all the ways human beings separate themselves from each other? Yes. Has God done anything about all these divisions among human beings? Yes. We're in the midst of a three month study on Paul's letter to Christians living in and around the city of Ephesus called "Child of the One True King: Discovering Who You Are In Christ." It's important to remember that Paul's letter wasn't written to an individual; it was written to a church - in fact, several churches. When we speak about discovering who you are in Christ, we need to think of that word "you" in both its singular and plural sense. God's interest, love and concern for people is both singular and plural. Of course, He cares about you as a specific, individual person, but He also loves families, ethnic groups and nations. What God did through Jesus at the cross not only has the power to transform and change individuals. It's intended to transform and change families, cultures, societies and nations, too! Because of Jesus, you are a member of a new community. Let's hear what Paul says here now. **READ, p. 1157.**

WHAT ARE PEOPLE WITHOUT JESUS? HOPELESS (v. 11-12)

That's the conclusion Paul comes to in v. 11-12. Now, when Paul wrote this letter, his world was basically divided into two kinds of humanity: Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles. When the very first Christians - all of them ethnically Jewish - began to share their new faith in Jesus with other people, something totally unexpected happened. Most of their fellow Jews rejected Jesus. Instead, droves and droves of non-Jews (Gentiles) received Jesus as Savior and Lord. This became the first and greatest controversy among the first churches ever established. Incredible differences existed between Jews and Gentiles culturally, morally and religiously. Those differences didn't just melt away automatically when people became followers of Jesus. Paul was deeply concerned about this

because he helped to start many of these first congregations all over the Mediterranean world and he wanted to see them become what God intended.

Jews and Gentiles hated each other in Paul's day. Jews had great contempt for Gentiles. Some Jews believed Gentiles had been created for the sole purpose of providing fuel for the fires of hell. If a Jew married a Gentile, a funeral for the Jewish person was carried out by his or her family. Even to enter the home of a Gentile made a Jewish person ritually unclean. And it's an historical fact that Gentiles, by in large, lived incredibly immoral, disgusting lifestyles. Would you be surprised to learn that Gentiles didn't like Jews? Plenty of Gentiles were just as arrogant towards and contemptuous of Jews. Jewish people were victims of terrible persecution in Paul's day. A great, impenetrable wall of hostility existed between Jews and Gentiles.

Hadn't God chosen Israel to be the channel of His love and grace to the whole world? Yes. But instead of pointing Gentiles towards God with a "one beggar telling another beggar where to find food" attitude, they became harsh, condescending and exclusive. Instead of approaching God admitting how unworthy they were to receive His grace, they put their trust in external rituals like the practice of circumcision to somehow earn God's favor and blessing. Paul, himself a ethnic Jew, understood that the Jewish people were just as spiritually lost and out of touch with God as the Gentiles.

At least, if you were born a Jew, it was fair to say you were closer to the things of God. You had access to things like the Mosaic Law, the prophetic writings of Isaiah, for example, and you were aware of the promise of a Messiah. Both groups were in bad shape spiritually, but the Gentiles were worse off. Paul writes, "Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders.... In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope." (Eph 2:11-12 NLT)

That's really the Bible's definition of any person or any people group without Jesus - "without God and without hope." If you don't have hope, you don't have God. And if you don't have God, you have no basis for hope. Every follower of Jesus is given a profound and wonderful hope that can sustain you every day of your life here on this planet. If you reject Jesus, or you never have the opportunity to know about Jesus, the only rational end result is utter despair about your life. It's meaningless! Sins are forgiven only through the shed blood of Jesus. A person who lacks a relationship with Jesus can never experience God's forgiveness. The Holy Spirit lives within the spirit of every follower of Jesus giving us access to God's guidance and power every day. A person who lacks a relationship with Jesus only has his or her own inadequate knowledge and limited personal resources to rely upon. Followers of Jesus suffer and struggle in this life, to be sure, but in the midst of them you're given the assurance that somehow God is using them for His glory and your eternal good.

What reason does someone who rejects Jesus have to persevere through terrible life experiences? None whatsoever! You have the certain assurance of eternal life in Heaven with God when you die if you're a follower of Jesus. Someone who rejects Jesus has only the horror of eternal separation from God awaiting him or her. Hopeless! People outside of Jesus are "without hope and without God in the world." Paul answers a different question next.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE BECAUSE OF JESUS? RECONCILED (v. 13-18)

Try and imagine with me a typical Sunday at the First Christian Church of Ephesus in say 60 A.D. Here's 300 new Christians gathered for worship. About 100 of them are ethnic Jews who now believe Jesus is the promised Messiah. But even before they became followers of Jesus, these Jewish believers told the truth, they didn't steal and they were sexually pure. They knew the great stories and wonderful promises of God contained in the Bible. They had been taught from an early age to despise Gentiles as human trash. But sitting right there with them worshipping the Lord were 200 Gentiles who also believed Jesus was their Savior and Lord. They were emerging from incredibly immoral lifestyles. They had to be taught that followers of Jesus tell the truth, don't steal and live lives of sexual purity. They were completely ignorant of the Bible. Last but not least, they had been taught from an early age to think of Jews as a bunch of arrogant snobs. Can you begin to understand now what fertile ground this was for all kinds of conflict? Can you better appreciate now how radical Paul's words might have sounded? "But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.... Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us." (Eph 2:13, 18 NLT)

When Paul refers to how Jesus Himself broke down this wall of hostility and separation between Jews and Gentiles, he may well have had a literal wall in mind. At the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, Gentiles were prohibited from entering most of the temple area. Warnings had been written on the temple wall to discourage any Gentile advancing beyond that point. You could be executed if you didn't stay in the right areas. Well, how then was peace made between these two people groups - Jews and Gentiles? It wasn't by turning Gentiles into Jews or turning Jews into Gentiles. It wasn't through a peace conference or a negotiated settlement. Peace came through a Person - Jesus. "Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death." (Eph 2:16 NLT).

Now, when a Jewish person found peace with God and a Gentile person found peace with God - lo and behold! - that Jew and that Gentile were able to find peace with one another. There's a spiritual principle embedded there I don't want you to miss. You may not always be able to settle your differences with someone who doesn't love and follow Jesus. Why not? Part of his or her hostility towards you might well be hostility towards God. But two people who say they love and

follow Jesus ought to be able to settle any difference between them. Jesus made it possible and the cross demands it. So, shame on you if you don't!

What difference does this make to your life today? It's not like we have a Jew/Gentile controversy going on today in this or other churches! Here's the transferrable principle or the point of application. Sadly, Christians still clash with each other as often, if not more, than they do with non-Christians. Cliques can pop up in any church. And these groups can treat each other with contempt. As a pastor for over thirty years, I guarantee you I've seen lots of cliques. Sadly, Christians can find all sort of "reasons" to exclude each other: theological differences, lifestyle differences, but most of all, just personality differences.

Excuses to exclude one another can be very subtle and that's where we all need to be careful. I love the diversity found this church; it's one of our strengths. But with diversity can come the temptation to spend all of our time with people who are just like us or more like us than others. If you were born and raised in the United States, do you make an effort to reach out to our members and attendees who are refugees or immigrants from other countries? If you're a refugee or immigrant, do you tend to hang out with only people who come from your background? Do you tend to associate only with people in our church who are in your age range or do you intentionally seek out people who are older or younger than you? If you're single, do you feel funny being around people who are married and vice-versa? Sometimes there can be tensions between long-time Christians and new Christians. Like those first Jewish Christians, it's easy to assume that because you know the Bible better and you've had the benefit of this wonderful, godly tradition, that you're just a tad more acceptable to God than someone who became a follower of Jesus last week. A judgmental spirit can creep in and create distance between you and others.

That word "diversity" has become politicized in our culture to mean accepting and tolerating all sorts of behavior the Bible calls sin. That's not what I'm talking about. We need to open ourselves to the great diversity found in this church and the Body of Christ as a whole. This new community offers you and me the richness of godly diversity. Those who trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord anywhere and everywhere around the world are a part of what the Bible calls the Church. A new people group came into existence almost 2,000 years ago: the Church of Jesus Christ. In that new community, all human divisions are broken down. Excuses to exclude each other are destroyed. We become one in Jesus.

In the decade prior to 1906, it's estimated that well over one thousand African-Americans, mainly men, were either lynched, shot or buried alive in the United States. Millions of people in the United States had joined the Ku Klux Klan. But in 1906, the Spirit of God was poured out in a powerful revival in Los Angeles that has come to be known as the Azusa Street Revival. Under the leadership of an African-American man, William Seymour, tens of thousands of people from all over the world and all walks of life—rich, poor, men, women, Americans, non-

Americans, black, white, Asian, Latino— came by car, by horse and buggy, by train and by boat. They all met Jesus and encountered the Holy Spirit. While all these terrible killings were going on, blacks and whites were embracing each other as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. Frank Bartleman, a historian of the Azusa Street Revival, said, "The color line is washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ!" So is every human division! I see Paul answering a final question in these verses.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE IN JESUS? A NEW COMMUNITY (v. 19-22)

There are three marvelous metaphors or pictures of this new community in v. 19-22. This is what we share with every follower of Jesus in this church or any other believer living in Africa or Asia today. First, along with every other believer, you are a citizen. "So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people...." (Eph 2:19 NLT) God has His own "country" or a "nation" It's not a geographic, physical piece of land. It's a spiritual country or realm called the Kingdom of God. You become a citizen of that country through faith in the shed blood of Jesus. You used to be like an illegal alien, but in Christ you are now a citizen of God's country.

Second, along with every other believer, you are a part of God's family. Paul says there, "... You are members of God's family." (Eph 2:19 NLT) It's one thing to share American citizenship with someone; quite another for that person to get adopted into your family. But in Christ you become part of a whole new family in which you have many brothers and sisters. I grew up in a Christian tradition where people called each other "Brother" or "Sister." My parents weren't called Mr. or Mrs. Breusch. They were Brother Breusch or Sister Breusch. When I was a kid I thought that was about the most awful, corny thing to call someone else. But the memory of it now leaves me a bit wistful. Those folk were on to something. You were constantly reminded that you were part of the same family.

Thirdly, along with every other believer, you have become God's dwelling place - a temple or a building in which God lives and resides through His Holy Spirit. Do you hear that in those final verses? "Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit." (Eph 2:20-22 NLT) That phrase - "the foundation of the apostles and the prophets" - is a reference to the Bible. Back in Paul's day, a cornerstone was the main piece in the whole building. It held all the walls together and supported the entire building. There's also the implication that you and I are like the individual stones or bricks that make up that building. What's the point? This church or any church will survive and flourish only when it stays founded on God's Word and stays in union with Jesus the Lord. This church or any church will only accomplish that if those who are a part of it - you and me - stay founded on God's Word and stay in union with Jesus the Lord.

With that in mind, let me ask you and myself a few questions. Is Jesus the single greatest priority in your life - knowing Him, growing in Him, serving Him? Do you want to glorify and honor Him both in this community in here as well as that community out there? Does the way you relate to all of your brothers and sisters in this place contribute to that or detract from it? How do you relate to visitors, strangers and new people who walk into our church? People who know and love Jesus are the first ones to move in the direction of the lost person, the lonely person, the different person and the wounded person in our midst. The fact is that the more you are into Jesus, the more you will be into people for whom He died and rose again.

In the Church - and in this local expression of it known as Karl Road Baptist - God is demonstrating His new people group - His new community - to a broken, divided world. That's an important part of who you are in Christ. In this church, it's irrelevant if you are black, white, Japanese or Latino. In this church, it's irrelevant if you are richer or poorer, have a degree or you're degree-less, if you're blue collar, white collar or unemployed. In this church, it's irrelevant if you are male or female, married or single, a two parent family or a single parent family. It is irrelevant if you are a Republican or a Democrat, politically conservative or liberal. Jesus has no use for cliques in His church. We are fellow citizens in God's nation - the Kingdom of God. We are one family in Jesus the Lord. We are part of the same spiritual structure - a building, a temple - in which God dwells by His Spirit.

Every third week in the month of June something called the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest and Festival is held in the bustling metropolis of Weiser, Idaho - population around 5,000. It's the national final of fiddling - an old-time music competition, festival and music gathering. It attracts about 7,000 people every year from across our country and even different parts of the world to hear some 350 different fiddlers compete in eight different divisions. Most people camp for free in the rodeo grounds close to where the competition is held. The town stays open pretty much round the clock with fiddling in the streets, dancing at the VFW hall, and fried chicken at the Elks Lodge. When the National Old Time Fiddlers' Contest and Festival began back in 1953, it was populated primarily by country folk. Pretty straight types: short hair, church on Sunday, women in their place - you get the idea. Then the long haired hippie freaks began to show up in the 1960s and 1970s. It might have been easy to reject them initially, but the trouble was some of those hippies could fiddle to beat the band! Out of that experience, an unusual method of judging the competition emerged that prevails to this day. When you play your songs on the fiddle, five judges sit in another room. They never see you. All they hear is the music you make; all they see is the number assigned to you. One old gentleman put it like this, "I don't care if you're stark naked and wear a bone in your nose. If you can fiddle, you're all right with me. It's the music we make that counts."

Brothers and sisters, if you have ears to hear, hear. It's the music we make together in this place that counts, not who makes the music - the music of God's love and grace, the music of salvation through Jesus and what He did for us at the cross and the empty tomb, the music of the Holy Spirit's presence and power in our lives together. The music we make together is sweeter than the music any of us can make alone. We are fellow citizens of God's country – the Kingdom of God. We are all a part of God's family. We are all bricks or stones in a dwelling place for God through His Spirit. We are children of the one true King.