

Belonging
Ephesians 2:11-21
Summer Road Trip Week 5
July 9, 2017

Welcome/intro/vision

We're in the middle of our Summer Road Trip series

it's summer time and for many of us that means getting away for some rest and vacation which is a great thing

I've been at the beach all week and it was wonderful!

But many of us can attest to going on vacation with an unrealistic expectation of the problems it would solve.

Most of us have gone away on vacation and been glad to get away from the problems back home only to return from vacation and find those problems still waiting for us.

There are things that vacation cannot fix!

Some issues in our lives require deeper work: forgiveness, redemption, direction, wisdom, real hope, real healing, real change at deep places in our hearts

So we're for the first half of the summer we're taking a road trip through the first 3 chapters of the New Testament book of Ephesians

to help us to get answers to these deeper questions, to meet some of these hungers that are too deep and too big for a summer vacation to meet

Today we're going to travel back to late-elementary school and middle school. Some of you have blocked that out as best you can, but I want to invite you to venture back there, for some of you that's a longer trip than others

And I want to suggest for most of us, maybe not everyone, but for most of us what mattered most was ***belonging somewhere***

Fitting into SOME crowd, whether it was the athletes or the band geeks or the cool kids or the counter-culture kids who didn't want anything to do with the cool kids, there were racially marked crowds or divisions as well—fitting in, belonging, that's what mattered

And what developed was these badges of belonging that signaled to everyone which crowd you belonged in, right?

If you wore a letter jacket in high school, you were with THOSE kids. If you carried your tuba around the school halls and hit people over the head with it, you were a band geek.

You wore the t-shirts from the concerts you went to as a sort of a signal that you were a part of THAT crowd, one of THOSE people

So we found these badges of belonging to signal to everyone around us that we were one of THOSE people, or WANTED to be one of THOSE people, and we did that as best we could

And many of us put tremendous amount of time/energy/anxiety into finding a place to belong

Wasn't that silly? For those of us who participated in this whole exercise, wasn't that ridiculous that we spent so much time and energy and fretting and worrying about belonging somewhere? Aren't we so glad that we all grew out of that and we never ever do that any more?

Except for many of us we still do this, don't we? That longing for belonging for most of us never actually goes away. We still like to signal to other people all sorts of things by the various badges of belonging that we all show each other:

What kind of cars we drive, what kind of bumper stickers we have on those cars, how much land we have, who we vote for, which neighborhood we live in or the fact that we'd NEVER BE ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE who are dumb enough to actually LIVE in a neighborhood

As human beings, most of us want to belong somewhere

and if you're one of those rare people who genuinely don't care about any of that stuff, you are blessed more than you know, but you can look around you and see it happening, can't you?

And in the search for belonging typically what that means is that I identify or associate myself with one group of people and there are these walls between us and the rest of y'all.

And some of these divisions can get downright hostile and angry, can't they?

We see conflicts in politics, we see the conflict between the workers and management and we see it across racial lines over and over and over again

This is not a new problem. These divisions have existed from the beginning of time, because the desire for belonging is so powerful

and that feeling of BELONGING often the easiest and cheapest to achieve by drawing big bright lines around a circle of people and saying "we're IN, leaving all the rest of y'all OUT!"

The passage we're going to look at today is going to tell the first century story of what Jesus did to break down a huge dividing line that was in place for a while and served a purpose for a season, but now because of what God has done in Christ, those walls have been done away with

Today, we're going to talk about how God has answered that longing we have for belonging in Christ and through Christ

Today we're going to see that God's way to answer this longing for belonging is going directly the opposite direction most people in our world do it:

one way that God is doing this belonging work is through BREAKING DOWN walls and barriers between people not constructing them

What God has done in Christ is build bridges across lines of division instead of walls to answer our hearts cry for belonging

and it's no coincidence that the place of emphasis that Paul is going to talk about is along lines of race and ethnicity, which if you haven't noticed over the past couple of years, just so happens to be a bit of an issue in our culture as well

If you've got a Bible, turn with me to Ephesians 2:11/no Bible/book table

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

One of my key badges of belonging that I wore back in elementary school were these fine articles of clothing: parachute pants and Members Only jackets

There was no finer combination to be found anywhere on the planet than to be wearing these things together—the Members Only jacket, of course, the name is totally leveraging that desire for belonging!

Paul here is identifying two big huge parties that the ancient Jewish world had divided the world into: the members only people were the Jewish people, and their badge of belonging was circumcision

And everyone else was Gentiles. And the Gentiles are who most of the Ephesians were!

And Paul is saying remember that this is who you were before we came to you and brought you Christ:

you were not "in" as a part of God's people Israel, you didn't have the badge of belonging which was circumcision

And because Paul insists along with the rest of the Scriptures that God was actually doing something utterly unique through the people of Israel and the promises that God made to Israel

The people who weren't in as a part of the Jewish people weren't in on the real God

They were, according to the biblical worldview without hope and without God in the world

Now of course, this is not what the Ephesians would have said about themselves before they met Paul and his people and before they met Jesus

They had lots of gods. There were gods everywhere.

In fact, the pagans had so many gods and so many idols and icons everywhere, they thought that the Jewish people and the Christians after them were a bit silly because they only had ONE God and they didn't have any statues or idols of them

In fact, in some instances we have record of pagans calling Christians and Jews ATHEISTS because they didn't have enough gods!

So Paul is taking this accusation that the pagans leveled against the Christians and he's turning it back on them:

we're not the ones without any God, YOU, pagans, are the ones who are actually without God in the world

THEREFORE, Paul says, you were without hope. Hopeless. Ever felt hopeless before? Been in a hopeless situation or relationship or circumstance? Stinks, doesn't it?

One commentator I studied pointed out that one of the characteristics of the ancient world was a deep hopelessness

Most people believed that the gods were fickle and that everything was more or less fated by the gods and they had no agency, no ability to make things much better

But it's not until Jesus comes along that we get this comprehensive new HOPE that gets introduced that's BOTH for the individual as well as the corporate, for your individual situation as well as for the whole world

I've got friends and family who don't have any faith at all in Jesus or God at all and yet they'll say stuff like "it'll all work out" or "I'm trusting that it'll all become clear what I should do or why this thing happened."

You know where they got that from? Jesus! Even if they don't like him! Jesus is the one that introduces that type of personal hope into the western world and then beyond

Jesus is the one that shows us that the God of the universe isn't like the selfish, shallow, petty Greek gods

and to the non-religious, Jesus is the one that shows us that there is a God at all who is loving and benevolent and who has the power to make it all work out!

And if he's wrong or can't be trusted, then we have no reason at all to be confident that everything will work out in the end—either the Greeks were right and the gods are arbitrary and fickle

OR the secularists are right and there's no God at all that cares about us, the universe is simply a cold, calculating place that doesn't care a bit about how your personal life turns out

We are so conflicted about hope in our culture, aren't we? We want to hope because we were made to hope, we NEED to hope—that's why even non-religious people will steal a little bit of hope from the Christian understanding about the character of God as they trust that it'll all work out.

And at the same time, so many people in our culture and in our world have this same sense of hopelessness that pervaded the first century, don't they?

Jesus has come to introduce hope. Hope for you individually but not just for you individually, hope for all the world, indeed, hope for the entire cosmos.

Hope that there is a God who is at work to bring healing and redemption and meaning and purpose and ultimately rescue and renewal to a broken and weary world

Paul here starts with the bad news: they were without hope and without God in the world. This was the situation for the Ephesian people before Christ

But then he makes the turn to another wonderful, big old but in the Bible, here's what he says:

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Summer before my 10th grade year of high school we moved to the Northern Virginia/Washington D.C. area and we spent much of the summer looking for a church as a family

And finally we settled on one that had a decent sized group of teenagers and families and looked like a good fit, so we started attending there regularly, two, three, four weeks in a row

And my brother and I had met a couple of the other high school students there at the church, but we were awkward and it was all just a little awkward

And they all sat in the first two rows of the church together. The only place I've ever been to this day where the teenagers sat in the front two rows instead of the back two rows

But we were still new and sitting with our parents

Finally at some point after we'd been there several weeks in a row and had met most of the other students, we were sitting there Sunday morning before the service with our parents

and I looked up and saw Jenny Miller, get up from the front of the church, come back, and invite my younger brother and I to sit up in the front with the rest of the youth group

It was one of the simplest yet most profound actions of belonging that I've ever experienced—a cute girl came and invited my brother and I to sit with the rest of the students during a time when we had just moved, new to town, and were desperately looking for a place to belong.

I was once sitting far away from the youth group and from the place of belonging, now because of the initiative and kindness of someone who I barely knew, I was in the place of belonging

Gentiles, you who were outside the people of God, who were far away from the true God of the Scriptures, worshiping false gods and all these little idols

Now, because of Christ, YOU who were ONCE FAR AWAY have been brought near by the blood of Christ

You are invited BACK--to be in the place where you were created to be back in the beginning

And now it is possible--because of the kindness and initiative of someone that you did not know, but who knew you, loved you, and bled and died so that you might no longer be on the outside, but on the inside, with God, where you belong.

We long to belong because we were MADE to belong—waste so much time/energy/money trying to make it all work—HERE is the belonging you were made for. This is the good news of the gospel to anyone who needs to hear it:

Once you didn't belong, far away, but NOW because of Christ, you're brought near.

Paul goes on:

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

So there's a couple of different ways that you can make a new group of people and meet that hunger for belonging that many of us have

you can either build more walls or you can build more bridges

And there are some ways that Jesus himself talks about being a Jesus-follower as being a wall-builder

he says that following him sometimes is going to have consequences of leaving behind even mother or brother or sister who refuse to join us in this journey

So yes, there are ways that putting Jesus at the center of our lives will create barriers or obstacles between us and other people—that's just the reality of life in a fallen world

But here, Paul proclaims this revolutionary new thing, totally re-orienting the social and political and religious landscape for both Jews and Gentiles

Jesus is creating a new definition of the people of God, a new belonging, by knocking down the wall that separated them and not just building a bridge but BEING the bridge between them

This is especially radical coming for someone who was as steeped in the Jewish world view and Old Testament as Paul was

the first century Jewish world view had been shaped by the Scriptures which said that Israel was to be a set-apart nation, different, distinct

I can't think of anything that would be as radical today that would be a modern-day equivalent of Paul, a good Jew, declaring that being a good Jew was no longer the only way to have access to God

that Jesus has flung the gates wide-open and those old badges of belonging like the law and circumcision or ethnicity no longer made anyone in or out

In Christ Jesus, God is taking the Jews and the non-Jews, the in-crowd and the not-in-crowd, and making them all one body

Jesus himself IS the peace on offer to every single person, regardless of race or ethnicity or cultural background or what they worshiped before

Paul is declaring that the Law, which is good, was given by God to Moses, and was one of the key markers of Jewish identity, one of the key badges of what it meant to be 'in' as one of God's people

That wall has been abolished.

Paul's language is very carefully chosen--in the first century Jewish temple in Jerusalem, there were these dividing walls. **[PIC HERE]**

There was the outer court of the Gentiles—if you were not a Jew but had become convinced that Israel's God was the true God and his way of life was a better way to be human, you could come to worship at the BIG TEMPLE in Jerusalem, but this was as far as you could go

You could only worship from AFAR. BUT NOW in Christ Jesus, God has gotten rid of this wall, abolished it, as he's abolished the law

Paul explains in other places that the law worked okay for a time between Moses and Jesus, for a couple thousand years the law was put in place to make Israel distinct and holy among the nations that they might bear witness to who God was and what God was like

But now, Paul says, that law no longer serves that purpose. Now we have first-hand knowledge of who God is, God has made himself known in and through Jesus

And Jesus is the final and fullest light to all the nations, the fulfillment of that law, the one who is true Israel, the one who does what Israel struggled to do all those years

Jesus is the one who obeys the law perfectly while Israel failed to do so again and again. Jesus is the one who is the perfect worshiper, always doing whatever his Father

And certainly there are aspects of the law that are right and good, we continue to obey them—don't murder, don't lie, don't steal, worship the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength

Those are the rules of the house and that used to be just for a select few, including rules that explicitly kept non-Jewish people at an arms length, outside and waiting

But now in and through Christ, we're all invited into the house to participate in the life of the house, to share in this life together, all given access to one Father, through One Spirit, by the blood of Jesus

This dividing wall was both a racial and religious issue and it has been dealt with once and for all in Jesus at great cost to Jesus.

And the response to this requires sacrifice and comes at some cost for all parties involved

The Gentiles are now invited to come and share in the true God, the God of the Jewish people and leave behind their old ways, leave behind their old gods, and build their lives around Christ

Which also is going to include putting aside their own prejudices and biases against the Jewish people, repenting of their own racism in their hearts

And at the same time the Jewish people are commanded to welcome the Gentiles in, to be willing to share their God and their promises with all those who trust in Christ

And to repent of the racism in their own hearts towards those Gentiles, to put aside bigotry and prejudice

Because God has clearly gone to great lengths in Jesus to create this new space where all peoples belong

He shed his blood to make this new unity and reconciliation happen, who are we to try to stop it?

God sent his Son to die to create a new thing called the church that would be a reconciled and reconciling community, we are called and commanded to participate in this same work with him

In the biblical world, as divided as things were between Jews and non-Jewish people, reconciling non-Jewish people to God and doing racial reconciliation were essentially two sides of the same coin

Evangelism and breaking down racial barriers and working through issues of race and culture so that there might be a reconciled church, this was all part and parcel of each other

You couldn't have one without the other! And they believed that this new thing was not only possible but NECESSARY because of Jesus

What God had done in Jesus's death and resurrection was re-framing their entire worldview and understanding of what it meant to be the people of God living God-honoring lives here on earth

All of this was only because of the power of Christ, because of the sacrifice of Jesus—his death and resurrection unleashed a new power into the cosmos that was bringing people who were far from God and far from each other nearer in both directions

And this is why we say each week that what we're here to do is connect people to God and to each other!

Now here at our church, we've got a variety of church backgrounds, including many of us with no church background whatsoever

But some of us grew up in churches where we maybe talked about outreach and talking to people about Jesus who didn't know Jesus

But we sort of screened out the racial components, left out that the same message and the same power at work to extend forgiveness and salvation to all people and that reconciles us to God

IS ALSO the same power that reconciles us to one another across racial and ethnic lines

And on the other end of the spectrum, some of us grew up in churches where we talked about the importance of racial reconciliation and justice, fighting for what is right and just which is great

But many of those churches left out the power: that it's by Jesus's blood we're reconciled to God first and then to each other across racial and ethnic lines

And it's critical that we embrace the call to invite people to draw near to God through what God has done in Jesus—his death, his resurrection, THAT's the spiritual power that fuels our fight against injustice and brokenness, especially along racial lines

The gospel of Jesus is bigger than either one and it gathers up the strengths of both: there is a bold call to all who are far and all who are near to be reconciled to God through the unique work God has done in the death and resurrection of Jesus

and we proclaim that here this morning to anyone who does not yet know that and has not yet embraced that good news

And there's a bold work that we're committed to doing here at CCC of rolling up our sleeves and working out issues of race and racial division in our world through the same power of Jesus that conquered sin and death and the grave

We're here to apply that life-giving power in many ways, including to be a part of healing racial division and brokenness all around us

Paul closes this section with this and we'll close here too before we wrap:

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, [no longer on the outside!] but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, [you belong here, Paul declares with great boldness across racial and ethnic lines that used to be firmly intact with a great big dividing wall between them] ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We were made to want to belong somewhere. This morning, the good news of the Scriptures is that God has gone to great lengths to build a bridge to YOU, to get YOU into his family

Paul here uses temple language again: this NEW temple that's rising up with the walls and divisions broken down between people

No matter where you've been or what you've done, YOU belong HERE with God's people, in God's family, because of what Jesus has done

Today's TAKE-WITH is two-parts:

1. Are you at peace with belonging in God's household because of what Christ has done for you?

Some of you know you're not there yet, still considering or wrestling with or ambivalent about the whole Jesus thing

I want you to hear that Jesus has built a bridge from eternity to you THIS MORNING, right here, in real time, at great cost to himself

And this bridge of grace and forgiveness and peace and hope is already built and there for you, all you have to do is take the step of faith to step onto it and embrace what God has done for you to bring you near.

For others of us, we've taken that step at some point in our lives, but we know we aren't yet at peace with our belonging—here's how you know:

because we're still stuck in the same old patterns of trying to make belonging happen through pretty superficial badges of belonging and judging others

If we're still getting sucked into drawing tight lines of us belonging to some sort of earthly subset of people based mostly on really, really superficial things—who do you know, what do you do, where do you live, what do you drive, where do you go on vacation

Then we haven't yet embraced the peace that comes with belonging to the most important and eternal thing in the world, God's household

This is a conversation I have with my kids on a somewhat regular basis: you don't have to strive or sell yourself out or spend every cent you've got OR box others out to belong somewhere that matters

you are already in, already secure, already taken care of in Christ! It's the same conversation us adults need, too!

Do you know how much more free, how much more generous-hearted, how much less anxious and striving most of us would be if we could simply receive the peace that Jesus bought with his blood?

Let me say it again: because of what Jesus has done on the cross, no matter who you are or what you've done, you BELONG here in God's house, with God's people, in God's family, a part of what God has done in Jesus.

When you're longing for belonging, you're always insecure and anxious which makes you super-self-conscious.

When you know you're accepted you've then got two options: build walls to keep other people out and make sure that you're in

OR we can do what Jesus does and build bridges--which leads us to the second wildly important take-home

2. What does it mean for you to be in step with the bridge-building work of Christ across spiritual as well as racial lines?

If you're a Jesus follower here this morning, this passage tells us the heart of God. God's work is always biased towards reconciliation wherever possible

That's what God's Spirit is up to in this world! Where has God put you to join in his bridge-building work? Bridge-building spiritually, which is simply inviting people to consider what God has done for them in Jesus

And bridge-building across racial lines, employing the same power that washed away our sins and overcame death

Into the work of building bridges across racial and ethnic lines

This summer road trip tour stop touches on two of our deepest needs in this world: one is the internal need to belong, the other is the need to bring some healing to a world reeling along racial and ethnic lines

My hope and my prayer is that we'd be equipped to engage in the work of Jesus, as he builds the bridge that we need to be both reconciled to God and to one another.