

Ephesians 2:11-22
(Genesis 12:1-3; John 10:14-18)
“No Longer Strangers”

Introduction

If you have been studying Ephesians with us, you may have noticed that this morning's text, the second half of chapter two, follows the same pattern as the first half of the chapter. As we saw last week, in verses one through ten, Paul contrasts humanity by nature, alienated from God and in bondage to futility, with humanity by grace, reconciled to God and living in joyful hope. The connection between the two is the love of God.

As we turn, now, to the second half of the chapter, we see Paul once again contrast humanity by nature with humanity by grace, and the connection is the work of Christ. The difference between the two halves of the chapter is that the first emphasizes our relationship with God and the second emphasizes our relationship with one another. This is, of course, what we should expect, for the great commandment has two parts: love the Lord and love one another. And the gospel of Jesus Christ reconciles us both to God and to one another.

It is interesting that we come to this particular text on a week that has raised the whole issue of whether or not we, as a nation, will continue to welcome refugees, in the language of our text, “strangers and aliens,” or whether the awful events in Paris will make us choose safety over compassion. Please don't take this as a political statement. Our leaders are charged with doing all they can to keep us safe, and we should be grateful for that. Certainly, there must be careful screening of those who seek entry to our country in order to do all we can to ensure that we are not throwing open our doors to those who wish to destroy us.

Nevertheless, we who bear the name of Christ must also be concerned about the safety of those who are desperate and homeless and longing to share in our good life, in the safety and opportunities and freedoms that we enjoy. And this text warns us against closing our hearts to those whom we are called to love self-sacrificially, even as Christ loved us.

Paul begins by speaking of the alienation of God's people from the surrounding nations, an alienation displayed dramatically in the Jerusalem temple. The temple was built on an elevated platform, and surrounding the temple were three courts: first the court of the priests, then to the east of it was the court for Israelite men, and to the east of that was the court for Israelite women. These three courts were all on the same level as the temple. Beyond the court of the women were five steps down to another platform surrounded by a wall, and beyond that wall another fourteen steps down to another wall, and beyond that wall was the court of the Gentiles. Around the wall at regular intervals were warning signs that trespassers would be

executed. Gentiles could draw only that near, look up at the magnificent temple towering above and behind the walls, watch the Israelites draw near, hear the worship in the distance, but on pain of death were barred from joining God's people.

Thus, Paul has in the background this graphic picture of the alienation of the nations from God's people, who were called to be a light to the nations and a blessing to the nations, but who had lost their sense of mission. They thought it was about them, about their comfort and safety. Quite beautifully, I think, Paul ends this passage by saying that in Christ, Jew and Gentile are "joined together into a holy temple in the Lord ... a dwelling place of God by the Spirit" (2:21-22).

Look with me at how Paul develops the good news of the gospel from the picture of those who were once far off being brought together and the wall that divides people being torn down in Christ.

Body

1. Once we were strangers and aliens (2:11-12).

We were separated from Christ.

This is key to Paul's thinking. By nature, we are part of the old, broken humanity, still on a trajectory of futility and death. To be outside of Christ is to be without hope. It is Christ who has restarted humanity, brought life into death, freedom to those in bondage, and hope to the hopeless. Paul sees nothing but darkness outside of what God has done in Christ. And this, he says, is the state of all apart from what Christ has done.

We were alienated from God's people.

To be separated from Christ is to be separated from God's people, says Paul, and thus to be outside of the community where God's blessings are poured out. It is within the community that the love of Christ is experienced, and this is love that surpasses mere human love. Apart from Christ, we are left within a dying humanity marked by alienation, not only from God but from one another.

Therefore, we were strangers to the covenants of promise, and thus without hope and without God in the world.

This is the point Paul wants to make: If we are not in Christ, Paul says, we are not part of God's covenant community and therefore are strangers to God's covenant promises, and without the hope of receiving his promises. In Paul's day, that meant that Gentiles who wanted to enter the covenant had to become Jews, taking on the covenant markers of Israel: circumcision, dietary

laws, observation of special days and seasons, separating from family and friends. Either way, they would find themselves alienated, either from Israel, or from the rest of the nations.

2. But now in Christ we who were once far off have been brought near (2:13-18).

We have been brought near by our union with Christ.

“But now *in Christ Jesus* you who once were far off have been brought near” (2:13). As we have seen in the opening chapter-and-a-half of this letter, a key and central concept of Paul’s thought is that the blessings of the new covenant are given to us in union with Christ. We have said this over and again, because Paul keeps emphasizing it. It is in Christ that we have been brought near. Salvation through the Gospel of Christ is ultimately just this: God joins us to Christ by giving us his Spirit and making us members of his body. And in Christ, we are not only reconciled to God, but to one another.

How does union with Christ reconcile us to God and to one another?

We have been brought near by Christ’s sacrifice.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near *by the blood of Christ*” (2:13). The Messiah has offered himself in our place. He has fulfilled the suffering servant text of Isaiah:

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

The Christ – that is, the Messiah – has fulfilled the meaning of the ritual laws and the sacrificial laws and has, thus, ushered in a new covenant, one promised by the prophets, and one that is entered, not by becoming a Jew, but by trusting the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. The only way in is through the Christ, and thus both Jew and Gentile now obtain covenant membership the same way as one another, not through the ceremonial works of the law, such as circumcision, etc., but through faith in the Christ.

The walls surrounding the courts of the temple, keeping out the nations on pain of death, have now been breached by God’s grace. Even as the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from all the rest was torn in two, showing that we are reconciled to God and can enter his presence in Christ, so too the

walls that separate clergy and laity, male and female, Jew and Gentile, have all been torn down in Christ and all are welcome to come through what the Christ has done to redeem us. He took our brokenness and gives us his wholeness, died our death so that we might live his life.

We have been brought near by Christ's life.

In his life and ministry, he showed us what it looked like to love those whom we would not otherwise love, how to forgive those who have sought to wound and destroy us, and how to love with the last full measure those who do not deserve our love. That's how he has loved us. How can we withhold love from anyone whom the Lord brings our way?

"He came," Paul says, "and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (2:17-18). This is the message Jesus preached: "Shalom!" It was for Jews and Gentiles alike. He has made us one by reconciling us both to the Father through the same Spirit.

3. So we are no longer strangers and aliens (2:19-22).

In Christ, we are fellow citizens with the saints.

All that marked us as strangers and aliens by nature has been undone in Christ, and now we are fellow citizens in the Kingdom of God along with all those set apart by God for his purposes (the definition of "saint"). We must never forget where our true, eternal citizenship is – in God's Kingdom, which will never pass away.

In Christ, we are members of God's household.

We are charged with caring for the family – caring for one another. God's Spirit has given us gifts so that we might care for one another through faithful acts of loving service. Again, he is emphasizing that we are now part of the family, reconciled to one another, united to each other in the body of Christ, by the Spirit of Christ.

In Christ, we are a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

He began by describing the kind of alienation between Jews and Gentiles that was reflected in the temple architecture, the walls and partitions that keep the two apart. He ends by describing such a complete transformation, such a full reconciliation, that we are together, Jews and Gentiles in Christ, the temple of the Lord, the place where he dwells by his Spirit. In Christ, reconciliation is complete.

Conclusion

So, what difference should this make in your life and mine? This weekend, I watched and sent on to several of you, a *Q Ideas* video by Washington Post columnist, Michael Gerson, entitled, "The Pope Francis Moment" [<http://qideas.org/videos/the-pope-francis-moment/>]. In it Gerson spoke of the church- and culture-transforming ministry of the Pope, simply because he so often acts like Jesus, in this sense: he treats people as persons, not as defined by their religion or irreligion, nor by their political or ethical views, certainly not by their brokenness. Gerson said that authority and power return to Christ's church, not when we seek it, but whenever we lay aside our insistence that everyone agree with us, and simply love people the way that Christ loved us.

Many say, "I love Jesus, but can't stand the church." They say it because the church has not, throughout much of its history, been very much like Jesus, who came to reconcile the alienated, to love the unloved and unlovable, to bring us in one body animated by one Spirit home to the Father, who made us for his glory, and simply called us to love him and to love one another.

This is what Christ has done: he has perfectly loved the Father and perfectly loved us, and he calls us to join him in a life of consecrated loving service. In Christ, we are no longer strangers.

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