

“No longer strangers”

July 19, 2009

Text: *Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56*

I.

As the letter to the **Ephesians** reminds us, historically, there was tension between the Jews and Gentiles. As non-Jews, the Gentiles were *outside* the reaches of Jewish life.

For the faithful Jew, there was a *purity system* constructed on the laws and accepted practices of Judaism, which was not so much biblical as social and political. But the bottom line is that it was glaringly exclusivist.

This *purity system* functioned like an invisible wall between Jews and Gentiles. There were all sorts of prohibitions and restrictions around food and hygiene and interpersonal relationships that kept people in or outside community.

This wasn't so much about incompatibility and cultural gap as it was it was about an imposed division. The intent was to keep people divided ... to keep people *in their place*, as the saying goes.

Boundaries have their place in human life—in our families and in our communities—because, to some extent, we all have our need for privacy and intimacy. And we need some means of controlling our lives. But boundaries that become walls can be divisive ... and they can be an enormous copout when it comes to relationships.

Walls are supposed to promote peace, but do they?

- *This is mine, that is yours. These are my clothes, my shoes, my stuff; that is yours, or whatever it is.*
- *This is my side of the room or closet, that is yours.* Trust me, in our closet, I always get the short end of the straw. Do women just need more room? Of course, you go out to the garage and it's probably all reversed.

But we like our walls, don't we.

II.

All the time, it seems, we are building walls—walls to keep people out rather than to build a spirit of oneness between us. In many ways, walls keep us from community building. They keep us from having to learn how to get along ... to build a foundation for communication and understanding.

1. In the United States, we are building a monster wall on our border with Mexico to keep undocumented immigrants from entering.
2. In Israel, the Israelis are building a wall to keep themselves separate from the Palestinians.
3. Poet Robert Frost once said, *Good fences make good neighbors*. But, again, do they?

I remember when we first bought a home in California (back in 1976), it took me years (being from the Midwest) to adjust to the back yard/ side yard fences. Everywhere, there were fences. This is mine; that is yours. This is my little world; that is yours—on the other side of the fence ... where things aren't so easily shared or exchanged or discovered about the other.

Look at how we organize our living: fences of security, to protect our stuff. Strong locks and sophisticated security systems; well attended security gates, like where I live.

While I very much appreciate the safety and security in our neighborhood (Lakes on the Green), every time I pass the security gate, I feel a little strange. Is all of this *in-group/ out group*—with gated communities etc. ... is this how we build safe communities?

The point is not that all of the attention to personal space and safety doesn't have a place. The point is: does it bring changed hearts and transformed spirits? Does it bring peace?

Aren't peace and changed hearts a condition of the spirit? And isn't that a condition that Christ calls us to? Aren't we supposed to be more bridge-builders than wall-builders?

III.

Friends, the truth of our Christian faith is that it's a tough faith. It's not easy. It's not easy because—always—it calls us to a BIG love; certainly, often times, to a bigger love than we may want. In a BIG love, we gotta learn and grow; we gotta give up stuff.

Our reading from Ephesians this morning gives us a handle on what I call *the Christ impulse*. This impulse is the energy of Christ in the world; it is a blending of the grace, the love, the mercy and the forgiveness of God. It is all of this—this energy, moving from the heart and soul of God into the world.

It was this impulse, this life energy that was in Jesus ... and that became magnified in him on the cross.

Check out Ephesians here: *But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace ... in his flesh he has made both groups one and has broken down the dividing wall ... that is, the hostility*

between us.

The Christ impulse is always a unifying impulse, a unifying energy. It works to break down walls, to break down barriers. It functions, through the power of its love, through the spirit of its grace, to bring unity out of diversity ... to bring oneness and peace out of separation and hostility.

When we give ourselves to the *Christ impulse*, to this unifying energy in the world, we find ways of coming together.

- We become better listeners—to those who are different from us; but also to those who are a lot like us, but whom we simply disagree with on things.
- When the *Christ impulse* is alive in us, we have more compassion and *empathy* for others; for those left out, those on the margins and those who, everyday, are victims of injustice.

And it is because of this that *Ephesians* can say:

So then you are no longer strangers (in Christ) ... but you are members of the household of God.

IV.

We are no longer strangers, therefore, in our families, in our communities and in the international community: in Honduras ... in Iraq ... in Pakistan and Afghanistan ... in Iran ... in Russia and China.

We are no longer strangers in the United States congress—in pursuit of Health Care legislation, in pursuit, too, of quality education for all children ... and with the all-out effort to solve the ills of the economy.

When we take on the mantle of Christ, we give ourselves to this unifying process. When we are IN Christ, we can't help but find ways of coming together ... ways of uncovering common ground.

Why? Because it is the love of Jesus—to be more specific, it is the suffering love of Jesus—that lives in us and works in us. To be *in Christ* as believers, as people of faith, is to actually BE—ourselves—this reconciling presence of love in the world.

- Bringing whatever diversity into a unity.
- Transforming the darkness that divides into the light that unifies.

When we are IN Christ, *we are* the energy of love in the world. **No longer strangers ... but members of the household of God.**

V.

Let's take a deeper look at what being *in Christ* might mean for our families, particularly for our relationship with our spouses.

We hear all the time about perfect marriages. Jose and Jane have a perfect marriage, we hear. They're so compatible; they get along so well. They share common interests, common values and on and on.

Obviously, that's a beautiful thing. Any of us who have such marriages should rejoice and give thanks to God everyday.

But let's tell the truth: marriage is hard work. And just because our compatibility is challenged in our marriage doesn't mean we can't—and shouldn't—find ways to make it work.

When we're *in Christ*, we take on the spirit of Christ in our total being. It's hard. Yvette and I have certainly had to work at our marriage over the years. She's a beautiful lady; and, poor thing, she's had to live with me all these years.

What does this mean? Among other things, it means, we have to give up stuff. I'm not suggesting that we be a door mat. Absolutely not! There's nothing that's big or loving or virtuous in any way about being a door mat. Door mats just prolong someone else's problem with issues of power and control.

Giving up stuff means compromise. In marriage, we have to compromise all the time. We compromise because when we're *in Christ*, we're trying to find common ground. We're trying to find a place where we can come together.

VI.

If you think about it, compatibility in marriage might be overrated. Too much compatibility can be boring, to where we never grow as a person. Not only that, but compatibility can be developed. It can evolve. We can *learn* to be more compatible, to get along better and to enjoy one another and appreciate one another more.

In the most radical sense, when we're *in Christ*, we can find ways of getting along with any human being. We have to work at it, to be sure; and we have to be willing to give up stuff.

Obviously, in any relationship, we can only give up so much or we lose ourself. And, surely, there comes a point where we'd want to say: *you know, that may not be a person I'd want to marry*. Fair enough!

Recently, I heard of this older couple; they're in the eighties and they got divorced. Apparently, they had grown to the point where they just hated one another (after 50-60 years of marriage) and finally one of them—I don't know which one—said, *that's it. I'm outta here.* And they got divorced.

While that may well have been a good thing, my guess is that this older couple wasn't a whole lot *in Christ* in their relationship over the years, particularly in the early years where patterns of inter-relationship take root.

When we're *in Christ*, we forget and forgive ... and we start over again and again. Of course, it has to be a two-way street. I'm not meaning to be too judgmental or harsh here. But, again, what does it mean to be *in Christ* in our marriage, or in any relationship?

Doesn't there have to be some sacrificial element? From both sides ... some middle ground on power, control, pride, and life-style. And doesn't there have to be a *giving of ourselves to the Spirit*—the Spirit of patience and kindness ... of generosity and compassion?

When we're *in Christ*, we're making an effort to see the world through the eyes of the other person, the other group, the other nation.

When we're **no longer strangers**, friends, when we're **members of the household of God**, when we're truly *in Christ*, the Spirit of God is alive in us—working in us and through us, doing what it can to deepen the bonds of love, enlarge our world along the way and make us bigger, more grace-filled persons ... making us **no long strangers**.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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