

The Table of Peace

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World Communion Sunday

October 1, 2023

Scripture

Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Sermon

We have many words to describe what goes on here, at this table. Communion. Lord’s Supper. Holy Communion. Eucharist. Mass. We call this a table; some call it an altar. We call it a table. We have different names for this essential meal that symbolizes Christ’s unity with the Church and the Church in unity with itself. And yet we know that this meal is also a painful sign of the disunity and division within the Church. This meal is supposed to be a symbol of peace, but we quarrel over what occurs in the bread and wine. What is going on in this meal? Who is allowed to receive the elements? Who is allowed to distribute the elements? Who can come to the table? Is it a table or an altar? It’s a table—at least here it is. Who is allowed to be celebrant, who is allowed to say the words of institution? What do we call those who preside at a table? Ministers? Elders? Presbyters? If this is an altar, then we have priests. But since this is not an altar, but a *table*—did you hear that it’s a table? You know the drill. We can gather together for worship, but there are still so many parts of the Christian body that will worship together but not share this meal. We’re so divided.

Robert Frost (1874-1963) said, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Walls can be good things. Boundaries are good, especially healthy boundaries. “Good fences make good neighbors.” [1] Often, though, not always, it’s tough to have any kind of meaningful relationship through a wall. It’s tough to be in community with your neighbor when there’s a wall going through the middle of it.

As we know, though, the Church has never been immune to conflict. One of its first flashpoints was the Gentile-Jewish division, which we can hear in this text from Ephesians. This tension is found throughout the New Testament. Do Gentiles have to become Jews to worship Jesus? If not, how can Jews share a meal with Gentiles, particularly the Lord’s Supper? The Gentile-Jewish tension is explicit in the Ephesians. It’s tearing the community apart, just as it did in Corinth and Rome and elsewhere, wherever Gentile and Jewish followers of Christ tried to worship together in community. When they tried to just sit down to share a meal together. How can there be peace in the Church when there are such struggles?

The author of Ephesians, probably Paul, being a consummate pastor-theologian, knows that Christ’s death and resurrection have created something new in the world. Whereas before, there was alienation between God and humanity, now there is peace through Christ. The first eleven verses in Ephesians 2 speak to this *vertical* relationship, of peace between God and humanity, of an end to enmity. The following eleven verses speak of a horizontal relationship. Because the vertical relationship is true, the horizontal relationship changes accordingly. Because we know peace with God, peace with our neighbor, can follow, must follow. There was a time when Israel was alienated from God. There was a time when Gentiles were alienated from God. There was a time when Jews and Gentiles were estranged from each other. “But now”—*but now!*—“in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.” Why? How? “For [Christ] is our peace, who has made us both *one* (Jew and Gentile), and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself *one new humanity* in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ...” (Eph 2:14-18).

Reconciliation between God and humanity, when it’s fully understood—that is, personally, psychologically, existentially—will inevitably yield reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, indeed reconciliation between any disparate groups. Peace is a sign of the presence of God. Peace is holy. It’s what God desires for God’s children. Making peace is, therefore, holy. Peace is a sign of God’s goodness and blessing (Matthew 5:9). Peacemaking is sacred work. [2] Jesus calls us to be peacemakers because he is, himself, a peacemaker and because he knows that God is the ultimate peacemaker and, therefore, the peace-giver. “So then,” Paul writes, “you are no longer strangers and sojourners to one another, you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).

When Christ is at the center of a community, there is space for everyone Christ calls into that community. We’re free to make space for everyone. And this is crucial because the Spirit continually draws people into the Church, all kinds of people. People who think like us, look like us, and smell like us—and plenty who don’t! Because the Spirit draws people toward

Christ, the Church will always have a wide and wild diversity. It's supposed to be this way. And the Church is always healthier, more robust, and more effective in the world when it's diverse. [3] And because we as a Church struggle, historically, with this diversity, we know that the Church has a long way to go.

Christ might love diversity, but that doesn't mean his Church always does. Divisions in society have always made their way into the Church. Just look at how the Church split over slavery. These days, the increasing polarization of American society, spurred on by the political divides in the country, is wreaking havoc upon this country, and then the world suffers as a result; then the Church suffers. It's also tearing the Church apart.

The Jewish-Gentile division within the early church is eerily like the conservative-liberal divide in the contemporary Church. From Paul's perspective, being either a Jew or Gentile is always *secondary* to being found in Christ. Similarly, being liberal or conservative is always *secondary* to being found in Christ. To be in Christ means the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has crumbled away because Christ has come to make peace. When we are in Christ, all labels and categories and factions—all of which have their origins in the world!—dissolve away. In Christ, "conservative" and "liberal" become meaningless.

To be honest, I wish we would stop using these words in the Church. As I've said many times, I really cannot stand theological labels—all of them, liberal, conservative, progressive. They can be insidious. I remember an experience I had when I was at a seminary. I was having dinner with my friends one evening. I left the table to go back to my room, and they remained behind. Later, they came back to the dorm and said to me, "We were talking about you after you left the table?" Surprised, I said, "Why?" "We couldn't figure out whether you are a conservative or liberal." And I said, "Good."

These classifications might be useful outside out there, beyond the Church, but they don't have a place in here. A church should pay attention to whether it's fulfilling *God's* agenda. If the Church were more obsessed with this sacred work, fewer disagreements and divisions would exist. Sometimes, God's agenda will appear very conservative; sometimes, God's agenda will look liberal or progressive; and sometimes, it will appear to be nothing less than radical, radical for both a conservative and a liberal. The only thing that matters in the Church is that we are here to worship and serve Christ. He is our peace; we can be at peace because Christ is at work in us.

Significantly, Paul never says that Jews should become Gentiles or that Gentiles should become Jews. Instead, Paul's experience in Christ allows him to *transcend* the two groups to envision a third option, something entirely new, which contains both groups but elevates them into something new, what Paul calls here a "new humanity" (Eph. 2:15)—*kainon anthrōpon*—a new expression of humanity now transformed to serve the greater glory of God. [4]

What Paul came to discover was this: we have been called into the Church because God in Christ is trying to build something new *through* us, that something new is a *new humanity*—a true household of God, built upon the cornerstone that is Christ, "in whom," Paul writes, "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord," (Eph 2:11). Why?

So that you and I together may become a dwelling place for God. That's the miracle of the Church. Whole. Together.

People will come from east and west and north and south—from everywhere, every direction, every *every*—to sit at Table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29). When we gather at this Table—and every time we gather—we should have the entire world in mind. As every false category melts away, we demonstrate to the world “a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31).

Here is the Lord's Table of peace.

A peace the world cannot understand but desperately needs.

So, come, come world, come to the Table of peace.

Sources

- [1] Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” *North of Boston* (1915).
- [2] Michael J. Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 65.
- [3] Katherine W. Phillips, “[How Diversity Makes Us Stronger](#),” in *Scientific American*.
- [4] Paul's understanding of the “new humanity” is an example of what Carl Jung (1875-1961) called the “transcendent function,” which occurs at critical moments of insight and transformation. “The shuttling to and for of arguments and affects represents the transcendent function of opposites. The confrontation of the two positions generates a tension charged with energy and creates a living, third thing—not a logical stillbirth in accordance with the principal *tertium non datur* [no third is given], but a movement out of the suspension between the opposites, a living birth that leads to a new level of being, a new situation.” “The Transcendent Function,” *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Volume 8 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 67-91.