

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 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. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. **-New Revised Standard Version**

I met Bob in summer Hebrew at seminary. We were both first year seminarians— he was the oldest member of our incoming class; I, nearly the youngest. I know exactly how old Bob was. This is how he introduced himself on the first day of class in every class we had together throughout that year. “I’m Bob Hecker. I’m 64 years old. I’ve been a Presbyterian my whole life and a Christian these past 8 years.” Well, alright then. I’ll admit it, I found this introduction off-putting- as a cradle Presbyterian who believed her Baptism as an infant was sufficient to bring her into the Christian fold, his declaration was... unnerving at best. But it was also funny. And sincere. And inviting. It made me want to say, “O.K. Bob, tell me your story.” So by the time we made it to intro theology in the second quarter of our first year, when the professors asked us to identify a learning partner who was as different from us as possible, I knew precisely who my learning partner would be. Bob. Sure, we have the same color skin. And speak the same language— sort of. And both come from the same denomination. But we were worlds apart. For 10 weeks we’d read the assigned texts on our own and write up our reflections on them and then we’d get together and compare notes. And for 10 weeks we were repeatedly astonished at the radically different dimensions we’d find in the readings. I was pretty nervous to talk with Bob the week we were contemplating “Who are we as human beings?” I had written two pages more or less all about sexuality. Bob chuckled when he heard my reflections. “Hunh. I didn’t write about sex at all. Shows my age!” Both of us, I believe,

walked away with a more balanced reflection on human personhood than we could have arrived at alone. And, in time, a true bond of trust, love, and affection developed between us.

Bob and I have lost touch, but what I learned from cultivating a relationship with him has stayed with me— and always comes to me when contemplating this passage of scripture. Unlike many of the letters in the New Testament, we don't know who wrote Ephesians. We also don't know precisely to whom it was written, nor why. But we have a few hints— and today's passage offers some significant clues.

It is quite clear that the intended recipients of the letter were Gentile converts to Christianity. We heard that plainly today- Remember who you were, the author says... Gentiles by birth. Gentiles being, as the author lays out in a litany of descriptors (“aliens,” “strangers,” having no hope”) far off from the Jewish covenant with God. And through this litany we learn a lot about who they are.

But there is also a clue about the author, it's a bit more subtle, but it's there... Right from the start a contrast is established between Gentiles and Jews, two oppositional groups, those far off from God, and those nearer to God. Did you catch the “us” language in the passage? This, I think, is our clue to who the author was- the author speaks of the former hostility between us, and both of us having access to God through the Spirit. This language throughout the passage suggests that the author was himself not a gentile convert to Christianity, but rather a Jewish Christian.

But from the very beginning of our passage it is apparent that the writer of this letter, though pointing to difference and distinction, is wanting to suggest the present insignificance of that distinction. There's one repeated word in this passage that is invisible in English. You have to look at the Greek to see it. This word is sarx (flesh), actually there's a repeated phrase “In the flesh.” Where our English version says the gentiles were so by birth, more literally, they were so “in the flesh”- and then the author appears to take great pains to heap up emphasis on the fleshly character of Jewish circumcision- “a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands.” The Gentiles and Jews were different at the level of flesh. And because of someone else's flesh those differences no longer need to mean division. In verse 14 we read “For he is our peace; in his flesh (there it is again!) he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Before the coming of Christ, as this author understands it, Gentiles and Jews were in relatively different spatial relation to the holy- far off and near- the coming of Christ relocated both groups... actually this passage mixes metaphors all over the place... are we all being brought closer to one another and to some place together? Or are we being transformed into one new person, made from two? Or are we being built up as a building? A growing building? Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Both groups, different in flesh, were without Christ before his coming— but after his coming— everything is different.

The dividing wall of hostility between these groups is down... and that was accomplished by Christ overcoming the hostility between all of humanity and our creator God, by taking the whole of humanity to the cross. Christ took all of the old humanity with its divisions from one another and from God, took its hostilities towards one another and towards God, took it all to the cross— he brought all of humanity to the cross, in his flesh, as one body.

And though we don't hear an explicit word about resurrection in this passage, it's all over the passage... something changed on the cross... but surely it went into effect after the resurrection... with the breathing or sending of the Spirit onto the gathered disciples... an act which happened in Jerusalem, but quickly spread beyond the commonwealth of Israel... birthing a new community that sang songs about there being no slave or free, Jew or Greek, male and female in Christ... who preached sermons about God showing no partiality... old humanity died on the cross in one body, new humanity walked out of the tomb as one body— walked out as one body and remains one body by the Spirit.

Yes. Remains. I meant what I said. Though the Church sure doesn't seem to be one, in any meaningful sense of the word, does it? There are so many different denominations, different versions of Presbyterianism even... And even within denominations, congregations often, though not always, look more like one part of humanity than some representation of the diversity of humanity knit together as one. And when we continue to choose to go our separate ways when we cannot agree... in what way does our corporate life witness to the radical difference made by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus?

As much as this letter talks about this transformation and reconciliation like its a done deal... remember that it addresses an entirely or predominately gentile community. This letter stresses so heavily, again and again, the unity that is gifted in Christ Jesus... so I think it was something that they needed, as much as we need, to hear... and I believe therefore that it was

Please note: actual sermon content may vary from this manuscript at time of delivery.

just as easy for first century Christians as it is for us, to segment the body of Christ according to accustomed human divisions, even if only innocuously— because we gather with those who speak our language, or live nearby— and it was just as easy then as now to believe that your fraction of the body is it— to totalize your experience of Christianity as **the** experience of Christianity.

But this is a very dangerous thing to do. Because Christ truly has overcome the hostility between all of humanity and God, surely we must give up our futile resistance, and let the Spirit nudge us, nudge us to overcome all hostility, nudge us to overcome even benign neglect in the human sphere. How does the 1st letter of John put it? if you say you love God while hating a brother or sister— what are you? Oh yeah, you're a liar. You can't love God whom you haven't seen, while hating the one you can see. We might pull back at this, start to get defensive... hate? We're good people. We're church people. We don't hate... but are we content to let divisions remain divisions? Are we content to call names and make assumptions about you over there as contrasted with us over here? Especially, perhaps, when we're talking about Christians who live their faith differently than us? This might not be active hate, but is it love?

Here is my prayer for the church, inspired by this text— I pray that as we live into the future, we will invest in cultivating humble, loving relationships with our others— our others within the Church and outside of it. I pray that Christians, and congregations of Christians, will step out of the familiar and comfortable, trusting that Christ has torn down the walls that still seem so present— and reach out— to other Christians and congregations who look different, sound different, smell different... and even worship different- to other people outside the Church who are just plain different... especially to those whom we are most inclined to fear.

I hope these acts of outreach, of peace, of embodied love— that these will start to change us— to deepen our understanding of and appreciation of our Christian faith... to strengthen our love of God... and I hope that in time our Presbyterian congregation will be a visible witness to the radical difference that Christ makes in human lives and human relationships. Because this is Gospel, good, good news that our warring and wounded world desperately needs to see... and hear.