

Ephesians 2:13-22 (NRSV)**pg. 192, NT, Pew Bible**

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

¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵He 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, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word...

Ending Hostility

Hostility. Enmity. Acrimony. Animosity. Aggression. Malice. Malevolence. When we hear these words, our imaginations might be drawn toward villains in a Disney movie or those on a television cop show where the lines between good and evil are easily seen and readily defined. When these vices are present in an individual, the problem is bad enough. But when they are present within groups, tribes, parties, and nations, the consequences can be horrific. Humanity has a tragic history of drawing lines in hostility and relating to the whole world as either the accepted us or the adversarial them. World history is largely the story of how political borders came into being—behind most borders is a bloody story often told in terms of us versus them.

I've been thinking a great deal recently about the distinctions that we quickly draw when we meet someone either in person or on social media. Within just a few seconds of interaction, we are already placing people into a particular subgroup, painting them with the broad brush of societal stereotypes laced with our own personal biases. When we encounter someone who looks or thinks differently than we do, we are quick to measure them against our own criteria of what we think of as good or bad, useful or worthless, helpful or hurtful. Our proclivity is to villainize those whom we think are not worthy of our time, our effort, or our consideration and conveniently throw them into the ash heap of discarded others for whom, in our eyes at least, there is no hope or redemption. We then wipe our hands and move on. We seem to be hard-wired to do this. We evaluate, compartmentalize, and then proceed on our merry way. And we do this all within a few seconds of the initial encounter.

In light of all the emotional trauma my own family has experienced in recent months, I've also been thinking about the way we talk about the challenges we face in life. For example, when someone is given a cancer diagnosis, we often couch their situation in terms of a heroic conflict. We frequently hear that someone is "fighting cancer," or "battling Alzheimer's," or "combating pneumonia." So, I've wondered. Was my dad really "battling" Alzheimer's or was he simply a human being who was diagnosed with a horrible disease that would take away his mind and eventually his life? Is couching such a situation in heroic terms simply placing the proverbial lipstick on the pig? Is looking at it as a battle really a form of denial, a defense mechanism that attempts to block or at least soften the emotional pain we feel when seeing a loved one dealing with a disease or condition over which we have no control? The words and metaphors we use reveal a great deal about our own fears—the fear of death, the fear of the unknown, the ambiguity and mystery of life itself. Are the terms we use to describe such situations really the product of the anxieties we experience when we wake up in the morning and are confronted with the fact that we are finite and frail, subject to entropy and decay? I'm still working through my thoughts and feelings on this, but this is where I find myself at the moment.

We do much the same thing when we assert our political or religious viewpoints in the public arena. It doesn't take much for us to hoist the banner and declare that we are in a fight, a struggle, a no-holds-barred bout with some enemy, seen or unseen, against whom we strive with every ounce of energy we can muster. In the thick of the struggle, the militant language that we often use to describe such challenges might be comforting, even uplifting. There is definitely a time and a place for the halftime, locker room speech. There are times when we need the injection of inspiration through the "rah rah" rhetoric that causes our adrenaline to surge and our chests to swell.

But couching the struggles we experience in life and face in the world in purely militaristic terms has the potential to do more harm than good. Whenever we see life in those terms, we automatically default to binary, simplistic, black-and-white thinking in which there are distinct winners and losers. We find ourselves amidst some sort of cosmic struggle where only the strong survive and the weak are left behind because they don't have what it takes. When we constantly look at life's challenges and couch them in terms of combat, we set up a false dichotomy of us versus them. We lose the humanity of others as well as our own humanity because we fail to see that we are intricately connected to one another; we are a part of each other. So, we draw the battle lines. Anything that's not within our own predetermined dogmatic boundaries must be the enemy and must be dominated and destroyed, whatever the cost.

The question before us this morning is must us versus them be our controlling paradigm? The New Testament challenges this kind of thinking. The us versus them attitude of groupthink hostility is the source of humanity's most shameful crimes: racism, torture, war, and genocide. If the gospel is to offer solutions for humankind's greatest problems, and if the gospel is to have any relevance beyond the realm of private piety and afterlife religion, it must address the curse of deep-seated hostility.

The author of Ephesians deftly addresses this in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Christians at Ephesus. Hear verses fourteen through sixteen again: "For he [Christ] 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. 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, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.” I love that last part: “thus putting to death that hostility through it.” In Christ, God destroys the hostility that separates us and that encourages us to dehumanize and destroy the “other.”

Because that’s what we do. Dehumanizing the other makes it much easier to crush them. For example, it was much easier for rank-and-file Germans to gas Jews and others in the death camps when they were fed a steady stream of dehumanizing rhetoric of which Nazi propaganda chief Josef Goebbels was a master. It’s much easier to destroy pond scum or rodents or fleas than the neighbor down the street who has a name, a family, a story. In reducing the people we don’t like to some non-human existence, they become worthless, pathetic, expendable. And yet, it is into this world of hostility that a cross appears. A cross that was, ironically, an expression of that hostility in a world that couldn’t handle Jesus’ challenging message of loving our neighbor and praying for our enemy. Not only does the cross achieve peace between God and the sinner, but it is also the place where God inaugurates a new humanity—a humanity saved from hostility. In killing Jesus, the world unleashed a message that could not be stopped, even by death itself.

The Letter to the Ephesians deals specifically with the clearly drawn battle lines between the Gentiles and the converts to Christianity of Jewish descent. The Gentiles coming to their new faith in Christ were excluded and alienated from those of Jewish origins who believed that citizenship in the kingdom of God was based on three crucial factors: ethnicity, circumcision, and Torah observance. The only way an ethnic Gentile could obtain the blessings and promises of Israel was to be circumcised and committed to the observance of the dietary laws, the Sabbath, and other imperatives. In other words, the only way a Gentile could become a citizen of God’s kingdom was to become Jewish. We’re in and you’re out. If you cross the line, we’ll kill you. The author of Ephesians says that the cross of Christ destroys the division, the alienation, the us versus them attitude.

In Ephesians, the author suggests that in the cross, everything has changed. There are no longer insiders or outsiders, everything has been brought together because Christ has knocked down the walls between us. Theologian Miroslav Volf explains it like this: “The open arms of Christ on the cross are a sign that God does not want to be without the other—humanity—and suffers humanity’s violence in order to embrace it.”

There’s a beautiful story that came from the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain. Derek Redmond was a sprinter for Great Britain, seeking to overcome the injuries that had plagued him — he'd had five surgeries, including one on his Achilles tendon with less than four months before the Games. His Olympic dreams had been dashed four years earlier at the 1988 Games in Seoul, Korea when he tore his Achilles just an hour before the race. Redmond's pursuit of a medal in Barcelona in the 400 meters started off well, as he notched the fastest time in the preliminaries and won his quarterfinal heat.

In the semifinals, Redmond charged out of the blocks and looked strong on the first straightaway. But shortly before the race's halfway mark, he suddenly grimaced in pain and grabbed the back of his right thigh: his hamstring had torn. He crumpled to the track in pain and dismay, as the rest of the pack sprinted on. Alone on the track, Redmond stood and began hopping on his left foot — careful to remain in his lane — determined to finish the race. The crowd stood and cheered as Redmond limped slowly toward the finish line. Then a figure emerged from alongside the track: Redmond's dad, Jim. (Who was dressed in perfect dad-wear of the early '90s: white crew socks and sneakers, roomy shorts, and a Nike hat emblazoned with "Just Do It.")

Waving off officials who tried to get him off the track, Jim Redmond ran up to his son, putting an arm around his waist. Derek turned and wept on his father's shoulder. Together, father and son walked the final meters of a race now long decided. To this day, it’s considered "one of the most inspirational moments in Olympic history." I can never seem to prevent the tears from flowing as many times as I’ve viewed this event on YouTube.

I think this story offers us a better way of looking at the challenges we face. Maybe the metaphor of a footrace is a healthier and more wholistic one that doesn't carry the baggage of simplistic, black-and-white, binary thinking that more militant metaphors do. The author of Hebrews picks up this image, looking at faith as a race and describing those who have gone ahead of us as part of "a great crowd of witnesses." I imagine a stadium of gargantuan proportions with countless faces waving and cheering us on. Because of the size of the crowd, the noise is staggering. "Enter Sandman," eat your heart out! But what makes the race of faith different from all others is the fact that the victory has already been won by Christ on the cross, so there is no pressure to win at all costs. The only expectation—and it's by no means not a small or an easy one—is to do our best to love God and love one another. There aren't any losers in this race. No one's a loser in the kingdom of God! There aren't any opposing teams, everyone's wearing the same jersey. This race isn't about taking home the gold, the silver, or the bronze, but rather about crossing the finish line where a new home awaits in the eternal embrace of God.

We are called to run the race of faith, not for the prize at the end, that's already guaranteed. We don't have to worry about that. God's got that covered. Rather, we are called to run the race with perseverance keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. And we run this race with and for one another. And, like Jim Redmond, when we see another family member faltering—as we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, the family of God—we are to wrap our arms around them, pick them up off the ground and help them cross the finish line.

As the rhetoric, the emotion, and the anxiety of this election season heat up, might I offer the reminder that we are all in this together. Dehumanizing someone who votes differently, thinks differently, and believes differently places our world in much greater peril than it's already in. If we are to follow the example of Christ as his disciples, then we surely know that animosity is never the answer. The only purpose dehumanization serves is to puff up our own ego. And the cross of Christ reveals that the world is not transformed by ego but rather by

humility, not by raw, unadulterated power but by weakness and vulnerability, not by superhuman effort, but by the tender love, mercy, and grace of God. The kingdom of God only comes to fruition wherever and whenever peace and compassion are found and cultivated. The cross of Christ has ended hostility forever. There's no reason to feed the beast, when that beast has been forever vanquished.

Closing Thought/Commission & Blessing

God is one and not one; there is this thing we call the Trinity

we don't understand it; we can't totally understand

but we can know it—this unity in diversity.

It's important that we can be many—we can be diverse

we can be black, white, tall, short, Greek, Jew, American, Iranian, Venezuelan, Republican, Democrat and still participate in a profound unity.

Thus, we are called, we human creatures who lean toward fragmentation,

to practice Wholeness; to take time to stop, and breathe,

to worship and pray and connect with the One with Eternity with the Really Real.

What is "sin"—

what does it look like when we stumble and fall

and fail to realize ourselves as Children of God.

It looks like fragmentation

like fragmented souls; fragmented communities; fragmented nations

as scattered and shattered world

it looks like hate and bias; like inequality and inequity

it looks like the bonds of love shredded by words that incite and demean

by anger and violence by those who will sacrifice everything for money and power.

We cannot embrace fragmentation

we cannot follow those who would divide

we must reflect the unity of the One

we need to be Holy.

Go out, remembering all God has done for you.

Emulate Christ in breaking down any barriers of hostility that hinder you from proclaiming peace to all whom you meet.

And may God be with you wherever you go;

May Christ Jesus heal you and set you back on your feet;

and may the Holy Spirit encircle you with love and strengthen you for the race ahead.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **Amen.**