

I. Intro

A. We are moving through a historic moment, and right now, everything is unsettled. Racially, culturally, economically, politically and – remarkably - even medically – things are contentious, and the ground is moving.

B. Every day I see or hear anger, fear, confusion, judgment, guilt and more. (And that’s just from the guy who looks back at me from the mirror and says, “It’s time to shave.”)

C. Everyone seems to be a bit weary. And conversations are more complicated:

1. Some people are not willing to say much.
2. Others are willing to talk but seem unable to listen – or at least to hear.
3. Still others seem only willing to talk if your views (and the intensity with which you hold them) matches theirs.

D. Alongside all of this there are:

1. Protests that started as one thing but to have turned into something else;
2. COVID is spreading.
3. There is a growing illiberalism.
4. And most of the loudest voices are very secular. This makes things different than in the past, when men and women of faith were calling on people to love others or to pray or to trust in God’s hand.

E. If I spend too much time reading the news, or Heaven forbid, on Twitter; or if I fail to spend enough time in prayer and Bible reading, I quickly feel discouraged or angry or exhausted. This has been one of the most challenging and unusual times in my 35 years as a pastor.

F. And at the same moment, it also strikes me as a time of great opportunity. It is a time to trust and grow and to see the light of the Gospel shine more brightly.

G. I continue to pray that it is a moment where many come to faith. Were, as people see:

1. The limits of modernity – when they realize how naïve their secular optimism has been.
2. When they see: our great need for others, the ugliness of fear, the fragility of civilization, the reality of death that they will look again at Jesus and see His beauty and be won over by the grace and hope He offers.

H. Please here me. I’m not saying this is an easy or fun time, or that the path forward is clear.

I. On several occasions I have told the Lord that he has seriously overestimated my leadership chops. And I have no idea what to do. But I come away from those prayers realizing the opportunity to trust and grow, and very confident that He remains sovereign and that any challenges we face are light and momentary, compared to the eternal glory that waits.

II. So, some of my prayer time is focused on navigating the challenges of the moment well. One of my other ongoing prayers is, “What do your people need to hear – from you?”

A. If you have been around you know I plan sermons months in advance. Well, when I look at what has been mapped out, all I think is the statement, “Man makes plans and God laughs.”

B. We were going to be finishing up Planted. But that hasn’t been working so well. So just about every week I throw out the sermon that was planned, I whine a bit and start down another path.

C. When COVID hit we did some things, mostly out of the Psalms, on Hope and Heaven. When then had the Mental Health Series.

D. Three weeks ago – following George Floyd’s death – the “I can’t breathe” moment, which was following Ahmaud Abernathy’s death (and others), I turned to Romans 12 and a focus on others; two weeks ago it was the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Last week was Father’s Day, and we tried to make the best of having Charlie Duke lined up.

E. We have some things lined up looking at what we can learn from various biblical figures who went through crises; and I’ve been in Joshua because there is a sense in which Israel had a reset on life during that moment. I think many of us are hoping for a reset. In the fall, Lord willing (things are fluid and everything has an asterisks right now), we will be in Revelation 1-3.

F. Today, I want to turn to Ephesians 2:11-22 and reflect on unity.

III. I have been thinking about this for some time.

A. In fact, for over a year I have been asking pastors what they are going to preach on Nov. 1 and November 8 - those are the Sunday’s immediately before and immediately after the presidential election – because I have been concerned about our national unity for some time. And as I have looked around, I have not seen any Abraham Lincolns or Martin Luther Kings emerging to lead us forward. I keep praying for leadership like that.

B. But as I have thought and prayed, a couple ideas have emerged.

C. The first is that the way forward is for the church to be the church – a community of grace, hope and love grounded in the life and work of Jesus.

1. What has become clearer and clearer is that the way forward is not through better policing or better laws (I am not opposed to either), but we had God’s perfect law and that didn’t help much. We need people to be transformed by Christ. We need people to come to faith and have their heart changed to become more like Christ so they can, in turn, both share the good news with others and serve – Proclaim the Good News and Engage in Good Works, Reach People and ReNew Communities.

2. Over the last few weeks I have gone back to my theme that, if the church isn’t the church, if we do not get after our assignment, none of the other institution – family, the state, education – none of them have a chance. We cannot hire enough police to make people be good citizens (whatever that means). We need people to be changed, and that comes through Christ.

D. And the second idea is that I do not need to focus on holding the country together – that is not my job and it’s beyond my abilities. I need to focus on holding the church together - not by being balanced or persuasive, but:

1. By calling Christ followers to yield to Christ - to take their apprenticeship under Jesus more seriously.

2. By pointing out God's priority for our unity. It matters to him a lot.
 3. By noting that a church that divides - over race or politics, or good heavens, music or secondary doctrinal issues - is deficient to the point of not being the church.
 4. And also by noting that, in the process of learning to get along we get better. I can't be the only one who has found that marriage is hard, but one of the reasons it's hard is because it highlights the ways I need to change, to love, serve, give. That marriage has gotten easier and better as I have been reshaped. And that this process is part of what should be happening to the church - which is the bride of Christ.
- E. So, I was going to preach on John 17. But I decided instead to go to Ephesians 2 because it is not only a call to unity. It is specifically a call to have our identity in the context of racial division.
1. The message is that those who have been adopted into the family of God should be so shaped by the Gospel that their identity is far more about him than it is their race or ethnicity.

IV. If you have a Bible, turn to Ephesians 2:11.^[1]

- A. This is a letter written by Paul, who frequently takes up issues of division. (In the daily devotions I have been posting, we have been looking at divisions in the church in Philippi and what he said to them).
- B. In Ephesus it's divisions between Jews and Gentiles and also economic divisions.
- C. As a quick aside, let me note that divisions - especially racial divisions - are not new. They didn't start in the 60s - nor did they start with the slave trade over 400 years before that. We have to back up all the way to Genesis to see the start of division and confusion - ultimately we have to get back to Genesis 3.
 1. The alienation that emerges after the Fall wasn't just between God and mankind, it was between us as well. It started with a rift between men and women and it spread out from there.
 2. We now split up along: age, occupation, net worth, number of years of education, where we got our education, which neighborhood we live in, whether we use Mac or PC, drink Coke or Pepsi, like Country and Western or Rap or Rock 'n' Roll, or classical or pop or whatever. And one of the big ways we divide - and always have - is over race.
- D. So, race-based divisions are not new. Nor are they unique to the US.
 1. In South Africa, you not only have had white over black Apartheid oppression, but lots of tension involving those of mixed race.
 2. In much Central and East Africa, there is a lot of tribal tension. This was most famously on display in Rwanda and Burundi, where the Hutus slaughtered the Tutsis.
 3. In the Middle East, Jews and Arabs go at it.
 4. In the Far East the Japanese look down on the Koreans.
 5. In India it's the Untouchables that get dumped on.

6. In Europe everyone looks down on the Roma (previously known as Gypsies).
7. And I am not even beginning to scratch the surface of the number of ways we have found to divide.

V. Again, none of this should surprise us – these kinds of divisions, this kind of thinking – is all over the pages of the Bible

A. Genesis 1 makes it clear that we are all from one race – the human race. But then things go wrong in Genesis 3, and what follows in Genesis 4 – 11 - is so bad, it's a report of so many fights, quarrels, murders, battles and dumpster fires that it is clear that we are going to find differences and divisions and not get along.

B. But then, in Genesis 12, God calls Abraham and promises to bless the world through his descendants. To make him the father of many nations by bringing the Promised One – the savior – through his blood line. After that happens we read over and over where God calls on them to have a heart for the world – for all people. They are to see their role as reaching out.

1. The prophets make this point over and over, such as in Deut. 4:5, where it becomes clear that though God makes laws that separate them from others, it is so the others will come to faith and join them.

2. Or Isaiah 19, where Isaiah makes it clear that there is a spiritual equality between Assyria, Egypt and Israel.

3. We have examples where God sends the prophets help those from other nations – such as the Widow of Zarithath or Nathan the Syrian.

C. But they do not. Abraham's descendants end up repeatedly falling into a racial, ethnic and national pride that undoes them in God's eyes.

VI. And when we look to the New Testament we see more of the same.

A. There was a literal wall in the Temple, called the Wall of Hostility – that blocked the Gentiles. And a sign said, “if any Gentile crosses this place, they will be killed.”

B. In Matthew 21 Jesus quotes Isaiah 56. He goes to the temple and says, “My house was to be a house of prayer for all people – for the nations (ethnos, from which we get ethnic). But you have made it a Den of Robbers.

C. He later gives the Great Commission, calling on Christians to head out to every nation (every people group). But it's ten years before they think about doing so. And only then because God forces it upon them. In Acts 10, Peter has a dream – one that God repeats three times – in which he is ordered to share the Gospel with Gentiles.

1. As a Jew it was unthinkable to him to do so. As an adult Jew he had likely never had a meal with a Gentile – and was proud of that fact.

2. God says, stop thinking this way. Move on. Pay attention to what I am calling you to.

D. If you know the Book of Acts, you know that the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentile believers – we get a bit of a repeat of Acts 2. And this is clearly a confirmation that God's love was to all people, including Gentiles. Enough already with your racial attitudes.

E. And all is good for a bit. But then Peter lapses back – and Paul has to confront him for his biases, his prejudices – his racism. (We see this in their interaction in Galatia

and then again in the churches first big conference – the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 – which is about this very issue.)

F. And of course:

1. If you read through Paul's letters you see a lot of talk about the division between the races, the hatred and enmity
2. And if you read Revelation you know that the picture of heaven is of a gathering from every tribe and tongue.

VII. I share this to say: racism is not new. Our ability to find “reasons” to not get along – to create divisions, to look down on others, to violate God's heart. To wrongly think that we are better or different is long standing and contrary to God's plan.

VIII. So Ephesians 2

A. Paul is writing to the Gentile-Christians (not unlike most of you listening). They are in Ephesus, and at this point in the letter we are picking up where he is reminding them that they used to be outsiders. Cut off.

B. V11: Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision”, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

C. So the set up here is, remember what it was like to be locked out: separated from Christ, excluded from heavenly citizenship; foreigners to the promise, without hope and without God. Remember what it was like to be cut off both horizontally and vertically - alienated from both God and man.

IX. V. 13: **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** But now that has changed, because of Jesus, because of what God has done in Christ.

X. What Paul is saying to the Ephesians is, you need Christ (we need Christ). And then he is going to say, Jesus needs to define us – become our identity.

A. Reading on: Ephesians 2:14: For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

XI. So, a few points.

A. First - I already noted that racism is a long-standing problem.

B. Second – according to Paul – racism is not the ultimate problem, it’s more of a fruit of our ultimate problem, which is sin.

1. If Paul were here he would not be saying, we have a COVID pandemic or that we have a national racial pandemic. He would be saying, we have a spiritual pandemic. The real bad news is not that we cannot get along or that you might be on the wrong side of history, or even that you might be a racist. The real bad news is – the charge I am leveling against you (and me) - is that we are sinners.

C. Third: the solution to the problem of racism and separation is Jesus.

1. We need to be born again, and then we need to be defined by grace not race. Once you come to Jesus, Jesus must be your identity.

2. It is worth asking, how do you define yourself? We break out in so many ways: ethnicity, political party, gender, generation, occupation. What we need to hear is that any of these can be our primary identity. However, although they are not bad – and they can describe us - they should never define us. Our identity should be found principally in Jesus.

3. And this is critical not only because it is so obviously true – what God thinks about us, what God says about us, what is going to be true of us over the next 10 million years is much more true than our current political thinking. But this is true because if I decide that my primary identity is as a Mac User, then I will look down on PC users. If being a Mac user is important to me, I will start to feel superior to PC users. If I decide that my identity is as Bears fan, then I will look down on Packer fans.

4. Hear what I am saying: I am not saying it’s wrong to be a Bears fan. I’m a Bear’s fan. But what I am saying is, if you are a Christ follower and yet who you are is significantly shaped by being a Bears fan, then you have a problem and you likely are a problem. You are divisive over things that do not matter, or that certainly should not matter in any real way compared to how your identity is formed by Jesus.

XII. Please understand, our ethnicity describes us but it should not define us.

A. If you get your identity – if I get my identity or sense of worth - from my political position, then something is wrong. If you get your identity from your socioeconomic status, then something is wrong and you will feel superior to those of other classes.

B. If you are profoundly proud of being an open-minded, tolerant soul, you will be extremely indignant toward people you think are bigots.

C. If you are a very moral person – and this is one of the ways Christians frequently mess up! – if you are trying very hard to be moral and good, then you will feel superior to people you think are licentious, and you will be exactly like the older brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, who is the one Jesus is calling out.

D. If our identity comes from our education, our race, our money, our kids – if it comes from anything other than Jesus and the Gospel, then we have a problem and we are a problem. We will be divisive.

- XIII. In a book about adoption, Russell Moore writes,
- A. When we find our identity anywhere other than Christ, our churches will be made up of warring partisans rather than loving siblings... What would it mean, though, if we took the radical notion of being brothers and sisters seriously? What would happen if your church saw an elderly woman no one would ever confuse with “cool” on her knees at the front of the church praying with a body-pierced fifteen-year-old-anorexic girl? What would happen if your church saw a white millionaire corporate vice president being mentored by a Latino minimum wage-earning janitor because both knew the janitor was more mature in the things of Christ?^{liii}
- XIV. I am out of time. I’m told online sermons need to be shorter. So let me call you forward.
- A. Men and women, this is a disruptive time, but it is also a time of great opportunity. We have a chance to grow personally – to get better, more loving and Christ like – and we have a chance to help others. To Reach People and ReNew Communities.
- B. We cannot fall into either denial or despair.
- C. We must learn to see others as God does.
- D. We must learn to see and define ourselves principally in Christ.
- E. Jesus is the only way forward. No other solution will work.
- F. He not only brings peace, he is peace
- XV. Lord God, help us lean into what Paul has taught us in Ephesians 2. Help us to have our identity in Christ. Help us to be defined first and foremost by Jesus, by the Gospel. Help us to be people who are more and more like Him. Help us to be people who are not shaped by fear or anger or politics. Help us to find ways to celebrate our families and our cultures but to be most profoundly shaped by you. Lord God, help us to help each other grow. Guide your church. Refine your church. Protect your church. Use even us at this time to see others come to a life-changing faith in you.