

I. Intro

A. We are having a hard time getting along right now. Perhaps you've noticed:

1. On the international stage, there are two hot wars, one cold one and too many smaller conflicts and flashpoints for me to keep track of. Some of those I read claim the world has not been this unsettled since World War II.
2. On the national stage, there is lots of political tension and division. It seems worse than at any point I can remember. I find talk of civil war, certain states succeeding to be a bit crazy, but I suppose there is no longer a non-zero chance of it. And it speaks to the level of civil breakdown.
3. And it doesn't stop there. In the last five years there has been a rise of identity politics, with lots of rancor between groups that divide according to ethnicity or class or gender or sexual expression.
4. And a lot of friendships have ended. More than a few people are having a hard time getting along with their co-workers, neighbors and family. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf notes that if you are not going to embrace and care for people, there are various ways you can mistreat them. He lists a few – you can force others to assimilate, subjugate them, you can eliminate them. The one that stands out for me is just ignoring them. It seems like many I meet are just tired and they want to avoid others.

B. We're not going to solve all of this today.

1. I'd need a full hour for that and I only have 35 minutes. But I bring it to your attention for a couple reasons. First, because it's important to know about. And second, because it's the focus of our text today.
2. We're in the second half of Ephesians 2. And the topic is getting along.
3. To be sure. It's not unity at any price. Nor is Paul writing about unity at every level – the international horizon is not our concern tonight. Nor is national unity.
4. What Paul is calling for in Ephesians 2 is unity within the church. It's about you and me getting along with each other. It's about small groups navigating the tension. It's about people remaining friends with people who are going to vote for the other candidate.

C. How are we supposed to do that? Why would we do that? How is that even possible?

II. This is week three in our study of Ephesians:

A. Which was written by Paul in the early 60s. It's one of the prison letters he wrote:

1. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians are grouped together as prison letters. GEPC

B. Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament. Luke actually wrote more words. Between the Gospel of Luke and Acts it is longer.

C. Ephesians is aimed at encouraging early Christians in their faith.

1. The first 3 chapters focuses on theology - God's plan for salvation and a call to unity. The second three chapters focus on how we are to live – with a lot of relationship advice (on marriage, parenting and work). And it ends with the famous passage about the "armor of God," a metaphor for spiritual strength and readiness.

D. Today we are focused on the idea that the Gospel creates supernatural community

III. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles (non-Jews) by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision (which is done in the body by human hands) —

IV. V12: 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.

A. The Jews are the ones God selected. In Genesis 12 God a deal to Abraham and his descendants (thru Isaac). And he set up his covenant with them. And that unfolds in various ways throughout the Old Testament. It is updated and expanded and then ultimately finalized in Jesus, who ushers in the New Covenant. Which is offered to Gentiles as well.

B. In Ephesians 2, Paul is writing to Gentiles – i.e., to non-Jews – saying, remember, you are not the children of the promise. You were without hope and God.

V. But that is past tense. V13: But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups (Jews and Gentiles) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

A. A big part of what made the Jews the Jews was the Law – which they got back in Exodus. It was a gift. It was given to them so they could live well and be a light the world. Paul celebrates the law.

B. We dismiss it because we know it can't save us. We can't keep it. Right. You know that. If you haven't already tried to do so – to be perfectly good – make a pass at that this afternoon. It will not take long. We are all about the Gospel. One of the values of the law is that it helps us see that we need to be rescued.

C. But, that said, it was a good thing. Indeed, along with the Temple it was what the Jews pointed to to show that they were special. It was a visible sign of the covenant they had with God.

D. But it had become a barrier. It was a source of division between the Jews and Gentiles, and so we read that in his desire to make the two groups into one, Jesus **“has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.**

E. In his desire for unity, Jesus sets aside the law. That is how important unity is.

F. It's probably worth noting that it is often what makes us superior – or at least what makes us feel superior - that causes division. Because, when you feel superior to others it tends to leak out.

1. Superiority may be superiority. I am not in the camp that says all cultures are the same. They are not. Some are better in some things than others are in those things. There tend to be trade offs.

- a) I grew up in a culture good at generating wealth, not so good at making friends.

2. Other cultures have other upsides and downsides. We need to be able to talk about this. The idea that all cultures are morally equal on all things is nonsense. It is the kind of mindless drivel that is coming out of some institutions of higher learning.

G. I think some cultures are better in some things than other cultures. I raise it here to note, one of the ways the Jews were gifted by God was with the Law, but in God's economy the unity of the Jews and Gentiles is of greater value and so Jesus is saying, he was removing the law on the path forward. , Jesus **“has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.**

VI. V15: **His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two** (part of his assignment was to create a unified church. Christ died to reconcile us to God and to each other), **thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.**

A. There are some allusions going on here we don't want to miss. What was put to death on the cross was not their hostility, but Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 5 we are told that God made Jesus sin for us. Not that he made him sinful, but that he made him sin and then he killed sin.

B. Let's not miss the lengths to which God has gone to reconcile us – not just to himself but to each other.

VII. V17: He came and preached peace to you who were far away (Gentiles) and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you (the Gentiles) are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens. This is the first of three metaphors Paul uses. We are citizens of the same country.

VIII. Consequently, you (the Gentiles) are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people (the Jews) and (we are going to get three metaphors here. The first is that we are citizens of the same country) and also members of his household, (we're also siblings in the same family), built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him (here is the third) the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. (We are not just citizens in the same country and siblings in the same family, we are bricks in the same building. We are cemented together). **V22: And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

A. Paul is making the point that the members of the church are to be united. The Holy Spirit should be enabling community between people and at a level that should surprise others. We should get along with people we otherwise would not be expected to get along. We should carry on like long lost brothers and sisters because we are.

B. I am particularly struck by the metaphor of the family. Because, one of the things we know about family is that you don't have to tell your siblings your faults. They know. Indeed, they tend to tell you what they are.

C. There is a sense in which this is to be true of the church. In Hebrews 3:13 we are told **to exhort one another (*parakeleo*) daily so you are not hardened by the deceitfulness of your sin.** This implies that we are easily self-deceived. Blind to our faults. (Yes, I can testify that the more layers of the onion I peel back, the more I realize how deep the faults and delusions go).

D. It also implies that we know each other well enough that we really know what is going on in each other's lives. That is not generally true. It certainly doesn't happen in a room this size – especially if you only show up once a month. This is one of the reasons we push small groups. At the time Paul was writing, churches were small. They met in homes. We need that level of community.

1. As an aside, we're working on a strategic plan. The next five years. And it feels to me as if during the next five years we are likely to see two things happen – neither of which we are ready for. The first is more headwinds. I'm not suggesting that what we might face will rise to the level of persecution. But it might cost us something to follow Christ. There may be more scorn and perhaps some legal hassles. And some of you are not ready for that. Your faith is not strong enough and you lack the kind of support structure to help you navigate even a little blow back.
2. The other thing we are likely to see is more people coming to faith. It seems to me as if secularism and materialism are not working at levels that will start to get more people's attention. And if the church is a community of grace, hope and love. If the people inside the walls of the church are loving and caring for each other – getting along in ways that surprise people – then more people will come to faith. It could happen. But, we are not ready.
3. All of that to say, the unity of the church is important.

IX. So... how does this happen? How can we get along with people who are deeply different from us.

A. Well, in Ephesians 2 we get this case study to learn from. The conflict between the Jews and the Gentiles was real and deep.

1. It is likely that most Jews would have never hung out with a Gentile. Never shared a meal.
2. In both v 14 and in verse 16, Paul uses the term hostility to describe their relationship. The Greek word used might be translated enmity or hate.
3. This is not our problem. (There is animosity towards the Jews to be sure. Antisemitism is a real and growing thing. It's shocking how much of a real and growing thing it is.) But it's not our problem. For us it serves as more of a case study or place-holder for all manner of other divisions: men and women, democrats and republicans, Michigan grads and Ohio State fans, and 10,000 other ways we sort ourselves out and get sideways.

B. What can we learn from Ephesians 2 about unity?

X. As an exercise, earlier this week I made a list of the advice I typically give when talking about deep divisions.

A. This is a dangerous exercise because you can then find what you want to find. What we are supposed to do is called exegesis. What we often do is called eisegesis.

B. But I do get called into these things. I may even get email from people who are on a rampage railing against things they see as wrong.

1. As an aside, let me note that I read all my email, and respond to all of it that I can track back to Christ Church. If you are not in the data base I may not respond. I do not have much success online with those who are ranting.

2. If you are not in the data base I usually do not engage. But I do from time to time. Perhaps I did in the last 48 hours. Sometimes I can't help myself.

C. And so I made my list of the things I try to share. How should we respond with those who are making us mad:

1. Prayer.

2. Forgiveness – absorb some of the pain. Stop the cycle.

3. Fight for an eternal perspective.

4. Be willing to invest the time and hassle to understand why the other side is saying / thinking what they are saying;

5. And humility.

D. I would stand by all of those. They are in other places of the Bible. But then I went to dig into Ephesians 2, they are not there.

XI. Paul advocates two different things. If you step back and think about what he might have said and then look at what he did say, what jumps out is:

A. First – that he calls on them to value unity and community.

1. I was taken by his appeal to Jesus's death as an act designed to remove the division. V14 reads: **For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.** Paul bases his argument for our unity based on the lengths Jesus went to to set it up. He notes that Jesus absorbed a lot of pain to make our unity possible.

2. This led me to reread John 17, where we get the prayer of Jesus. In the first part he prays for the disciples. After a long lead in he says, "don't take them out of the world but protect them from the evil one.

3. Then he prays for the rest of us. V20: **My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,** ²¹ **that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** ²² **I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—** ²³ **I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**

B. The second thing that Paul does is imply that our identity in Christ should overshadow everything else. That the fact that I am a Christian is more important than the fact that I am Asian or a Republican or a Vegan or lawyer or anything else.

1. If you dig in you find that he undermines the identity of both Jews and Gentiles – he is speaking to those far from God and those who are close. He notes that neither are saved by anything they do. Any other aspect of their efforts or identity.

2. He makes it clear that the religious people are not better than the irreligious.

3. What he is underlining is that we should have an identity that is received not achieved. The point being, when we get that right, we are not looking down on anyone else.

4. I'm not saying that if you are Asian or republican (or democrat) or a vegan or a lawyer that those things do not shape your identity. They can and they do and that is OK. But part of the way we are going to have the unity we are being called to is if we see that being a Christian is more important than anything else. Indeed, it is more important than everything else put together.

XII. So, let's understand the assignment. In a world in which everyone is fighting for their rights and demanding their way or just staying home, we are called to a unity that transcends reason – we are called to get along and love one another in ways that cause others to say, “what's up with that. What do those two have in common.” And the answer may be, very little except Jesus. But Jesus is a glue that pulls us together.