

Message for Peace Sunday, September 24, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passage: Ephesians 2:11-22

Building bridges

Last Thursday, September 21, was the International Day of Peace. Our sisters and brothers in Mennonite World Conference have invited us to celebrate our own International Peace Sunday today, September 24. They chose the theme: Building bridges. “In a world divided by difference,” they say, “it is not easy to be a peace church dedicated to the ways of Christ’s peace. As we mark 500 years since the birth of the Reformation, Mennonite World Conference recommits ourselves and our congregations to the work of peace by building bridges. Indeed, our desire for Christ’s peace requires us to embrace those who are different.”

The scripture passage that they chose for today – Ephesians 2:11-22 – is all about building bridges. It’s about bringing opposites together. It’s about connecting the disconnected and creating something strong and new.

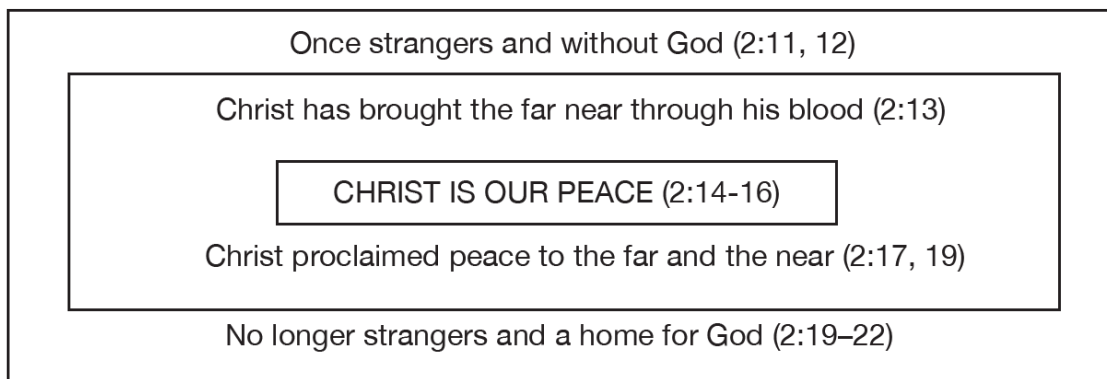
Many of the words that I will share with you this morning come from theologian and New Testament scholar, Tom Yoder Neufeld. Tom wrote the book on Ephesians for the Believers Church Bible Commentary series. He’s an excellent scholar and he’s also a really nice guy. Bruce and I had the chance to get to know him when we took a TourMagination trip to Turkey and Greece. Tom guided us along the footsteps of the Apostle Paul in that area. We came to respect and admire Tom and his deep love for Paul and Paul’s earthshaking, earth changing vision. That vision is articulated in the letter to the Ephesians.

Tom suggests that we approach the book of Ephesians, and particularly our

passage from chapter 2, as if it were a painting in an art gallery. So today as you listen, imagine that you are entering an art museum.

“I love museums and galleries,” Tom writes. “A lot goes into organizing a gallery, like proper lighting, choosing which paintings get set next to each other, how to direct the attention of the viewer.” The writers of the Bible frequently did the same thing in a literary fashion. They used a device called “chiasm.” Chiasm is a kind of framing device – like for a painting – intended to draw the reader’s or hearer’s attention to the center around which the rest of the passage is arranged.

Ephesians 2:11-22



In a chiasm one looks for corresponding elements. The first set, which in this case is verses 11–12 and verses 19–22 of our passage from Ephesians 2, is called the “outer frame.” This frame draws a sharp contrast between before and after.

The upper section begins with a reminder to Gentiles of who they once were: the “uncircumcision,” outsiders to the covenants, “atheists,” and thus without hope. This is very much a picture of how “we Jews” view “you Gentiles” whom “we” have considered

to be beyond the circle of God's care.

Compare now the corresponding lower part of this "outer frame": You are no longer strangers, but members of the family, part of the commonwealth, now not rejected, but chosen by God. Rather than being "without God, godless," you now constitute a home for God.

The inner frame draws attention to Christ's reconciling and restoring activity "through his blood" – this is the upper half of the inner frame – and to his being an evangelist of peace in the lower half of the inner frame. What holds the two parts together is not a stark contrast as previously, but the phrase "the near and the far."

This inner frame is itself more than a frame; it is an example of astonishing creativity. Jesus not only speaks peace, but makes peace by offering his own life. "You who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." This "blood" certainly refers to Jesus' death on the cross, but "blood" is also a symbol of life – the liquid of life. "Blood" thus becomes also a way of speaking of Christ as the giver of life.

Who are these "near and far? The "far" are the Gentiles mentioned in verses 11–12. They – we, in fact – are no longer being cast as the "other," but as family members in exile whom God is bringing home. In verse 18 the evangelist and maker of peace – Jesus Christ – takes both the far – the Gentiles – and near – the Jews – together into the presence of their common divine parent.

And now we come to the very center of the chiasm, our painting, with the singular focus on Christ as "our peace." Listen again to verses 14–16 and imagine what you hear as a painting: "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. 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.”

What do we see in this painting? Probably we first notice the images of destruction and violence:

- a shattered wall, once erected to separate the chosen from the rejected
- a torn fence which was intended to keep what is holy, holy,
- a cross, the supreme symbol of state terrorism,
- an act – actually, two acts – of murder: the murder of the Messiah by

crucifixion, and the Messiah’s own act of murder. Precisely at the moment of his own death at the hands of his enemies, he puts hostility to death!

Christ’s death must never be separated from his life, his teaching, his proclamation of the gospel of peace. He was both a practitioner and an evangelist of peace. The cross was a consequence of his breaking down the walls of division, of his stepping out to the highways and byways with his invitation to the banquet of God, of his confronting a world of injustice, impoverishment, marginalization and disease with the promise and threat of the kingdom of God.

But the tenacity of God’s loving embrace of humanity is seen in the fact that the spurning of that loving initiative – the murder of the peacemaker – became itself the final assault on fear and hostility. When Jesus died, hostility and enmity were also put to death.

But look again at that imaginary painting. In the midst of this carnage, right in the middle of this violence, there are images of peace, birth, transformation:

- the reconciling of enemies, of “you” and “we;”
- the reconciling of both of us together to God;
- and the creation in Christ of a new “us,” of the “new human.”

In Christ, through Jesus, God is starting all over again with humanity, and doing so not by the elimination of godless enemies, but by the costly process of forging bonds of unity and peace for those who were once prisoners of enmity, whose hostilities were forged over centuries, not least on the anvil of piety. It’s all here in this marvelous work of art! Atonement, new creation, reconciliation with God, reconciliation among enemies, a bridge built where there was previously no way to cross between. This is the whole gospel from beginning to end, distilled in one remarkably intense picture.

When Ephesians was written, the division between Jews and Gentiles went so deep that our text refers to it simply as “the enmity” or “the hostility.” It’s not hard to come up with a contemporary example of this, is it? Jesus is confessed as “our peace” because through his ministry, death, and resurrection the division between accepted/rejected, loved/unloved, insiders/outsideers has been crushed, demolished, “murdered.”

“In him” a new humanity is being born out of long-time enemies. In this new humanity “you” and “we,” the far and the near, Jews and Gentiles, old enemies, have access to “our” divine parent – not by ourselves, not with those just like us, but together with those we know as the “other.”

In verses 19–22 “you” and “we” together become one family, indeed, one temple, God’s home. Notice that God’s home is made of stones not only from the covenant community quarry (the “we” in this passage), but more dramatically from the landfill site

of rejected stones (the “you” in this passage). God’s home is a massive recycling project, we might say.

This temple – the reconciled and re-created people of God – is a powerful witness to God’s grace. In its very existence, this temple is a subversive presence of retrieved and rescued “living stones” in a culture of fear and suspicion; a profound and sociologically visible witness to the radical hospitality of the One who is “our Peace.” God loves to live in a home of rescued building materials, in a home permanently under construction.

Tom Yoder Neufeld suggests some ways this text is relevant to us in our time and place. First, this euphoric hymn, this expressive verbal painting, places peace at the very center of our confession of Jesus. That resonates loudly with contemporary Anabaptist emphasis.

That said, we should not be smug. Anabaptist Christians face two dangers, Tom says. One is to see “Christ is our peace” chiefly in relation to God, failing to see how Jesus, in living and giving his life, intends to make peace within a divided and hostile human family.

The other danger is to reduce peace to a political or social goal, too often loosening it from its holistic tether in the confession of Christ. Too often, we only connect peace with Jesus as a model of nonviolence. That is not the answer Jesus is looking for when he asks: “Who do you say that I am?” This passage from Ephesians challenges us to a more comprehensive understanding of peace that exposes both a Christ-less peace and a peaceless Christ as falling far short of the confession Jesus is wishing to hear from us.

To confess Christ as “our” peace is a confession we do not make by ourselves.

Jesus is most faithfully confessed alongside those we would just as soon keep at arm's length, who threaten or disturb our "comfort zone," whether we think of ourselves as individuals or as congregations. To be "born again" is never a solitary experience. We are born into the "new human" together with our enemies. So be careful! The chain of peace, with which we are tied to each other and to Christ, more often than not chafes.

Just as you never know with whom you will confess that Christ is "our" peace, so you never know before whom you make the confession. What does it mean for us to confess Christ as our peace and the peace of the other in a world in which followers of Jesus do not control the levers of power? What does it mean to confess that Christ is "our" peace in the face of indifference and even ridicule? What does it mean to confess that before those who have their own faith? In other words, what does it mean to say Christ is "our" peace, knowing that peace is intended to reach to those who are different, strangers, enemies?

This is no easy song to sing, no easy confession to make. Because to confess this Christ is to invite the enemy in, to chase down the stranger with love, to chain ourselves to the stranger far away and the all-too-familiar one near at hand. It will change us, as it did the early community of faith as it moved out of Palestine into the Gentile regions of the Roman empire. But that is what "salvation by grace" looks like.

The church is and has always been a risky enterprise, most especially when it has been faithful. Risk is at the very core of peace. We rehearse the risk God took in Christ every time we share Communion. In its very visible existence, in its brokenness and unfaithfulness, the church testifies to the degree to which Christ took a real risk in breaking down the protective wall, in building a bridge to bring the "far" and the "near"

together. But precisely in its vulnerability the church can be a forceful witness to the wondrous grace of the One who is “our Peace.”

Sisters and brothers, may we be faithful to the one who builds bridges by building bridges in our own lives between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar, between ourselves and those with whom we disagree. May we come to believe deep down and unshakably that we are all in this together, and that enmity and hostility have indeed been put to death. In our lives as individuals and as a community, may we be a witness to the One who is “our Peace.” Amen.