

Pentecost 9
July 26, 2015

“One in Christ and One with Each Other”

EPHESIANS 2:13-22

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this 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. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's 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.

The other night I woke up to the sound of a cat screaming outside of our bedroom window. You know the sound. Cats like to roam the neighborhoods at night and get into fights with other cats. They don't keep the claws in and softly swat at another cat. They extend their sharp claws to inflict as much pain as possible.

Think of how many people got into fights with other people this past week, In homes across our country husbands and wives fought with each other, brothers and sisters got into fights, and children said disrespectful things towards their parents. People are worse than cats because they know better. They know the right way to treat each other, but still they extend their claws to lash out and hurt. It even happens in Christian families and in the Christian church that people say mean and hurtful things towards other brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today we want to listen to what the Apostle Paul tells us about being one in Christ and how that helps us be united and close to each other because we are God's dear children through Jesus.

Close to our God through Jesus

It is good for us to remind ourselves just how close we are to our God through Jesus. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." There is something we share with every other person on the face of this earth. We were born into this world far away from God. In the verse previous to this Paul writes, "Remember that you were separate from Christ... without hope and without God in the world." The sin I saw in my life this past week separates me from God. It causes me to fall short of God's glory. It makes me unacceptable to the God who created me and knit

me together in my mother's womb. I have no human resources I can rely on to remove this sin that separates me. My only hope for personal peace with God is Christ Jesus and his blood that cleanses me from my sin.

When Paul writes that the Christians in Ephesus were once far away from God this was certainly true because of the idolatry that existed in that city. When Paul first came to the city of Ephesus he found a city that steeped in the culture and worship of the goddess Diana or Artemis. The city was famous for its large temple to this heathen God. People came from all over to worship there. The people of Ephesus made large sums of money selling items related to the worship of Diana. Paul began his mission work in Ephesus in the Jewish synagogue where it says in Acts he spoke boldly and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. Then he had discussions with people on the Word of God that went on for two years. Many believed and many gave up their worship of the goddess Diana.

In our culture today it is considered improper to say anything bad about another person's religious beliefs even if they are wrong. Paul did not hesitate to tell both the Gentiles and the Jews that their hope of bridging the gap between them and their God by their own efforts left them completely without hope. Their only hope for peace with God was through Jesus as he says in verse 17, "He came and preached peace to you and who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we have access to the Father by one Spirit."

The heathen people living in Ephesus were far off. They did not know the truth of God's Word. That is why Paul spent so much time teaching them. The Jewish people were in just as much trouble even though they were near the writings of the Old Testament. They looked at the Old Testament as a way to bridge the gap between them and their God by keeping rules and regulations. They failed to see how everything pointed to the peace that God would provide in Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Dare I look at people the way Paul did? I must. I must see them as people without hope if they do not have Christ. I must see them as people who feel comfortable in their own skin because they are basing their hope on their performance and their efforts at counterbalancing the sin that pops up in their lives.

Have you ever hurt someone in your life? Have you ever swatted at them not with soft velvety paws, but with claws extended? Oh, what a book we could write about all the times we have been hurtful and yes even hostile to others. Paul writes about the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles in verse 14 when he says, "For he himself is our peace who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." How could anyone every think they can put their life right with God by trying to make up for the hurts done in the past with a few good things done in the future? We desperately need Jesus to step in for us and remove the sin that separates us.

Jesus has done it all for us. That is our hope. It says in verse 15, "By abolishing in his flesh the law and its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one man to reconcile both of them to the cross by which he put to death their hostility." All of the best deeds of my life

could never put to death one hostile, angry, even unloving moment in my life. The Fifth Commandment says, "You shall not commit murder." I have broken that every time I have a bad thought toward someone. The commandment says, "You must pay for that sin and the penalty is eternal death." I have no hope.

Jesus abolishes this judgment against us by fulfilling the requirements of the law for us. Jesus reconciled us to our God by his death on the cross. He did not come into the world to say to you and me, "I'll do my part and you do your part." Jesus did it all. He made peace at the cross. It was not the cross of oak wood and nails that paid for our sin. It was the body of Christ hanging on the cross that shed real blood for our forgiveness. Listen to these amazing words in Colossians chapter one, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight."

Because of Jesus we have peace with God and access with God. "For through him we have access to the Father by one Spirit." We have access to God. We are one with God. Verse 19 says we are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household." Because you are one with God through Jesus, your God is not distant and far off. He is close to you. You call him Abba Father which means "dear Father." You know because of Jesus that your Father has this intense personal love for you as Jesus said, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." Your Father wants his love for you to intensify and grow with each passing day. Because of Jesus we are so close to our Father in heaven that we can say with Paul in Romans, "Nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Because you are so close to your God through Jesus, you are also very close, intensely close, extremely close to other brothers and sisters in Christ. That means you never bring out the cat claws in your relationship with your fellow Christians whether it is in your family and whether it is among Christians in your congregation, or Christians who are also part of the body of Christ even in other denominations which do not agree with you in all parts of God's Word.

Close to each other through Jesus

What does Jesus do to help us get along? Verse 14 says again, "For he is our peace who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." How did the Jewish people view the Gentiles at the time of Jesus? They hated them with a passion. They could not say enough bad about them. Even if Gentiles converted to Judaism they had to stay outside the main part of the temple in what was known as the Court of the Gentiles. Why was there so much water available to turn into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee? That water was used for ceremonial washing. People washed the filth of the Gentiles that could have contaminated them before they came to the wedding ceremony. Jesus was criticized for not washing properly. Jesus loved all people. He would not participate in such hateful practices.

From a prison in Rome, Paul is writing to these dear Christians in Ephesus. He reminds them how they were not only one in Christ but how well they were getting along with each other. Former Jews and former Gentiles worship together, pray together and love

each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul reminds them that they are no longer foreigners and aliens but fellow citizens with God's people. They shared citizenship in the kingdom of God. They were members of God's household. And he reminds them that they are "built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." They were a beautiful temple of the Lord. They were a dwelling of the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 2 says, that we are living stones built on Jesus Christ the Living Stone. We are not bricks, we are stones. (Show a brick and a stone) Bricks are all the same. Stones are uniquely made by God in creation and also with water over many years of time. As you worship here today you are sitting next to living stones built on Christ the Living Stone. You share a mutual love for the Apostles and Prophets who build your life together in Christ. Oh, to be sure, there will be moments when our dear brothers and sisters try our patience just as we try theirs. It is OK to deal with conflicts because that is healthy. But it is always with the softest paws possible, never with the cat claws out. We are one in Christ and one with each other. Amen.