

8th Sunday after Pentecost (L16B)
Ephesians 2:11-22

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is a lot to explore in the readings assigned for this Sunday that can be connected to our lives and the times we live in. One theme we could explore is Jesus and the disciples being tired after all the work they've been doing, trying to get away for some rest, but unable to do so because there is such great need, and they just can't *not* help. Does that sound familiar? There is a lot of weariness and burnout that has resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare workers, caregivers, and teachers were particularly hard hit. They have continually had to choose between their own health and wellbeing and the extraordinary demands placed on them by the need to quarantine. And like Jesus and the disciples, they often end up sacrificing their own needs for the needs of others. So that's one direction we could go this morning. Then there's that comment of Mark that Jesus had compassion on the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. We have a tendency to see this as a folksy image drawn from the simple, daily life of the ancient Holy Land. We might even think of it as slightly derogatory. After all, isn't "sheep" a term we use for the deluded followers of political views we don't agree with? Well, speaking of politics, that's exactly what this comment is. In the Hebrew scriptures, the image of sheep and a shepherd is used repeatedly to talk about the kings and the people of Israel. For Mark to say that the crowds that followed Jesus were like sheep without a shepherd was to say that their leaders had failed them. And so Jesus "teaches them many things," presumably things about the kingdom of God, and how God's way of ruling is different from the way we try to rule one another. The Jeremiah reading this morning is support for this comment of Mark, showing that the leaders of Israel have a history of being bad shepherds of the sheep, who rule for the benefit of a fortunate few at the expense of the majority. Even our psalm fits in here. I wonder if you ever thought of this most famous of all psalms as being political. "The *Lord* is my shepherd, I shall not be in want..." God is my king, is the meaning – my president, my congress, my supreme court.

As I said, all of that would be good to talk about and to connect to our present context. But I want to turn instead to our second reading from Ephesians. I want to do that not because it's the easy way out, as I suggested last week, but because I think it might help us identify and address the root of the problems these other readings identify. Ephesians was written to the church at Ephesus, one of the most important cities of the Roman Empire. The church at Ephesus began in the synagogue as a development within Judaism. Jesus was believed to be the promised Messiah who was fulfilling the covenant promises made to the people of Israel. Christianity began as the religion of an ethnic immigrant minority. But very quickly it became clear that what God was doing in Jesus was something much more universal. The good news of God's kingdom was for all people, all those under the yoke of bad shepherds of whatever nation.

By the time the letter to the Ephesians was written, though, the church at Ephesus was predominantly Gentile. And they were confusing their status as proud citizens of a major imperial city with their status in the kingdom of God. Interesting, huh? It's something that happens in our own context too, isn't it?¹ The writer of Ephesians takes the Ephesian church to task for this kind of attitude. "Have some humility! Before you heard the gospel, you were the

¹ I mentioned it in my July 4th sermon, though not by name. It's known as Christian nationalism, the idea that a person's identity as a Christian goes hand in hand with one's identity as an American, that the best Americans are Christians and the best Christians are Americans.

strangers, the foreigners to God's kingdom. What you have, you have only by the grace of God." What's ironic is that the Jewish Christians had had this same attitude in reverse. Jewish Christians thought they were the *real* Christians, and accepting the gospel of Jesus meant accepting Judaism.

Both sides, then, were quick to build walls to exclude others. It seems to be an innate human tendency. And that's the first thing I want us to notice in this reading from Ephesians. Jesus is all about breaking down the dividing walls that we are so eager to throw up between ourselves and others, and quashing the hostility that comes with them. And that is certainly good news for our times, when things seem so hopelessly polarized and hostile. God in Jesus is at work *against* our hostility.

Second, the hostile divisions we create and perpetuate throw up barriers not just among different groups of people, but between people and God. That's why our passage mentions the Gentile Christians being "without God" before hearing the gospel. Why were they without God? Was it because up until then God only cared about the Jewish people? You might get that impression from how they treated Gentiles, automatically equating them with sinners, even calling them "dogs." But that is to forget God original covenant promise to the nation that God created out of Abraham and Sarah. That promise was for God's blessing not only on their descendants, the people of Israel. The promise was also that *through them* all the nations of the earth, the Gentiles, would be blessed. By forgetting this promise and hoarding God's blessing for themselves, they effectively cut off the Gentiles from God. For some reason, God has chosen to use human beings as a vehicle and means for God's blessings. Not how I would do it if I were God. Humans are too unreliable.

But God's ways are not our ways, and our relationships with others are caught up in our relationship with God. We cannot separate the two. And that's the third thing I want us to notice in this text. Our hostility toward one another amounts to hostility toward God. We make ourselves God's enemies by our disdain and animosity for one another. That is why the text here mentions not only Jesus' work of breaking down the walls that divide us from one another. He is also at work to reconcile us with God.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the bad news of course is that left to our own devices things will only get worse, in our politics, in our interpersonal relationships, and in our religion. As Martin Luther observed, in our present condition we are simply incapable of loving God with our whole heart or our neighbors as ourselves, the two commandments upon which all the others depend. The good news for our intractable hostility toward God and one another is that Christ *is* our peace. He does not come to tell us how to get along. He does not come to demand that we get our act together. We're past that. He comes to *be* our peace, to give himself for the life of the world, and to incorporate us into himself as his own body. Or to use another image, he means to transform us God's dwelling place, the place where God lives and continues to work God's loving purpose for all people. Remember that today as you receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. Remember it as you go about your daily life this week. God is at work in you to bring down all your dividing walls and is building you into a house of blessing for all people. May that work be accomplished in us, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.