



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Ephesians 2:14-22 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) 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. (v. 15) He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, (v. 16) and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (v. 17) So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; (v. 18) for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (v. 19) So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, (v. 20) built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. (v. 21) In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; (v. 22) in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

A community is generally defined as a group of people, or organisms, living in and sharing the same environment, interests, beliefs, resources and purpose. A number of other conditions may be present and common, such as being perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society in which it exists. With the advent of globalization, a 21st century definition of community must also include diversity even as it eschews homogeneity.

As I write, the first African American President of the United States has taken office. He has also announced his cabinet in an unprecedented approach to leadership that promises significant change during the worst global economy and terrorist climate in history. On him are pinned the hopes of many who have dreamed that the pernicious disease of racism will be eradicated from the soul of our nation. This great man of courage stands calm and firm, deeply rooted in the knowledge that it is his God-ordained moment to be all that he was created to be for himself, his family and “we the people,” whom he has been called to serve. His election ushers in the opportunity of an unparalleled time of healing and bridging communities. It is also a favorable time for the African American church to effectively model a Biblical reconciliation that is greater than the moderate accomplishments of the larger Christian Church.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 2:14-22

Part One: The Contemporary Context of the Interpreter

In Christianity, emphasis is placed on sharing, participation and fellowship according to a common life and rules (Acts 2:41-47) in communities. The congregation I serve is blessed with people representing sixty-five nations. The flags of these nations adorn our sanctuary platform in a powerful symbol of unity in diversity. These flags represent more than national pride; they are a testimony in microcosm that the longed-for “healing of the nations” promised in Revelation 22:2 is taking root in various communities. They also express the earnest commitment to bridging communities so that people of a variety of ethnicities experience reconciliation with God and each other.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Apostle Paul addressed this epistle to a very cosmopolitan audience in the eastern Mediterranean, where Oriental and Occidental culture and religion convened.

For Paul, preaching the gospel of Christ in the ancient world normally began among the Jews (Acts 18:19; 19:8). It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that they were well represented among the converts in Ephesus but, according to reports in Acts, the contemporary conditions of prejudice often resulted in conflicts rather than reconciliation of Jews and gentiles. Expulsion of believers from synagogues and even violence and imprisonment of evangelists occurred regularly. So intense were some of these cultural and racial tensions that Paul himself was arrested and condemned by the Jews in Jerusalem on the basis of a trumped up charge that he took an Ephesian, Trophimus, into the temple. He was accused of defiling their holy place by this conduct (Acts 21:27-33).

Perhaps these and other mitigating conditions form the basis of the theme in this pericope that is undeniably a call for unity in diversity.

The cause of human estrangement from God and alienation from each other is sin. The ancient rabbis, however, taught that it was a sign of the loss of divine favor. They spoke of gentiles who were far from the privileges of the covenant people of God as being “made nigh” only as proselytes.¹ They negated the truth that Christ gave himself as a sacrifice for the sin of the whole world (Jn. 3:16; 12:32; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 Jn. 2:2). But, Paul, a Jew (Phil. 2:5-6), speaks of a far greater, more fundamental and wonderful way to approach equality - “*by the blood of Christ*” (Eph. 2:13). For instance, converted gentiles and all people disenfranchised by race, class or creed, have moved from being “without Christ” (v.12) to being “in Christ Jesus,” having found new life in him. Consequently, those who had been *far off* from God, with a great gulf dividing them from his covenant people, were *made nigh* in him whose life, death and resurrection has broken down all humanly constructed barriers to unity in communities.

In verse 14, Paul was obviously preoccupied with what, to him, was the greatest division of all that separated Jews and gentiles - a *dividing wall*, that is, *the hostility between them*, both literally and spiritually. The barrier was obvious in the temple proper and the Court of the Gentiles in Jerusalem. There, a stone wall bore an inscription in Greek and Latin “which forbade any foreigner to go in, under pain of death.”² This caused a great deal of conflict and, sometimes, even violent protests leading to imprisonment or death for Jews and gentiles alike.

Paul happily asserts that, “Race and national distinctions as the main things of importance, vanish in Christ,”³ and are replaced by “peace.” Not only can it or should it be said that Christ brings peace into the human experience, *He is our peace* then, now and always! Whatever may have caused divisions before – race, class, or creed – Jesus came to earth to be the Prince of peace and reconciler (2 cor. 5:18) according to the prophets who foretold his advent (Is. 9:6f; 53:5; Mi. 5:5; Hg. 2:9; Zc. 9:10). The barriers of Judaism against gentiles, therefore, hold no significance as far as the standing of any before God who made a way for the separated to become one in Christ.

In verse 16, the twin themes of reconciliation of humans to God and to one another are inextricably intertwined throughout this passage and underscored in this verse. *Through the cross*, on which Jesus died, *the hostility/enmity or sin* was slain as he bore our transgressions and made possible our forgiveness. He, therefore, reconciled not only Jew and gentile but also all people of different divisions into a new humanity *in one body*.

In addition, in verses 17-18, Paul alludes to the words of the Prophet Isaiah (3:7; 57:19) regarding the preaching of peace. Although these Old Testament verses did not originally speak of the way of peace for gentiles, the Apostle found apt application in them to this wonderful new reality in Christ. Paul teaches us that just as peace was made real to all through the cross, now also, through his Church and community of committed disciples, the message of peace and reconciliation must be lived in the world.

Paul adds that *through Him*, Christ, we have *access . . . to the Father*. The Greek *prosagoge* – “access,” could also be translated as “introduction.” Through a *prosagoge* in oriental courts, a person was brought into the presence of the king. Christ is our *prosagoge* through whom there is a way, a door (Jn. 10:7, 9; 14:6), to God. By him, sinners of all races who have been saved by grace through faith are reconciled and given the privilege of coming boldly before the throne of God (Heb. 4:16) and say, “Abba Father” (Rom. 8:15).

At verses 19-20, the Apostle specifically addresses the gentiles, speaking emphatically of the change in their status and position. Before, in relation to the covenant people of God, they were *strangers- xenoi and aliens- paroikoi*, i.e. people who might live in the same country without even superficial rights or privileges of citizenship. That is “*no longer*” the case, for “*you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.*”

Jesus referred to himself as *the chief cornerstone* (Mt. 21:42), the one set in the foundation to bind the building together. Paul applied this building metaphor to the community of believers, i.e., the Church, indicating that it rests on the unique event of salvation of which Jesus Christ is the foundation.

Within verses 21-22, the meaning of the word “cornerstone” is made clear in that it is *in Christ* that the *whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple*, or an edifice fully framed together. It is a work in progress. The Church cannot be described as a complete building until Jesus comes again. Neither will reconciliation or the healing and bridging of communities be accomplished in a day. We are, however, growing toward what is the intended purpose of God. We see this truth more evidently as we note that the actual word used for temple is not the general term *-hieron* describing the entire temple precincts, but *naos*, the inner shrine or special meeting-place between God and the people of God. *Naas* was the most holy place where the presence and glory of God were visibly manifested in the Shekinah. When Christ came, he became the Word made flesh and dwelt among humans (John 1:14; 2:19-21) making the temple obsolete as the divine dwelling among us. Today, he makes his habitation in the hearts and lives of those who allow him entrance by his Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).

Celebration

This passage is cause for the people of God to rejoice that God is reconciling, healing and bridging communities in both the spiritual and natural world. God is doing what some believed would never be possible in America. No, everything is not perfect, but thanks be to God for the changes that have come. The house of America’s political leader, a house built by slaves, is now home to a black man. Churches that were once segregated by toxic history, and age-old suspicions, are worshipping together and bridging divides and the more we come together in church, the more we can come together outside of church.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The echoes of bulldozers breaking down ancient walls and partitions/fences/hedges of prejudice. The noise of spears being hammered into instruments of peace, in the organism in which Christ is the foundation. This sound is accompanied by shouts of joy as all people receive the good news of reconciliation;

Sights: Standing outside the text in our generation, one cannot help but observe old prejudiced, jaded and jaundiced eyes that are forced to watch the new relationships between Jews and gentiles in a world where people are allowed to marry, worship and work together in unity. We are eyewitnesses of a new equality where Christ is Peacemaker between races, classes and nations; and

Smells: The fragrant aroma (Eph. 5:2) of salvation which, when inhaled, transforms the heart, soul mind and body. Reconciliation when applied like a salve (Rev. 3:18) gives sight to eyes blinded by prejudice and, as a second hand odor, is a perfume permeating society, bringing peace and healing to communities.

III. Other Sermonic Comments

Two points emerge at the end of this passage. First, verse 21 ends with “in the Lord” and verse 22 ends with “in the Spirit.” They emphasize what we know by faith and experience, that it is only by a person being in Christ and the Spirit that we become habitations where God can dwell. Second, we are reminded how far removed the Apostle’s inspired thought is from our individualistic concepts. His thoughts dwell on the community of Christians as the “holy temple,” one organism indwelt by the living Christ, and not a series of fragmented, conflicted denominations.

Unity, from Paul’s perspective, is not a matter of organization, but of the sharing of the life, duties and ideals of the Church. In this passage he calls believers from the old way of thinking and behaving, and away from that which hindered full expression of cooperation. He puts away personal rivalries to bring about real reconciliation and true healing in the family/communities of God.

Notes

1. Quotation from the Rabbinical writings in *Ephesians and Colossians*. The International Critical Commentaries. T.K. Abbott, 1899. p. 60
2. Josephus *Antiquities* VIII. 3:2 and *The Wars of the Jews* v. 5, vi. 2.4. Such an inscription was also reported to have been discovered by the French archaeologist M. Clermont Ganneau in 1871.
3. Robertson, Thomas. Archibald. Word Pictures in The New Testament: Vol. IV, The Epistles of Paul. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931. p. 536