

Pastor T.C. Arnold
2nd Sunday after Trinity
Ephesians 2:13-22
June 17th, 2012

What do you think of when I say the word, “Church?” What immediately comes to mind? For many of you, perhaps, this building comes to mind. This place you call “your church” – or maybe the church you remember from childhood. Now, not everyone thinks about a place when they hear the word, “Church.” Some may immediately think of a particular good deed that a group or a specific person from a church has done for them. Some may think of a “horrible experience” that has occurred. And it’s no wonder with all the negative press the Roman Catholic Church and improprieties of priests (not just limited to Roman Catholics) we have seen in recent times. A lot of different things come to mind when we hear this word, “Church.” Some of it is good and some of it bad.

Yet the most proper way to think of church is not about a building or a place. It’s not about the good or the bad. No, rather the church is a people. And that is what St. Paul is trying to explain to the Ephesians in the text for today. And that’s hard to grasp because we like to think in concrete terms – like a building or an event that happened. However, the church is not those things. The church is a people.

What is even harder for the Ephesians, and perhaps for us as well, is that the Church is made up of all sorts of different kinds of people. Ephesus has people of all kinds. This important city was well situated as a trade center with its harbor and well traveled highways. It was a free city, famous for its temple to the Greek goddess Artemis and also for its thriving Jewish population. There were many Jews and there were many Gentiles. The strange thing – many of both groups were becoming Christian. This is good. Or, wait a minute... this is bad. They are different so how can they be the same?

Jews and Gentiles have trouble relating. They were miles apart in terms of history, morals and religion. Historically, they were hostile toward each other and it wasn’t simply a cultural gap that was behind such hostility. Now, Paul talks to them as one church. Ironically, although laws, customs, and traditions have tended to unite certain groups of people, they have nevertheless become a dividing force in humanity. The Law, you see, is deceptive. It does not unite; it only succeeds in surfacing in us the hostilities which by nature we harbor against God, against our brother, and against ourselves.

You see, the law doesn’t just divide people from each other, it divides individuals as well. The law is given and the law is truth. Yet we are often conflicted when we hear it. We at times take a look at the law of God and “pick and choose” which we will apply to our lives – whatever suits best. We even reason how our given circumstances have actually forced us to break God’s law or live in sin – and if indeed that is the case – how could God hold that against us? We say, “I have no choice in my sins. I have to protect someone else.” We say, “I have no choice, because if I admit I’m wrong it will make people think I have made a mistake.” We do a fantastic job at reasoning why we must continue to sin. If sin is involved, the reason is always the wrong reason.

Sin is what divides us from our Lord. It distances us from what our Lord desires for all of us to have. Sin hurts us individually – spiritually. That’s why sin is so dangerous. And sin not only hurts us but the people around us. Sin hurts the body of Christ. Your sins hurt the people you love and even can have an effect on your extended family – like your church. Sin can have us live “outside” of the culture of faith God creates for us right here. It separates and divides. That’s the exact opposite of what our Lord would want for you, your family, and your church.

In Ephesus, with Jews holding to their traditions and ignoring the signs of the Messiah who has come... with the Gentiles and their love for the goddess Artemis (which was also a culture within itself because the temple of Artemis was big business for many) a life together of unity in Christ Jesus was a hard sell. Think about these two very different kinds of people/cultures and then listen to these words from the text again: the Lord came to, *“reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow citizens and with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”* With all that makes them different, Paul points out what makes the “Church.”

Jesus makes the church. Jesus is what binds us together. “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.” You have heard that old hymn before. That “tie” can be none other than Jesus. For the church to be the church, that “tie” has to be more than similar interests or something else we might have in common in our community. That tie that binds us together is Jesus. Jesus transcends our differences. Jesus transcends our squabbles and our disagreements. Jesus is the tie that binds even when something happens that we don’t agree with – or a decision is made in this place that isn’t exactly what you wanted. If Paul can talk to a church in Ephesus that is made up of Jews and Gentiles who are miles apart in matter of culture and life – then he can surely speak clearly and affectively to a bunch of Kansas City Northlanders with a few “south-siders” and Kansas folk mixed in. It doesn’t matter – we are one in Christ – in Him only.

Beloved, keep central what makes us “Church.” The truth is what makes us who we are in Christ Jesus. The law spoken plainly and the pure Gospel shared, announced, and placed upon you. Programs don’t make us “Church.” A great youth group doesn’t make us, “Church.” Talented musicians and gifted workers don’t make us, “Church.” What makes us church is Jesus. You are the church because of the true faith gifted to you by our Lord – and you along with those to your left and to your right come together in His name.

Jesus died on that blessed cross with all hostility our Lord may have against us because of our sins – that which attempts to damage and separate the unity of the church. By means of His cross He creates peace, which is the community of the church, life under the Gospel in the one body together. In the forgiveness of sins which we share in the Supper, in the healing of the Lord’s body and blood, we are able to die to our hostility toward God and toward one another and rise in peace and reconciliation. So let us do that – especially keeping in mind that part about each other.

And for those who are in Christ Jesus there is no more hostility. That doesn’t mean, of course, that we do not now, nor later, feel hostile. We are still in the flesh. Our comfort is not in any knowledge that we have, or will have, to put an end to hostility, but that in fact, hostility is now without basis, without power, since our Lord is able to make all things new, since He is able to hold us to God and to one another, despite our flesh. Because always we have His new and living flesh to share as a sign that peace is possible for Jew and Gentile, for all the hostile of the world, for you and for me. So, peace be with you. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.