

The 8th Sunday after Pentecost
July 18, 2021
Proper 11

The Lessons: Jeremiah 23:1-6
 Psalm 23
 Ephesians 2:11-22
 Mark 6:30-44

The Hymns: # 905 *Come, Thou Almighty King*
 # 644 *The Church's One Foundation*
 # 748 *I'm But a Stranger Here*

The Collect: Heavenly Father, though we do not deserve Your goodness, still You provide for all our needs of body and soul. Grant us Your Holy Spirit that we may acknowledge Your gifts, give thanks for all Your benefits, and serve You in willing obedience; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Division and Unity
 Ephesians 2:11-22
 Pentecost 8

Dear Friends in Christ,

Last Sunday in our sermon we began looking at St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The Epistle lessons for the coming weeks will all be taken from Ephesians, so today we continue to base our message on Paul's words in Ephesians in chapter two. This morning, under the guidance of God, the Holy Spirit, let us think about: Division and Unity.

Sin divides. We've talked about this before. Sin divides. God created us to be together with one another, but sin works to divide and isolate. It ends friendships, destroys marriages, estranges families and it hurts congregations. Ultimately, it works to single sinners out into the grave and hell, the greatest isolation of all.

God's Law divides: it divides between the righteous and the unrighteous. There are examples of this all over the Bible. Look at the Garden of Eden: God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As long as they obeyed, they were righteous and lived in unity with Him. As soon as they disobeyed, they were no longer righteous. They were sinful. Their disobedience led to division They were cast out of the Garden, separated and estrange from God.

Look at the Flood. Noah and his family stood out as believers while the rest of mankind had rejected the Lord. All others refused to believe that judgment was coming in the form of a deluge, even though Noah faithfully preached God's righteousness to them. The Flood came, and mankind was divided between believers in the ark and unbelievers outside. The Law divided between the living and the dead.

Look at the Tower of Babel. All the people of the world had one language, and together they intended to build a tower to the heavens to make a name for themselves—because they did not want to bear the name of God. They only wanted a name for themselves. For their wickedness, God confused their language. Suddenly, different groups couldn't understand each other. They drifted apart to form different nations, kingdoms and cultures. History has since chronicled the distrust, prejudice and violence between nations and between peoples. Sin divides.

One more example from the Old Testament, mentioned in our epistle: as part of His plan to redeem mankind, the Lord chose the nation of Israel to be His chosen people through whom the Savior would be born. This created a division: there were chosen people and not-chosen people—there were Israelites and there were Gentiles. Further, as a sign that they were His people, God commanded that every man in Israel be circumcised. A Gentile who believed in God and His Word needed to be circumcised, too. This also created a division between “the circumcised” and “the uncircumcised,” between believers and unbelievers. Like it or not, circumcision marked a kind of closed communion. Israel was on the inside, and everyone else was on the outside looking in.

Our epistle is full of the language of division—the division brought about by sin. It speaks of the division between “the circumcised” and “the uncircumcised,” between those who are “the commonwealth of Israel” and those who are “strangers to the covenants of promise.” It distinguishes between those “far off” from God and those “brought near” to God in Christ; between hostility and peace; between “strangers and aliens,” as opposed to “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” All of these “division words” mark for us a sad truth that not all people are believers in Jesus. There are believers and there are unbelievers. There is salvation and there is damnation. There is the light of Christ and there is outer darkness. There are songs of praise to God, and there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. There is heaven and there is hell. Sin divides.

The purpose of all the division talk, however, is not to foster or encourage a “them” vs. “us” mentality. St. Paul is not wanting to pit one group against another. Instead, he notes these divisions in order to lead us to this miraculous truth: Jesus Christ has come to end the division, to restore communion between man and God and between us and our neighbor. What he writes to the Ephesians is also true for you: once you were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of God's people and strangers to the covenants of the promise. In other words, you were born sinful and separated—divided—from God and His grace for you; and, therefore, you were without hope. Because of your sin, you were destined to be divided from God in hell for eternity.

But God desires the death of no one, and that is why Jesus came. Because sinful man was divided from God's presence by his own fault, the Son of God became man. As God and man, He straddled that dividing wall, if you will. As God and man, He went to the cross and shed His blood to bring you near to God once again. Having become flesh to take your place, Jesus bore all sin to the cross.

He suffered God's judgment that would have separated you from God eternally. Risen again, He gives you His righteousness. His first words to the disciples after His resurrection were: “Peace be with you”. Now there was peace with God, not hostility. And He has clothed you with Himself in your Baptism, and continues to forgive you and give you that same peace with God.

Once you were separated from Christ, born dead in sin and unable to save yourself. But that is no longer the case. In your Baptism, Christ put His name on you—marked you as His own, and joined you to His death and resurrection. He has joined you to Himself. That is unity.

Once you were alienated from “the commonwealth of Israel.” In other words, once you were outside of the Church, the body of believers. But by His own blood, Jesus has brought you in.

Once you were strangers to the covenants of the promise: you had no part in the Gospel and thus you had no hope. But now, the Lord has spoken His Word to you, promised His grace and life to you forever.

Once you were without God in the world, left to deal with the devil, the world and your sinful flesh on your own. Despite their flatteries and seductions, these three want only to keep you separated from God, broken into pieces and buried in the grave. But you are no longer without God: you are numbered among the redeemed. Against devil, world and flesh you hold up the cross and say, “I belong to Christ—you must overcome Him to have me again!” Against Jesus, your enemies are already defeated.

Once you were alienated, estranged. Now, in Christ, you are a beloved child, a member of the household of God.

Once you were an enemy of God, engaged in hostilities against Him. But Christ has taken away the sin that makes you an enemy; and in Him, you are now at peace with God.

Once you were far off. But now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Once you had no one to turn to, no one to pray to who would listen. Now, through Christ you have access in one Spirit to the Father, who promises to hear your prayers—and to answer them.

Once you were divided from God. Now you are united with Him in Christ.

How has Jesus done this to you? It is no mystery—the text tells us. It is not your efforts or character or desires: it is all the Lord’s doing. He has died for you and He is risen for you. Now, He builds you into His Church by means of His Word: that is what our text means when it says that you are “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.” The Lord used the apostles and prophets to record His holy Word and to point you to Christ, on whom the Church is built. And because you are now forgiven, you are a living stone in that holy temple, being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Once you were far off. But in Christ, you have been brought near.

2. A Couple of Important Further Applications

With that Good News for you, personally, we do well to make a couple of applications for the sake of the Church into which we have been built.

For one thing, there is simply no room for prejudice, racism and bigotry in the Church. These are divisions that sinners make all over the world. In every nation, there are all sorts of distinctions between “us” and “them,” and the purpose of these divisions is power: “Because ‘they’ are not ‘us,’ we can blame them for problems. We can take from them to give to us. We can belittle them

to feel better about ourselves. We can make them feel bad to make us feel better.” Sinners divide to elevate themselves as they denigrate others.

All of this is contrary to Scripture. It is sin. For many, it is an easy sin to fall into. But prejudice against others is not a godly distinction. It is not just a sin against them, but against Christ and His Gospel: for it says that, “Jesus died for us more than He died for them.” Part of the joy of Ephesians is Paul’s announcement to those Gentiles that Jesus is the Savior of all! Everyone whom you meet is one for whom Christ died: to harbor prejudice is to deny this truth. Should you harbor prejudice against others because of race, ethnicity, wealth, or status, repent; and rejoice that Jesus has come to make disciples of all nations. Otherwise, why would you have been brought in?

This is not to say that the Church doesn’t make any distinctions: as Christians, we make the distinctions that the Lord makes in His Word. There is a division between believers and unbelievers, between repentant sinners and unrepentant sinners. We make this distinction, but not for selfish gain or power. This is not a division of “us” vs. “them:” rather, it is a distinction that there are believers who need to keep hearing the Word of Christ, and unbelievers who also need to hear the Word of Christ. We make this distinction because many are still far off, still strangers and aliens; and it is our joy as Christians to proclaim the Lord’s Word, so that those who are far off might be brought near in Christ.

There are other distinctions, too. The Lord says, for instance, that men and women are not interchangeable, so we keep that distinction. He makes a distinction between believers who are well catechized and believers who are not, between strong faith and weak faith, between those who are prepared for the Supper and those who are not. Again, we make these distinctions because the Lord does: not to elevate ourselves, but for the care of souls and the sake of the Gospel, that many might come to faith and be strengthened in faith.

Everyone is one for whom Christ has died. Some believe, many do not. Some will be untrustworthy, even predatory and harmful—not because of skin color or ethnicity or social status, but because of sin. But everyone is one for whom Christ has died. This is what we practice as Christians.

The other application follows this one, though it’s perhaps a bit harder to get our head around. I mentioned before the Tower of Babel, where God divided and dispersed mankind because of their sin by confusing their languages. From there, mankind drifted apart and different cultures developed. To the extent that any culture turns from God to worship idols, that culture has turned from God. This is, I think, the biggest danger of multiculturalism and the notion that every culture is equally good. The more any society turns from God’s Word, the more ungodly it will become. This includes our own culture and society today.

I mention this because the Church seems continually to undergo a debate about culture and the Church’s mission to make disciples of all nations. The prevailing idea seems to be that the Church needs to reflect the culture around it as much as possible in order to reach the lost. Common examples today would be along the lines of, “If unbelievers listen to pop music, we need to use pop music in the Church;” or, “since youth like narrative more than propositional truth, we should abandon the catechism in favor of telling stories.” Another line along these lines is the

curious criticism that our order of service is “German Lutheran” and therefore won’t speak relevantly in our culture to those who are not.

This is hardly true: our order of service actually originates in Africa, which leads me to my point. The Church is not supposed to absorb itself into the culture where it is found: the Church is its own culture—it is the commonwealth of believers. It is not to be a facet of a nation—it is its own nation in the sense that it is the kingdom of God spread throughout the nations of the world.

Perhaps we can illustrate this in a different way: I say “Hindu,” and you think, “that religion is part of Indian culture.” I say “Buddhism,” and you think, “that is part of Far Eastern culture.” I say “Islam,” you think, “Middle Eastern culture.” I say “Christian,” and you think...well, what do you think? See, the Church is not part of one culture in the world. It is the people of God throughout the world. It is a culture unto itself. If our Afro-Germanic worship looks different and sounds different than the world around us, that is quite all right: because this declares that we have a different message than the world around us.

And this is the different message that we proclaim to all who will believe: once you were far off, but in Christ you have been brought near. Once you were aliens, but now you are citizens in Christ. Once you were strangers, but now in Christ you are members of the household of God. Once you had no hope: in Christ, you have eternal life. Once you were an enemy of God: in Christ, you are His beloved child and heir of His kingdom. Once you were lost and condemned in sin. Now, in Christ, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.