Sunday, 7/18/21

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

11So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—12remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14For 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. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

21In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

**Sermon**

There’s a saying that wherever two or three are gathered there will be politics. A former parishioner told me that one day when I complained privately about something that was going on in the church. The exact complaint escapes me—maybe there was a conflict, or maybe a session meeting had run long. My parishioner had a point: people have an unlimited ability to argue over anything and everything. Most of us are too aware of what’s going on in the world to disagree with that. Actual politicians have in many cases giving up even pretending to govern and taken up arguing and rumor-mongering instead; some would do better as insult comics. Meanwhile the potentially deadly infection that we’ve been preoccupied with for over a year now, the one that was supposed to be on the road to extinction by now, is in the early stages of another surge because people can’t agree about whether or not vaccines prevent illness. Churchgoers like to think they’re above this kind of behavior, but we’re very much a part of the vaccine arguments and most of the other culture war issues. Several years ago when the PCUSA was discerning whether to change its ordination standards, some delegates to the General Assembly were so afraid for their safety that they skipped meetings. Jesus may have said that where two or three gather in his name he’s there among them, but sometimes people prefer politics instead.

Paul has often been criticized for being opinionated, sexist, judgmental, and a lot of other things. The books that have been written attacking and defending him could fill a library, but there’s no doubt that he had strong opinions and wasn’t afraid to step into a conflict. (My own feelings about Paul are colored by memories of a seminary professor who used Paul’s writings to rant about culture wars issues. After more than a decade out of seminary I can usually separate my thoughts about Paul’s letters from my feelings about my professor.) Ephesians shows us a different side of Paul. Here he isn’t creating controversy or expounding on doctrine; he’s explaining that faith in Christ should lead to unity.

* 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14For 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. 15He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.
  + Christ died for all, not just for an “insider” group
  + Reconciliation: bringing groups together, overcoming hostility
    - Like marriage counseling: helping those who are fighting to have peace
    - All are reconciled to God by Jesus, who died on the cross for all; therefore we should all see ourselves and each other as those who Christ died for
* Circumcision vs. uncircumcision
  + Jews were circumcised—this was a physical marker of group identity; the Jews were justly proud of their heritage
  + Gentiles were coming into the gathering of Christ-followers, circumcision was becoming a marker of who could be “in” or “out”
  + Laundry list of divisions within the churches that Paul wrote to: Jews vs. Gentiles, believers who were baptized by different evangelists, rich vs. poor
* Our own divisions
  + Liberal vs. conservative (politics and theology)
  + Worship wars: what kind of music should we sing? Should we have liturgical or less formal worship services?
  + Arguments over church property
* What Paul says about such divisiveness
  + There’s one humanity, not two—all stand before/with Christ together
  + “in his flesh”: we’re part of Christ’s body, divisions should be overcome

Elsewhere in his letters Paul deals with making room for differences of opinion and coexisting with those we disagree with. Here he reminds us that Christ died to make peace between God and humanity, and between factions. Life in Christ means striving for peace.

Peace isn’t an abstract notion or a fantasy. To follow Jesus is to seek peace.

* 21In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.
* Peace as goal and method
  + Reconciliation, peace, justice are goals—that’s what God call us to
  + …so we act peacefully
* Our divisions now: racial, political, national
  + These aren’t real/absolute categories: we invent them
  + How can we break them down?
    - Love one another
    - listen