

# ONE IN CHRIST

Ephesians 2:11-22

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Series B)

July 22, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 2, verses 11 through 22. It is on page 827 of the pew Bible.

Beginning with last week's epistle lesson, the lectionary takes us through an eight week series in *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. I'm not sure yet if the sermons will all follow the epistle lessons. I'm kind of thinking they might. So it would be a good idea sometime in your spare time to just sit down and read the entire letter. It doesn't take very long, and it will help you gain an understanding of the overall message of the letter. And if you pay close attention to the sequence of the readings from week to week, you'll notice that some passages get skipped over. That's just because those passages already show up at a different time on the liturgical calendar, so the lectionary doesn't repeat them. One of those passages that gets skipped is Ephesians 2:1-10. We heard that reading during the season of Lent, so it gets skipped over here. But it might be the most significant part of the letter, and it sets up the text we are about to hear, so I'll briefly review it.

Paul teaches that all of us were at one point spiritually dead in our sins. We were not sick, we weren't merely weak. We were dead. And we certainly weren't neutral in spiritual matters. Instead of following God, we were actively following Satan. Instead of being neutral toward God, we were hostile to God. And being dead in our sins, we were unable to do anything—not even the slightest bit—to help ourselves. So God did what we were unable to do. He “made us alive together with Christ” (2:5). In other words, God converted us from sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ and made us his children. And then comes what may be the two most well-known verses in the letter: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (2:8-9) Paul takes salvation completely out of our hands, and places it squarely in God's hands. So we have no cause for boasting, but we also have no cause for fear.

And then we get to the reading for today. Please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From Ephesians 2, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For

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through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Dear saints,

We are one. As you look around this sanctuary at your brothers and sisters in Christ, you are looking at those with whom you are one. You might not all even know each other. It's even possible that you do know one another, but you don't really like each other. That's too bad, because you are one with one another whether you like it or not. We are united with one another because we are each baptized into Jesus Christ.

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This issue of church unity was one of the controversial issues in the early Church, and it's one of the primary themes in *Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*. So in order to better understand who we are and get a clearer picture of what the Church is, it will help to consider the situation in the early Church. So let's go back to the first century.

It was a unique time in the history of the Church. For one thing, everything was new. The Jewish Christians were still getting used to everything that changed after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. They were getting used to a completely new substance of worship. Gone were the sacrifices of the Old Testament. In were the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. And there was a whole new teaching from the apostles as they explained all the implications of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They were learning new doctrines, and they were learning to read the Old Testament in a whole new light. They were seeing more and more how it testified of the Christ.

But perhaps the biggest practical change was the inclusion of the Gentiles. Now it wasn't like Gentiles couldn't join Israel before Jesus' resurrection from the dead. They certainly could. All they had to do was submit to the Old Testament ceremonial law, including circumcision for the males. So it was never really about ethnicity. That's a common myth about Israel that continues even today—that being a Jew was somehow a matter of ethnicity. It's not, and it never was. Put that idea out of your minds. In the Old Testament it was primarily about circumcision. You can see that in verse eleven. The distinction between Jew and Gentile is the same as the distinction between "the circumcision" and "the uncircumcision." It was not actually about race. So for Jewish Christians in the First Century, the thing they had to get used to wasn't the inclusion of Gentiles; it was the inclusion of *uncircumcised* Gentiles. And this became the first big controversy in Church History. You can read all about it in Acts 15. Some of the Jewish Christians were bothered by the presence of uncircumcised Gentile Christians and they wouldn't associate with them. So the apostles took up the issue and determined unanimously that it was not necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised.

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The reason for this is that Jesus Christ has broken down the wall of hostility (2:14). And that's what Paul talks about in this reading from Ephesians 2. It's all about Jesus breaking down the wall of hostility.

Now when Paul talks here about the wall of hostility, he's not talking so much about the division between Jews and Gentiles. That's part of it, but it's only a secondary part of it. The main part of it is the wall of hostility between God and all of humanity. The coming of Christ brought peace to both Jews and Gentiles (2:17). Both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God "through the cross" (2:16). So it's not like the Jews were at peace with God before Christ came. They were not at peace, because the same Law that distinguished them from the Gentiles also condemned them on account of their sin. They needed reconciliation just as much as the Gentiles did. So it's because Jesus broke down the wall of hostility between God and all of humanity that the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down.

And this is essential to all Christian unity. The unity we have as Christians is never direct. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are never united to each other directly. It is always indirect, because our unity is mediated through Jesus Christ. If I am united to Christ, and you are united to Christ, then we are united to one another because we are united to Christ. That means that you and I and whoever—we can't just decide to have unity with one another. Our unity exists because of our union with Christ. It also means that we can't make that unity go away without severing our union with Christ. If I am baptized into Christ, and if you are baptized into Christ, then we can't break the unity we have with one another unless we first leave that baptismal covenant with Christ. And that would be a bad idea.

So that's part of how this passage applies to us. But first it applied to Jewish and Gentile Christians as they began to understand that they were not separated from each other anymore, not even in the slightest bit. Now there were probably some Jewish Christians in Ephesus, but based on the way Paul speaks here, it seems like it was mostly Gentile Christians. Paul speaks to them as those who had been strangers and aliens to the household of God (2:12). This is one of the things the Old Testament Law did; it distinguished Israel from all the other nations.

Now when we talk about Old Testament Law, it's helpful to distinguish three general categories of the Law. I'll name the three general categories, and then I'll explain them. The three categories are the moral law, the civil law, and the ceremonial law. The moral law has to do with what is right and wrong on a universal basis. For example, things like murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and disobedience to parents are wrong and sinful regardless of when or where you live. They are universal moral absolutes. They apply to all people in all places and at all times. So these commandments still apply to us Christians today, and these laws will even be true in heaven, though we won't really have any problem keeping them there.

Then there's the civil law. These were the laws God gave to govern the way the nation of Israel functioned. This would include laws about how land was distributed and passed down, as well as sentences for different crimes. So, for example, the Old Testament laws about stoning people for offenses like adultery, we consider those to be part of the civil law. Those laws were specific to one particular nation at one particular time. They are not universal laws that dictate how every government in the world should function. And, as best as we can tell, the general purpose of those laws was to keep the nation pure, or at least less impure, as well as to distinguish Israel from other nations. God wanted them to stand out as different, and he

prescribed extreme measures to prevent certain sins from becoming common practice among the people of Israel.

Then there's the ceremonial law. These were the laws that dictated how the people of Israel should worship. So the ceremonial law includes all the stuff about sacrifices, feasts, the Sabbath day, what foods they could or could not eat, and, as in the case of this text, circumcision. Some of these laws seemed kind of arbitrary, like not being able to eat shellfish (Lev. 11:12) or shave the corners of your beard (Lev. 19:27). And people have proposed different theories as to what the point of these laws was. Perhaps there were some health or hygienic purposes. But that's all speculative. The best explanation is that they did two things. First they prophesied of Christ, and, second, they distinguished the Israelites from other nations and other religions. God wanted them to be a peculiar people set apart to himself. So circumcision was a mark that distinguished the Israelites from other people, but it was a mark that only God could see.

So when we consider the Old Testament law, we can identify these three categories of moral, civil, and ceremonial laws.

And this distinction, by the way, is helpful when critics of Christianity accuse us of being hypocrites for insisting on something like natural marriage while not keeping the food laws. We are accused of being hypocrites for living by some laws but not others. But the key is noticing there are different kinds of laws. The moral laws are universal, but the civil and ceremonial laws were particular to one particular nation at one particular time. And sometimes there is some overlap between categories, but when you treat the text fairly, it's usually not hard to tell which laws are moral and which laws are civil or ceremonial. And we remember that part of the purpose of the civil and ceremonial laws—especially the ceremonial laws—was to distinguish Israel from other nations and religions.

So these Gentile Christians in Ephesus are those who had been distinguished out. They were separated from the household of God because they did not submit to the ceremonial laws. But now Paul says that they have been brought near and have been made one with those they had been separated from, because both groups are joined to Christ by faith, and by extension, to one another.

Christ "has broken down the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances" (2:14-15). Now that word "abolish" is kind of strong. Especially when we remember that Jesus himself said that he did *not* come "to abolish the law or the prophets ... but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). So how do we reconcile what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about *not* abolishing the Law with what Paul says here about how Jesus *did* abolish the Law? It seems like they can't both be right. Part of the answer is that the words they use are actually different, even though they get translated the same in English. The word Jesus used (καταλύω), which is translated as "abolish" in English, is different than the word Paul used (καταργέω). The word Jesus used has more of the meaning of "destroy," while the word Paul used is more along the lines of "invalidate." So there's at least a subtle difference there.

But I think the solution has more to do with the distinction between the different categories of law—the distinction between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws that we were just talking about. Christ fulfilled all these laws. That means that obedience to any of these laws is no longer necessary to earn God's favor. God's kindness is given freely on account of Christ. But the moral law is still God's will for how he wants his creation to function. It is still universal.

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That's why we still strive to live by the moral law, even though our position before God does not depend on our performance. But, remember, the civil and ceremonial laws are not universal. So Paul can speak of Christ abolishing those laws. Since they are not universal absolutes, they become obsolete when Christ fulfills them. So for all practical purposes, those laws are abolished for Christians, even for Jewish Christians.

Now this took some getting used to, especially for Jewish Christians. But from what we observe in Church history, they did get used to it. And within a generation or two, the entire distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians disappeared. They recognized that they were one in Christ, and they stopped distinguishing between one another. They were just Christians. There is no distinction any longer between Jew and Gentile.

The two key points to remember are that Jesus has fulfilled the entire law for us, and we are joined to him in one body. So through Christ we all have access to the same Father, and that access is in the same Holy Spirit (2:18). There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, and there is no advantage to submitting to Old Covenant regulations. In the Old Covenant, the Israelites were near to God in comparison to the Gentiles who were far away. But in the New Covenant there is no "near" and there is no "far." There is only "in." We are *in* Christ. We are not far. We are not even near. Near to God is still too far away. Instead we are *in* Christ. You don't get any closer than that. When you are in Christ, nothing you can do can get you closer. Submitting to various regulations cannot get you more "in." When you're in, you're in, and that's all there is to it.

The covenant of circumcision in the Old Testament, which distinguished the Israelites from other nations and set them apart as belonging to God, has now been replaced by Baptism. Paul makes that point very clear in his letter to the Colossians (2:11-12). We are not merely distinguished from other religions. We are not merely set apart for God. And we are not merely near to God. We are in Christ, because being baptized means being baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. We are not far away. We are not even near. We are in.

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So when you look around this sanctuary at these other children of God, you are one with them. And it's not because we subscribe to the same doctrine. And it's not because we all decided to join this congregation. Those things are good, but they are not the basis of our unity. The basis of our unity is Jesus Christ and the fact of our Baptisms into him.

You have been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. We who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. More than that, we are in Christ. We have all been made one body through the cross. This is our reality. Whether you like it or not, we are one, for we are one in Christ. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.