“In Christ: No Longer Strangers”
Ephesians 2:11-22

Last week, we talked about the beginning of chapter 2 in Ephesians which in many ways is the heartbeat of the Christian faith: salvation. But we explored that the way Paul talks about salvation is in terms of that which was dead being made alive, we who were bound to sin, bound to follow our own self-interest, are released, set free, and made alive in Christ, saved by grace through faith, to be a part of something greater, to be, as v. 10 puts it, what he has made us to be. And among the many important points we can take from that is that as we continue in this series “In Christ,” our identities are most fully realized and we are most alive when we accept that our best self is what happens when we stop trying to be our best self and instead focus on who we are in him, and what he has made us to be.

And this week, Paul introduces another core component of the Christian faith, something that is inseparable from one’s identity and salvation in Christ, and he puts it in the highest possible terms: the church. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Paul’s funny to me, sometimes. Right after talking about grace and faith and salvation, it’s like he asks himself, “Well, what should I write about next? I got it! Circumcision. I should write about circumcision.”

He writes, “So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision,’ by those are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands.” Seems a bit out of nowhere. But here’s why he did it.

Easily the number one most divisive issue for the first generation of the church wasn’t predestination or the Trinity; it was this: just how Jewish is this new Christian thing going to be? Very briefly, the reason that was so divisive was because for centuries, the Jewish people considered themselves to be God’s covenant people, God’s household, God’s chosen family, and the mark, the sign of being in that family, at least for the fellas, was circumcision, tracing all the way back to Abraham.
Then along comes this Jesus guy, who claims to be the Christ, the Messiah, the fulfilment of all the longing and expectation of Jewish history and law and prophecy. Well, he dies, but then people start spreading rumors that he rose from the dead. People go all over saying this, inviting other people to believe it too. And people did, many of whom were Jewish, but also including many who were not. Those who were not were known as Gentiles.

So the question came up: if this Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Christ, just how Jewish are his followers supposed to be? Some thought they were under the same covenant as before, and therefore, again for the fellas, they should be circumcised. Others thought, that old law isn’t in effect anymore, therefore don’t worry about it. Might not seem as big an issue now, but it was a really big deal, and nearly split the church in two right from the start, effectively along ethnic lines. There were Jews, and then there were Gentiles, and they usually didn’t like each other, and this was the case everywhere. How were Jews and Gentiles supposed to be a part of the same group?

That’s what Paul is speaking to. It’s why he continues in v. 12: “remember that you [speaking to Gentiles] 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.” At one point, these Gentiles were not a part of God’s covenant people, the people of Israel, God’s adopted family. They were cut off, aliens, strangers.

But then the good news. In v. 13, “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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. He 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, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.”

Whew. There’s just a lot there. We could spend weeks here. But he’s saying that through the cross, through the blood of our Lord, this great point of division among Christians is broken down and overcome, uniting what was once two into one new humanity, one body, the church. It means that embedded within the gospel of Christ is this call to his followers to gather, that no matter what differences they might have had, in his blood they are united. And because Paul is talking about this right on the heels of talking about God’s salvation of his people out of death, out of a life that was so bound by our own sin, our own selfishness, and into a life as a part of something much greater, he’s saying woven in the very fabric of salvation is the gathering of Christ’s followers, God’s adopted family into one body, the church.
And then there wasn’t a problem anymore, and the church lived happily ever after.

It’s a bitter, tragic irony of the human heart that we simultaneously have this urge to connect, to live in community, while also having this urge to self-segregate, to be with others that are like you are, those that look, live, and think like us. It’s all part of that innate desire to do what feels best. We feel safer, more comfortable. And it can lead to our destruction.

I read this article that argued that electricity and indoor plumbing are the greatest blessings and curses upon modern society. In America in 1890, less than 10% of households had running water and electricity. By 1950, over 80% had water, and over 90% had electricity. Think about how huge a shift that was. Completely changed American life. At the beginning of that time, folks spent an average of 60 hours per week on household chores. At the end of it, less than 20. Put that into perspective. Think about what you would do, if an invention suddenly freed up 40 hours for you every single week. It’d be awesome, right? But here’s the kicker: do you think folks in 1950 felt closer to other people than folks in 1890? Do you think we do now?

I heard this story, and I didn’t vet it, so I don’t even know if it’s a true story. But it’s about a village somewhere with a small river next to it. And it was common practice here for folks to wash their clothes in the river, and so folks would gather at the river while they washed their clothes. Then the village got running water and electricity, and over the span of just a decade or two, people got washing machines, eliminating the need to go to the river. Good thing, in a lot of ways. Freed folks up. Probably kept the river cleaner. Probably kept the clothes cleaner too. But over the same span, the village experienced a decided increase in those suffering from anxiety and depression. And no one could figure out why.

Friends, this isn’t to suggest that washing machines cause depression or that we should all go back to the Stone Age, because I don’t think that. Indoor plumbing’s a good thing. But with all that convenience, are we closer now than we used to be?

Here’s another example. Right now, on your person right now, many of you have a computer more powerful than the one that sent astronauts to the moon and back. Through it, you have access to more human knowledge than any library has contained in all its books ever. You could be connected through it with someone on the other side of the world. You can keep up with friends and family with just a few flicks of a finger. So let me ask you: do you feel closer to people as a result? Again, the point isn’t to go back to the Stone Age or dump our smart phones. But isn’t it tragic, that all the steps we take to try to free ourselves up, to try to connect to other people, only end up making us feel more and more isolated?
The reason for it is because while we want to be connected to other people, we also want to feel safe and comfortable, which means that we typically prefer to connect with other people like us. And as we are able to be more and more selective about those we connect with, whether through technology or convenience or whatever, it means the niches become more and more specific.

Stephen Colbert, now host of the Late Show on CBS, was years ago the star of a satire show called the Colbert Report. If you’re not familiar with it, he was a fake political pundit, to poke fun at what he saw as hyper-partisan news media. And he had this regular segment called “The Word,” when he would go on a rant about some topic defined by a catch word.

One night, he did a segment on the word “Lunchables.” You know those snack packs with plastic dividers, and the pepperoni over here and the cheese over here. And this is what he said, and I’ve trimmed it down a bit—and again, this is satire, all tongue in cheek. “America was once called a melting pot, then called a salad bowl, but I prefer ‘Lunchables.’ …Like the vacuum packed snack tray, America should be patriotically divided into sanitary compartments of like-minded citizens…. Americans may have their differences, but I believe we can come together by living hermetically sealed apart. If you disagree with your neighbor, just find a new neighbor. One just like you.”

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace.”

That word from Paul is indeed an assurance that despite our own tendencies to self-segregate, we are indeed united by the blood of our Lord. But it’s also a knife in the side because it’d be pretty hard to look around at the church and say that it’s united, and that’s just heartbreaking. God has chosen and gathered an adopted family together, a covenant people dearly bought and redeemed by the blood of his Son, and it’s that very blood that should bind us together, but rather than stay together the church has over the centuries splintered again and again, choosing to divide according to theological opinion, and in most cases gathering among those that look, live, and think similarly. And that shouldn’t sit well with us.

But there’s hope here too, because sometimes the church lives up to it. Sometimes the church stays together. This church did. As I’ve learned more and more about our congregation’s history, I know that a little while ago this church went through a pretty tough stretch, a time when it would’ve been easy just to split, divide into the company of the like-minded. When faced with disagreement or division, it often feels easier just to split up. But you didn’t. Sure, some folks parted ways. But you didn’t. Most didn’t, and if you were here during that time, you know better than I do how hard a time it was, and this church should be proud
of the fact that despite pressure to do otherwise, in large part, this church stayed together.

Here’s why it’s important, not just for us here now, but across the board, why it was so important for Paul to bring this up. It’s because the church has been made to be more than just a gathering of the like-minded. The church has been made to be a sign that a different power is at work. Think about what you would call the most divisive issue that faces the church today. There’s probably a short list that many of you are thinking about right now. Guess what? The issue that divided the church then was even more divisive than whatever you’re thinking about, and the blood of Christ broke that down.

Now that’s not to say we just gloss over disagreement, that good doctrine isn’t important. It is, and Paul cautions us to precisely that effect elsewhere in Scripture. We are supposed to struggle after the truth, to grapple with Scripture, to seek to guide, and at times correct each other, but we are by nature far too quick to say, “I disagree with you. Therefore, goodbye.” In Christ, that’s not who we really are. That’s not what Christ has made us. That’s not how the church is built.

I was speaking with one of you the other day, and you didn’t want to be named in the sermon. But he noted that what he sees within culture is a longing for transcendence, that was the word he used. Great word. Put another way, a longing for the holy, for the divine.

And what is so powerful about this passage, when Paul talks about salvation and the church being brought together and united in the blood of Christ is just how he says the church is built. In 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,” and here’s how that house is built, “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;” and here’s where we come in, “in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” What Paul is saying here is incredible. He’s saying that this very act of gathering, this coming together as the church, this staying together even through the most divisive of issues, is the very dwelling place of God, a holy temple in the Lord.

Friends, the world indeed is looking for connection, a place to come together, a place where our own tendencies to splinter and divide isn’t the rule anymore, and the world indeed is seeking transcendence too, a touch of the holy, and the church, as Paul tells us, by the blood of the cross, is both.

Now let us live like it.