

"Aliens Brought Near"

July 1, 2018

Scripture: Ephesians 2: 11-22

*<sup>11</sup> So 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 — <sup>12</sup> remember 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. <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 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. <sup>15</sup> 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, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*



When you look to your left or perhaps to your right, who do you see? When you look up one pew or back one pew, who do you see? When I think back to July 2016, as I sat right there in the front pew, almost two years ago now, I can remember wondering who all these people were. Yes, I had met a few folks, but most of you were still really aliens to me. But you are strangers no more. You are now family. You are now aliens brought near. As I thought about that, I wonder if you can even remember when you first came to this church, when you first sat in that pew. If you first came to this church as a child or young person, can you remember the first time you walked into worship or into a Sunday School class? Can you remember wondering beforehand if you would know anyone or if you would make friends here? If you came as an adult, can you remember your first time here, hoping to see that person who invited you or hoping that you saw someone you knew so you had someone to talk to?

Perhaps you first came uninvited, just seeking a church to call home. Maybe you sat in the back, arriving a little late and slipping out a little early, hoping to just be here for worship, not quite sure that you wanted to become a part of this family. Or maybe you are here for the first or second time today. Just here to see what things are like. Here to see if you might fit in with this family.

Wherever you fall along this spectrum of belonging, please know that we are all seen the same way by God – simply as beloved and cherished children, heirs of an inheritance beyond our understanding and members together in the family of faith. Today we delve into the second installment in this sermon series, looking at our place in the family of God and at how the church is called to show what true community is really supposed to be like. With that, let us pray...

Paul opens today's passage using a term that is common in the New Testament:



Gentiles. In a general sense, this term means outsiders. For the Jews, Gentile meant all non-Jews. For the early Christians, who were still Jews, this term would originally mean all non-Christians. As the church progressed, the term

Gentile would come to be understood as all non-believers. This would be the working definition that the Ephesians would understand when Paul said,

*"remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth ... remember 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".*

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In essence, what Paul was saying is: remember when you were aliens on the outside looking in? Can you remember when you were NOT a part of this family of God? Can you remember the barriers that were there, keeping you out? Good, now that you remember that, let's talk about how you have become a part of the family of God.

In verses thirteen and fourteen, Paul reminds the Ephesians of what first brought them into the family. It is the same thing that allows you and me to become part of the family of God. Please join me as we read these verses together:

*"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".*

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This is great news, isn't it? Through the blood of Jesus, we who were once far away have been brought near. Today, in fact, we will celebrate communion,

remembering how the blood of Jesus brings us near again to God. Jesus has made us into one family, breaking down the walls that divide and separate us. To those who heard this message in the first century, this was a radical call to community. Friends, it is just as radical of an invitation today as it was 2,000 years ago.



In Paul's day, the claim that *"he is our peace"* was naming Jesus as Lord. At that time, to pledge allegiance to Christ and to the family of God was risky because it went against the established powers that be. Instead of "aliens brought near", a believer would be pledging allegiance to One who made them aliens to the political and religious powers of the day. Rome, the dominant political power of Paul's day, said to pledge allegiance first to Caesar and then to the Roman Empire. Roman emperors were viewed as "vessels of the divine" and would be seen as the source of peace. To name another source of peace was politically subversive. You would be denying the political power and authority of the emperor and the legitimacy of the empire itself. To deviate from the accepted source of peace meant punishment, a punishment that could even bring death.

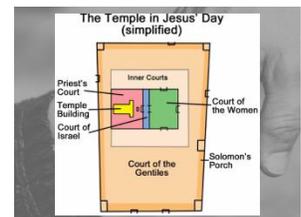
The Jews, the dominant religious group of the day, said to pledge allegiance first to God and then to the Law. To deviate meant you would likely lose connection to your family and friends. To declare allegiance to Christ would cause you to be seen as a rule breaker, as an outcast. Instead of trusting in the Law to bring peace, one was aligning with Jesus as the Prince of Peace. Through the body that was broken and the blood that was poured out on the cross it was declaring

a new source of peace – one that was built upon a radical, self-sacrificing love. It was a love that threatened the status quo and challenged what it meant to be in relationship with God.

Paul's call to draw near to Jesus Christ and to break down the walls that separate was also a radical. It was a call to step outside the norm, outside the box. The culture of the day was segmented. You were a Roman citizen or you were not. You were Roman and you had rights and privileges or you did not. You were a Jew and you had standing within that community or you did not. Even within their place of worship, lines were clearly drawn. Jewish men were allowed to be here, women were allowed to be here – all had their place. As an illustration of the way that the Jews defined their unique and separate identity as the chosen people of God, the Temple had a clear physical line that non-Jews were not to cross. Within the temple was a four-foot high wall which ran

through the court and separated the court of the Gentiles from the rest of the inner court. Only Jews were permitted past this dividing wall. Another line separated Jewish men

from Jewish women. In 1871, archaeologists uncovered this inscription on the Gentile wall: 'No man of another race is to proceed within the partition and enclosing wall about the sanctuary. Any one arrested there will have himself to blame for the penalty of death which will be imposed as a consequence'.



This was just one of many ways that the Jews told others that they were a Gentile, an outsider. All the ways said, "You are different". This is such a contrast to the way that Jesus himself operated. Jesus was not one who ever

defined who could and could not belong. He was one who said all are welcome, all can come to the table of grace, all can be a part of His family. Jesus offered a radical invitation to belong and He demonstrated a radical love that welcomed one and all. Jesus brought disparate and diverse people together. His open invitation was an affront to the rules and laws that defined who was a Jew and who was not. Things like talking to Samaritans and healing on the Sabbath drew the ire and anger of the religious authorities. Jesus offered a radical new love that allowed those who were aliens to be brought near to the throne of God. At the end of His ministry on earth, Jesus commissioned his followers to go forth to make disciples of all nations. This would include the Gentiles. As the New Testament unfolds, it becomes increasingly clear that the church is to include peoples of all nations. The apostles bring the message to all peoples as the church spreads around the world.



Is this what the church is today? Is the church and are we as Christians known as people who love all, who welcome all, who seek to be in true community with all? Is the church out there, seeking to make disciples of all nations? The new family of God that Jesus modeled and that Paul is preaching here in Ephesians is not something that just happens on Sunday mornings, when we come together and sit nice next to each other, pretending to like one another. The ideal church is a self-giving, forgiveness-offering, love-first community that seeks to help one another grow in faith with God and in relationship with one another.

The church that Jesus modeled and Paul preached is a church where rich or poor does not matter, where black or brown or white does not matter, where have or have-not does not matter, where blue collar or white collar does not matter, where male or female does not matter, where young or old does not matter. The church that is envisioned in the New Testament is a place of radical love, where aliens and strangers gather in the same pews as the regulars do, knowing that they too belong in the family of God. The church is intended to be a place where the world takes notice of the radical love found in the family of God. It is a love rooted in Jesus' love. It is a love that reconciles us to God and allows us to be reconciled to one another. It is a love that breaks down boundaries and says that all are welcome in this family of God.

If we are truly to be the church that Jesus intends us to be, then we would not only radically love each other within the church, but we would also take that love outside the walls of the church. When we think of the gospels, we realize that Jesus did very little of his overall ministry in the temple and in the synagogues. He did teach there on the Sabbath. But when we think of the stories of Jesus, we think of stories that happened out in the world, on the street, in the fields, at the well, by the seaside, and on the mountainside. Jesus met people right where they were at and met their needs as he best could. It was where Jesus was in His comfort zone. But for us, this is a much scarier way to be in ministry because it is filled with unknowns and the path is seldom clear. But when we trust in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, we come to know that God is in control. To close, I would like to tell more of a story from our mission trip to Racine that I shared briefly last week in the children's time.

On Wednesday afternoon, as our work teams were arriving back at the church, four of our young ladies wandered into the kitchen to bake some cookies for someone's birthdays. Here is a picture of them with Sam, another of the youth on our trip. From left to right, the young ladies are Lauren, Cydnee, Andrea, and Claire.



When these young ladies arrived in the kitchen, an older Grandma was there with Meredith and Nancy, our two kitchen ladies. Betty had come into the church seeking some food for her and her grandsons. Claire, Cydnee, Lauren, and Andrea came upon this scene and jumped right in and made some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and gathered some chips and fruit and bottles of water. As they were doing this, Betty shared her story. Part of her story was the fact that she was worried about losing her car. Due to some unfortunate circumstances, she did not have the \$200 to make this month's car payment. The girls walked Betty out to her car, laid hands on her, and prayed over Betty. As she left with the big bag of food, the foursome came back into the church with tears running down their cheeks. Fast forward a few hours.

After dinner and our trip to the beach, I was summoned to the kitchen. Cydnee announced with a dramatic flair that they needed to go to the Grace Welcome Center in the morning. It turns out that in the course of their conversation earlier that afternoon, she had given Betty a brochure from Grace along with an invitation to come to breakfast there the next day. Between when Betty left and when I was summoned to the kitchen, Claire explained that the Holy Spirit had placed it upon their hearts to help Betty with her car payment. The four girls

began sharing Betty's story with their friends and soon enough they had the \$200 needed for her car payment. Claire, Cydnee, Lauren, and Andrea felt that they needed to go to Grace to give Betty this gift. The problem was that only Andrea was on one of the two teams that were going to Grace the next day. Claire, Cydnee, and Lauren's teams were all scheduled to be at other sites the next day. Complicating matters was the fact that we were doing a full load-out of the bus at 7:00 AM.

Steve, my co-leader, and I talked and came up with a possible plan. Two of the three girls would have to ride down to Grace in the one van that we had at 6:30 AM with my team and the other girl would have to ride down in the 7:15 run that I made with the second team. Meredith agreed to come down at 9:30 to pick up the three and bring them back to their respective work teams. Without a word or a thought, the girls immediately agreed to our proposal. We cautioned them that Betty might not show up at Grace and they were OK with that.

Lauren and Cydnee were up and ready before 6:30 AM. Claire was waiting with team four when I returned with the van for them. Betty did show up for breakfast. The girls were among a small group that ate and talked with Betty. They gave her the \$200 and walked her out to her car. They again surrounded Betty and prayed over her. It was truly a blessing to watch God at work in and through these young ladies. They saw just a person in need when they saw Betty. They did not judge how she was different or how she got to the place she found herself in. They did not question her motivation for coming into the church that afternoon. They simply heard her story and allowed the Holy Spirit

to move and lead them. This is the type of ministry that we as Christians and we as a church are called to. It is scary and we do not ever know where it might lead. When we meet people where they are at, meeting the needs that they have at the time, then we are sharing the radical love that Jesus modeled. When we do so, then we are also inviting people to be a part of the family of God. As we go forth this week, may we be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, allowing God to be at work in and through us. Through our love we will draw others into this family of God, making them aliens brought near as well. May it be so this week. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) In what ways could you personally and we as a church offer a more radical love to those inside the church? To those outside the church?
- 2) Pray for the courage and for the willingness to engage and to minister to those that God places in your path and leads you to.
- 3) Who are the Gentiles in our community? How can we go forth to minister to them and to help them to become a part of the family of God?