

## *Separation and Reconciliation*

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,  
Glen Ridge Congregational Church, Glen Ridge, New Jersey,  
*Preached on the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, (19 July), 2009.*

Text: Ephesians 2:19

“...So then you are no longer strangers and aliens.” ~St. Paul

When Paul journeyed to Jerusalem for the Council to resolve the question of Gentiles in the church he took with him the young convert Titus.<sup>1</sup> Titus was born a Gentile and became one of Paul’s most trusted deputies. While the conflict over Gentile Christian seems inconsequential to us, it was not at the time. Almost all the early Christians were Jews and there was a huge dispute about whether Gentile converts had to become Jews—obeying the Torah, food laws, and such—before joining the church. Here before the Council was Titus, a Gentile who had given his heart to Jesus. In the Jerusalem church there were probably no Gentile Christians. Many of the leaders had never met one, talked to one, much less eaten at a church supper with a Gentile. Paul, however, knew many of them and knew they were eager for the message of salvation. It is hard to underestimate just how estranged Jews and Gentiles were. The Jews thought the Gentiles were immoral louts and sexual libertines. Gentiles long before Christianity subscribed to all sorts of anti-Semitic prejudices. So how could these two groups coexist in a Christian congregation?

While the two were in Jerusalem, Paul probably took Titus to see the Temple. Since the Temple dominated Jerusalem and played a role in the story of Jesus, Paul would not have considered his pilgrimage complete without a visit. Titus must have also been eager to see it. Years later during Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem, he was accused of having brought Greeks into the Temple,<sup>2</sup> a charge that probably referred to the visit with Titus. There was one court of the Temple that was permissible for Gentiles to enter. There was a low wall separating that courtyard from the rest of the Temple with a sign on it, warning of death to any Gentile who passed over it into the holier parts of the Temple.<sup>3</sup> This low wall separating the Gentile section from the rest of the Temple is probably what Paul alluded to in our reading today when he wrote of Jesus: “For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility.”<sup>4</sup> Alienation and division between Jew and Greek was not just symbolic in Judaism. How the early church resolved this tension and division was very significant in the development of Christianity, much more so than probably you think.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 15:1ff. and Galatians 2:1ff.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 21:28.

<sup>3</sup> By the way this was courtyard where the moneychangers set up their bizarre in the first century and Jesus cast them out, Matthew 21:12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:14.

One of the core principals of Scriptural religion is that human alienation and separation reflect a similar broken relationship with God. The two relationships—divine and human/human and human—mirror one another. From the Garden of Eden the break between Adam and Eve paralleled the break in the couple’s relationship with their Creator.<sup>5</sup> In the early church the break between Jew and Gentile, we now see, was a failure to understand their unity in Christ.<sup>6</sup> To the extent human beings fail to reconcile with God—this is what we call sin—we also find brokenness in our relationships with other human beings, especially family members and other people ‘close’ to us.

How does Christ change this dynamic? When God became human in Jesus, Jesus became the new Adam,<sup>7</sup> undoing the alienation between God and humanity which began with the first Adam. Jesus became the model of humanity, fully reconciled to God, and thus brought as well a new possibility in human relationships. Admittedly it has taken us years and years to unpack all of this, particularly in the relationship among races. Paul saw it 2000 years ago when he wrote,

For there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.<sup>8</sup>

Listen to how Paul spoke of the cross in today’s lesson and its power to bring us to God and to reconcile us to one another:

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing hostility to an end.<sup>9</sup>

Christ is the foundation of this conviction. Because God reconciled the break in his relationship with humanity by becoming human and offering that One to atone for our sins, our conflict, our striving and bitter divisions, God created one new humanity, in the church. This is not just sentiment, but is premised on faith in Jesus. It is not evident until you take to heart our unity in Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 3:15.

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:13-16.

<sup>7</sup> 1Corinthians 15:22, 45-49.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:28-29. Note the comment about Abraham: the vision of unity in Christ is mirrored in the separation and reconciliation between Jew and Gentile!

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 2:14-16.

There is a story of young illegitimate boy and his mother who grew up in the hills of Tennessee. The two lived in the country and did not go to town except when it was absolutely necessary. The woman felt people looked down on her because she had this child out of wedlock. The boy felt the same sting in the stares of strangers as they walked into stores to buy provisions. They got out as soon as they could every time they made the trip. This had been the boy's life for as long as he could remember. In adolescence, however, he discovered a little church near their cabin. He got in the habit of slipping into the back pew after the service began and then leaving during the last hymn, so no one would see him. He was convinced these people and the old preacher felt the same about him as the townspeople did. But how he loved those simple country hymns and the way that old preacher taught the Bible. He liked the words, the praying, the hopefulness of the message. One Sunday he got lost in his thoughts about the preacher's vision of a new world coming and he lingered longer than usual. The last hymn was almost finished when suddenly he came to himself and realized he had to get out quickly. He slipped into the aisle and was almost at the church door when a hand fell onto his shoulder. *"I know who you are,"* the deep voice of the preacher said to the young man. Just then the boy knew he would never be able to come back. They knew who he was and he had no place among these good people. *"I know who you are,"* the preacher said again. *"You are a child of God. Go claim your inheritance!"*<sup>10</sup>

The Apostle wrote,

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord.<sup>11</sup>

And so we are: no longer separated, alienated, alone, wandering without a home. Here we are children of God, reconciled, forgiven, our differences patched up. Made one with God and brought together by our faith in Jesus.

End

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<sup>10</sup> This, of course, is one of Fred B. Craddock's stories. I first heard him tell it in his 1978 Beecher Lectures at Yale.

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 2:19-21.