

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday after Trinity, June 27, 2010

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Hymns: 586, 472 (all), 342, 660, 553.

(The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Lessons: Genesis 17: 1-16, Ephesians 2:1-22, John 4: 1-30.

Text: Ephesians 2:11-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In the first chapter of the letter to the Christians in Ephesus, St. Paul praises God for the spiritual blessings that he – and the Ephesian Christians have received. He emphasizes that God chose them to be his children. He thanks God for them, and keeps on praying that they may be enriched even more than they have been, by learning more about the hope to which God has called them.

In Ephesus, St. Paul had first preached the gospel to the Jews. From this letter, we see that a conflict has arisen between Jewish ideas from the Old Testament and the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. But in this part of the second chapter, he writes that

JEWS AND GENTILES BECOME ONE IN THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

1. **In Ephesus there was strife between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.**
2. ***“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”***

St. Paul is making a contrast between believers and unbelievers. Beginning in verse 11 he uses the word “therefore”. This is a conclusion. Christ rules over all things for the benefit of the church, that is, for the benefit of all believers. And now St. Paul tells them that in Christ, people of different backgrounds, of different races, are become one, in what is called the “Holy Christian Church”.

In this chapter he has just said ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** Ephesians 2:8-9. Now that that fact has been clearly established, that a person is saved by the grace of God, not by obeying any laws, Paul goes on to talk about man-made distinctions some were trying to make.

He had spoken to the elders, the leaders of the visible church at Ephesus in Acts 20 telling them ***“For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”*** Acts 20:27-31. With that warning in mind that “savage wolves” would come in among the believers, it is apparent that by the time he wrote this letter there were some of those “savage wolves”, false teachers, at work in their midst. From what we read here, it is clear that some of those false teachers were Jews, and they were telling people that they had to follow the Jewish laws to be saved from their sins. Such people have been called “Judaizers”, because they taught that people had to adopt the customs and beliefs of the Jews. What the Judaizers didn’t understand or didn’t believe was that Jesus had ***“abolish[ed] in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.”*** They didn’t understand or didn’t believe that Jesus had obeyed the law of God far better than any of them or any human ever could. In fact Jesus had obeyed all the laws of God perfectly in the place of all mankind.

The contrast Paul makes is between those who are Gentiles by birth and those who are Jewish, called “the circumcision”, meaning that they had been circumcised in obedience to the command of God given to Abraham. But in Christ they are one; there is no difference.

He writes **“remember that [before you came to know and believe in Jesus Christ] you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”** Unbelievers, Gentiles by birth, were excluded from citizenship in Israel. They could become what are known as proselytes”, that is, converts, but were not eligible for full membership or citizenship, even if they were to follow all the rules of the Jews and even allow themselves to be circumcised. They were still foreigners to the covenants of the promise, sort of like immigrants who had not been accepted by the citizens of a country.

To make this a little clearer we might talk about citizenship in an earthly country. Citizens, citizens in any country, have some rights and privileges that non-citizens don't have. But Scripture is talking about more than just earthly privileges and rights. These are the promises of God, the promises of eternal life and salvation. These are promises that extend beyond this world. In the situation we read about in Ephesians, the non-citizens have no hope. They are without God. They have no saving knowledge of the true God. They do not believe that God forgives their sins because of what Jesus Christ did. They do not believe that because of that God gives them eternal salvation. They have no hope of any of the eternal blessings of God. Oh yes, they may enjoy earthly blessings. In fact they may be excessively blessed with earthly blessings, much as we in the United States of America have. But they have nothing beyond this life. They have no hope of anything beyond this world. And St. Paul says to all people that by nature, you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise. Remember that the physical nation of Israel, the Jews, were the first to receive the promise of the Savior, and the Savior was first sent to them. And in this letter, as well as the letter to the Roman Christians, St. Paul points out that all who believe are part of a spiritual Israel, even through they may not have Jewish blood in their veins.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” You noncitizens, he says, once were far away. That's not just a little bit close. That's not just “almost” citizens. That is a “far away”, or to create an earthly picture, “across an ocean” away. An ocean of their own sins separates unbelievers from God, and that is exactly what all of the Ephesian Christians, Jew and Gentile, and every person is by nature. It is not as though you have to walk a short distance to cross the border. I know that some of you have crossed borders from one state to another, perhaps even from one country to another, and to do this may have just walked down the street, or driven down the road, perhaps past a sign. In some cases borders are marked by rivers. Then it is a little more obvious that there is a separation between the two countries. But God here is talking about those who are far away, far away across an ocean of their own sins. Many of our North European ancestors came to the United States of America on ships. And after they arrived here, it took a great deal of study and learning and work before any of them were made citizens of the United States of America by a judicial decree. But the way that people are brought into citizenship in God's kingdom is not by sailing a ship, and learning facts and taking a citizenship test. It is through the blood of Christ. And it is through a judicial decree that their sins are forgiven, washed away, and forgotten by God. That is the act of justification, objective justification. God declares our sins forgiven. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works.”**

Our text goes on to say about Jesus the Christ: **“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”** It took Jesus' blood to give us peace. That is peace with God. Jews who came to believe in Jesus Christ – who previously had been given the Savior as one from their own tribe of Judah, descendant of King David – and Gentiles who were outsiders to the nation of the Jews – both are made into one “*man*” our text says. This “*man*”, this body we know as the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. It is the invisible church.

Jesus became our peace. Jesus makes peace for us. Jesus is our peace. He has made both – Gentiles and Jews – to be one. He has destroyed the barrier, the middle wall, the partition, the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles and made them ***“all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”*** Galatians 3:26.

How did Jesus do this? How did Jesus create peace, how did Jesus reconcile God and man? He reconciled ***“both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”***

His purpose is to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace. Jesus, because he is God, has the power, the ability, and the will to do this. Through faith in Jesus Christ, all who believe are made one. Jesus’ purpose was to reconcile. Notice that it is through the cross. It is not by changing church teachings to make them more acceptable to people of the world. It is not by trying to present the church to the world as a compromiser. When a church compromises, when a Christian compromises, nothing is gained. For a time it may appear as though there is some kind of gain. But if the teachings of the church, and the practice of a church, become sifting sand, there is nothing firm to stand upon. We must stand firmly on the blood of Jesus Christ, poured out on the cross for eternal salvation. The word of God in front of us says Jesus came and reconciled first God to men, secondly Jews who believe to Gentiles who believe. But notice that this must be through the blood of Christ. This kind of reconciliation must be through the cross of Christ. Believers accept the blood of Christ as the means by which they are saved. Believers accept the cross of Christ as the bridge to God and eternal life. This is the only way to eternal salvation. Unbelievers too must accept Christ as the only means to eternal salvation. Unbelievers too must accept the cross of Christ as the bridge to God. There is no other way. Unbelievers in this way become believers. Now, of course, that idea is very unpopular today. Men would like to have us think that there are many roads that lead to God, and that all roads that lead to any god are good.

Jesus Christ reconciles all men to God through the cross. They only need believe it to benefit from it. There is no other way. Isn't it interesting that we read here that it is through the cross that he put to death their hostility! It certainly appeared on Good Friday, the day Jesus was crucified, that he was put to death on the cross. But it is through that cross that we are saved.

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” Colossians 2:13-14.

What a joy that in Christ all believers are made one in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints! It is all God’s doing. May we make that knowledge part of our daily lives as we reach out and invite others to come and hear what Jesus has done for them! Amen.