

Brought Together

By Linda Rex

July 21, 2024, Proper 11 | After Pentecost—I believe one of the most painful and difficult things a person can experience in their life is estrangement from other members of their family. Perhaps the reason this pain is so acute is because we were not created for estrangement, but for unity and oneness. At times, each one of us experiences this sense of separation or alienation from those who are meant to be close to us. Have you ever considered that this is the way God feels towards us when we push him away and refuse his offer of reconciliation and restoration?

In our New Testament reading for this Sunday, Ephesians 2:13-22, the apostle Paul talks about this very thing. Our Triune God created human beings to live in face-to-face relationship with himself and others. So often, our decision as humans is to live life in our own way, on our own terms, and under our own power. Even though we only exist because of God's gracious creation and provision, and constant sustaining of our existence, we often choose to live as self-sustaining deities who set our own agenda and seek our own pleasure. But God created us for so much more than this. We were created to share in God's love and life, to participate in all God is doing in this cosmos. We were created for close face-to-face relationship with God and one another. And this is why Jesus came—to ensure that nothing came in the way of us sharing in God's life and love.

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul addresses the ongoing conflict between believers who were born as Jews, the 'Circumcised', and those who were born as non-Jews, 'the Uncircumcised.' The non-Jews had been excluded from fellowship within the people of God, and the apostle Paul was trying to help the church in Ephesia to see that all previous barriers between Jews and non-Jews had been eliminated in Jesus Christ. The rituals and traditions which held them apart had been fulfilled in Jesus and removed in his death on the cross. As God in human flesh, Jesus took the place of both Jew and non-Jew, offering himself in our place on our behalf.

Having assumed in his own human flesh all of our humanness, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, broke down all the artificial divisions we tend to place between one another—race, ethnicity, class, status, wealth, and so on. Jesus took all the distinctions we like to make to separate ourselves from one another, including our definitions of sin and evil, and in his human flesh, took them to the cross and crucified them. As God in human flesh, Jesus Christ brought each and every human into right relationship with his Father in the Spirit, creating the peace between God and man, and between humans, we so desperately need.

When we find ourselves at odds with those we are meant to be in close relationship with, we tend to focus on our differences and distinctions, and on the hurts we may have received from that person. We tend to take a very human-centered approach to our relational differences. Instead, Paul calls us to turn away from ourselves and our differences and to turn to our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who holds within himself our uniqueness, our distinctiveness, and our forgiveness. Jesus Christ has made himself the central meeting point between every person, no matter who they might be.

By the Spirit, we discover that Christ is real and present in and with each person, even though that person may not realize or believe in Jesus or what he has done on their behalf. Jesus is present by the Spirit, though hidden underneath layers of human frailty and sin. We must look beyond the surface to see Jesus is present. This is why Jesus can say to us, 'love your enemies' or 'do good to those who abuse you.' It's not because he ignores sin and evil, but that he has triumphed over them in the cross and is working his life out in us by his heavenly Spirit. We are all brought together in Jesus, in his flesh, crucified on the cross, and brought up again in new life. Every human being has died in Christ and has risen in Christ—this is our union and communion.

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with God and with one another. This is why we turn away from ourselves and put our faith in him and in his finished work, and allow him to live his life in and through us by his Holy Spirit.

In the midst of our divisions and disunity, Jesus calls us to himself, asking us to turn away from ourselves, our will, our ways, and to turn to him—the one who bought us relational peace in his own person. This is repentance. He calls us to trust in him and not in our own efforts. This is faith. He gives us his Spirit to bind us together with himself and with one another in unity. He gives us new life—life in the Spirit, rather than in our flesh.

When our relationships are hard and we can't seem to find unity, this is when we are reminded to turn away from ourselves to Jesus Christ. When we place our faith in him and not in our human efforts, we will discover ourselves bound together with unbreakable cords of love which have their source in the Holy Spirit and not in ourselves. As we respond to the Spirit's work in our hearts and lives, we will find ourselves swept up into the inner fellowship of our Father and his Son, Jesus, in the Spirit. And that is where we belong, and always will remain, as God's dear children.

Dear Father, Jesus, Spirit, thank you for loving us so much that you never want anything to come between us and yourself. Thank you for your faithfulness and kindness to us, even when we are so undeserving. Please grant us the grace to turn to you and away from ourselves, to put our faith solely in you, and to warmly embrace your indwelling presence by your Spirit, through Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

“Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision,’ which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. ‘and He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near;’ for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” Ephesians 2:11–22 NASB