

Sermon: Christ Is Our Peace
by Jeff Taylor
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Ephesians 2: 11 - 22 (NRSV and The Voice - hybrid)

11 Never forget how those of you born as outsiders to Israel were outcasts, branded “the uncircumcised” by those who bore the sign of the covenant in their flesh, a sign made with human hands. 12 You had no connection to the Anointed One; you were strangers, separated from God’s people and aliens to the covenant they had with God, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now, because of Jesus the Anointed One, God has gathered you who were far away and brought you near to Him by the blood of the Anointed One.

14 For he is our peace, sent once to take down the great barrier of hostility that has divided us so that we can be one. 15 He offered His body on the sacrificial altar to bring an end to the law’s commandments and ordinances that separated Jewish people from the outside nations in order to create in His body one new humanity from the two opposing groups, thus making peace. 16 Effectively the cross becomes God’s means to kill off the hostility once and for all so that He is able to reconcile them both to God in this one new body.

17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 And so you are no longer called outcasts and wanderers but citizens with God’s people, members of God’s holy family, and residents of His household. 20 You are being built on a solid foundation: the message of the prophets and the voices of God’s chosen emissaries[a] with Jesus, the Anointed Himself, the precious cornerstone. 21 The building is joined together stone by stone—all of us chosen and sealed in Him, rising up to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In Him you are being built together, creating a sacred dwelling place among you where God can live in the Spirit.

Sermon:

Christ is our peace. The one set aside for a holy task, that is to say, the “Christ,” is our peace. He offers his body to violence to become our peace. We set aside our violence to make his body whole - at peace - again.

Sometime in the middle of the first century, Paul (or someone standing in for him) wrote a couple of short letters (perhaps from prison) to Jewish and gentile converts to the way of Jesus. The letters we call Colossians and Ephesians both addressed the challenges of living at peace in bi-cultural churches that were in predominantly gentile lands but sometimes within Jewish population pockets.

The battles that raged between Paul and some of Jesus’ original disciples over if and how to include gentiles in the way of the Messiah (the Christ, in Greek) may have subsided some by the time Ephesians was written. But the cultural character of the Jesus communities was ever in flux as they took in new members from every people of the Roman empire. To say the church was merely bi-cultural doesn’t capture it. And in a world where most kingdoms were the size of cities, hostility was not reserved for those continents and oceans away; but for those just a few hillsides away. In a world this accustomed to dividing walls, the churches of Asia Minor (Turkey) had more than a few of them within their fellowships.

No doubt, though, the greatest of these walls was that which had so long been erected between the descendants of Jacob and the rest of the “peoples,” of the earth; and that is

the particular wall of hostility that the writer refers to in our passage in Ephesians 2. For those of us who now live in the most multi-cultural society and city on the planet, could there be a more relevant, more urgent word from our first century sisters and brothers to us in the twenty-first? We need to explore the walls of hostility in our midst that we have not noticed, have avoided noticing, have ignored, have built, and have even defended against efforts to tear them down.

But before this sermon begins to sound like another speech on diversity and inclusion, admittedly themes close to my heart, the writer of this letter urgently wants us to notice that it is the Christ who is the source of our peace with God and each other and who is himself made whole by the peace we make with one another. Let me repeat that . . . who is himself made whole by the peace we make with one another. We'll come back to that.

Numerous scholars see in this passage a structure that puts that statement, "Christ is our peace" (vs. 14), in the centre of a symmetrical group of statements, as seen in the slide before us.

[slide 1]

A - once strangers and aliens (11-12)

B - Christ has brought us *near* (13)

C - Christ is our peace (14-16)

B - Christ spoke peace to far and *near* (17-18)

A - Now no longer stranger but part of God's body (19 -22)

Note the symmetry of the first and last outer "A" statements about being strangers; and then notice the symmetry of the interior "B" statements about being brought near; and then statement C in the centre as the focus, "Christ is our peace."

Often this type of symmetry in poetic and even musical structure is called a chiasm - from the Greek letter chi.

[slide 2]

A chi looks very much like an English X which has a symmetrical design, the bottom reflecting the top, and the left side reflecting the right, all focusing in on a central point.

[slide 3]

Now, see how the shape of our text is like a chi.

And why is this particular letter of the Greek alphabet important? Because chi is the first letter of the Greek word . . . [let the congregation answer]

[slide 4]

□□□□□□ - Christ. Which means roughly the same thing as the Hebrew word “messiah” - one who is set aside/reserved/or anointed for a special task.

So Christ is the centre, the source, of our peace; and that statement is the centre and source from which this whole passage derives meaning.

(end slides, kill projector light)

I promise, that’s as heavy as the text criticism is going to get this morning, but I really wanted you to see that, partly because it’s just so cool that the author did that (probably), and secondly because it draws our attention to the source of the peace that the author is asking believers to make with one another.

And let’s not miss that point - this passage isn’t, in the first instance, about making peace with the guy that cut you off, or a work colleague that drives you nuts, or criminals, or terrorists. All we’re being asked to do at this point is make peace with fellow followers of Jesus - and that, in an exceedingly multicultural world such as the Turkish peninsula under the rule of Rome or in Pierre Trudeau’s multi-cultural Canada - that is already a big ask. Should we also make peace with those outside the Jesus fellowship - absolutely!

And let’s not be too quick to leap past the Jewish/gentile nature of the conflict in our text. Most of us here could probably be described as gentiles, and isn’t that telling in itself. Where are our Jacob’s children who gave us our faith in the first place. Yes, Paul’s mission to gentiles was so successful that, in time, gentile Christians simply overwhelmed Jewish believers in number. But we all know that the story doesn’t stop there. From early in the life of the church, certainly from the second century on, Jewish people have many times suffered horrendous abuse and even attempted genocide at the hands of Christians. And I don’t mean people who merely claimed to be Christians, I mean people you would consider to be indisputably Christian - Martin Luther being but one famous example. And let’s not pretend that we Mennonites have been guiltless in our dismissive, disdainful, and sometimes hateful attitudes towards Jewish people.

Nor should we allow ourselves too much credit for our ostensibly welcoming Canadian culture and vibrant Jewish life in modern Toronto. Let’s remember that, as Rachel’s children were being slaughtered in Europe in the 30s and 40s, Canada rescued fewer of them than any other country - our minister of immigration famously commenting that one Jewish refugee would be one too many; and our Prime Minister King (revered by some of our relatives for taking them in) bought up all the property surrounding his

summer home lest any Jews buy some and become his neighbours. With that as part of our legacy, how might we gentiles make peace with Jacob's decedents? I know that we are doing that in many personal interactions - but how else might we do it?

How might we, now insiders in the Jesus community, make peace with others considered to be "the uncircumcised" / the unclean of the world? Is there a wall of hostility arising between us and west Africans? Is there an opportunity for us to do some peacemaking with the Roma people, persecuted throughout Europe? Are there more opportunities for bridge building with Abraham's other children worshipping his God in the tradition of Mohammed?

You can name and imagine these opportunities as well as I can; and that is the challenge set before us in this holy writing. But I want to turn our attention back to where we began, to the centre of this passage in vs. 14-16, to the Christ.

"Christ is our peace." He offers his body to violence to become our peace. We set aside our violence to make his body whole - at peace - again.

We might have some ideas about how Christ's body, offered up to violence, becomes our peace. For some it is about a sacrifice made in our stead, fulfilling the requirement of Moses' law. That teaching is certainly to be found in the bible. For others these verses are about Jesus teaching us and showing us how to live a life of relinquishing our power over others - that in some way Jesus absorbed the violence of this world, releasing us from its grip.

But what of this strange segment that follows culminating in vs. 22 "In Him you are being built together, creating a sacred dwelling place among you where God can live in the Spirit." What image is being painted for us here? Christ gave up his body so that the wall of hostility would be broken and the two would become one in his body? We are being built together into his body, a sacred space?

You see, there is a sense in which Christ remains broken as long as we are broken. We are his body; if we are divided, Christ is divided. Yes, the "body" of Christ (as an image of the church) is divided when the church are divided - that's the abstract analogy and there is a great truth in that image. But let's not rush past the obvious: Christ's actual physical body was broken. He was, like every one of us, flesh and blood; and like every one of us, a physical, genetic, relative of every other human who has ever lived or who will ever live. When his human family is divided, he feels the pain that all of us do when our families are divided. Just as I am your relative, and you are my blood relative, so is every person a blood relative of Jesus. So we must behave like family because we are family. In the church we are doubly family to one another, both in blood and in the Spirit. All the more then must our fellowship ever be a place where

Jesus' broken body finds healing. Christ is our peace. We are Christ's peace. Christ bids you peace. May we bid Christ peace as well.