Ephesians 2:11-13

Peace to Those Who Are Far Off

Sermon

The world has its ways to bring peace in this world, and God has His ways. There is so much hostility in this world, and there are many attempts at peace, but they never seem to really work. Attempts to be inclusive. Attempts to celebrate unity. Attempts to bring about peace accords. But we are divided about EVERYTHING…and peace accords only last for so long. But God has a plan to reconcile the hostility in the world. Man's plans will always fail.

Ephesians is about reconciliation. God's plan to fix the heavenly and earthly hostility in the world is through His Son Jesus. **Ephesians 1:10 tells us this plan – *"a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on the earth."*** That's the book of Ephesians. God is uniting, summing up, reconciling, restoring, EVERYTHING that is hostile, because people have no peace within, no peace with God, and therefore they have no peace with one another. ***It turns out that the hostility in the world is more about our relationship with God than it is about our relationship with one another.***

Jesus, fills the church in such a way that the church then spills over what it is filled with onto the world around it – ***remember the bucket at indoor waterparks…once it is filled it tips over onto ALL THINGS around it*** – Christ is filling the church with reconciling, peace-giving power to be peacemakers to the world around it. He does this by first reconciling us to God…and then sends us out as progenitors/ministers of reconciliation. ***Paul shared with us this heavenly vision that becomes an earthly reality of Christ seated on His throne over all things and filling the church and the church spilling over onto the world:***

> **And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church [for the benefit of the church's mission], [23] which is his body [the body of Christ – a glorious reconciling household of God], the fullness of him who fills all in all [literally, "all things in all places"]. (Eph. 1:22-23)**

God is reconciling all things through Christ, and one of the main ways God brings about that reconciliation is through reconciled individuals sent out to be ministers of reconciliation.

However, it's not only the mission of the church going out, but it's the very STRUCTURE of the church that brings reconciliation, because the church is built of people formerly hostile to one another, now united in Christ. With every soul saved, another brick is placed in the structure. One Jew here, one Roman there, one Greek here, one Scythian there….one female, one male, one Asian, one Assyrian, one Russian, one Mexican, one African American…the church is built in such a way that each person becomes a very important part of the structure. All equal before God…all equally in need of God…all saved through one Lord and Savior. ***All blood relatives – united by the blood of Jesus shed for our sin. And we care deeply about the world around us because Jesus cares deeply about the world around us.***

We think racism and diversity exists today? Enter into Paul's world. So many ethnic and cultural differences divided them. If you were not a Roman citizen, or you were a female, or a slave, or a child, your rights were radically limited. Historians will tell you that one of the reasons Christianity

spread so quickly in the midst of great persecution in the 1st and 2nd centuries was because it elevated those who were formerly marginalized. ***All this division, then Paul came on the scene with the gospel and made a <u>radical</u> statement in the 1st century***:

> **For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:27-28)**
>
> ***A glorious reconciling household where great diversity is celebrated in the midst of unity.***

Mans attempts at unity fail. Think about where this hostility in the world began. In Genesis 11 we see the starting point of ethnic hostility…and ironically it happened when mankind attempted to unite together. ***They were trying to build their own religion and create a utopia of unity and inclusion here on earth. Here was their plan:***

> **Come, let us build ourselves a city and tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth. (Gen. 11:4)**

Like the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "there is nothing new under the sun". Man attempts to build unity his way, not God's way…and it fails. At Babel, they sought to "make a name for themselves". As the story goes, God comes down and stops their attempt…the people are confused and scattered. God miraculously confuses their languages so that they no longer can understand each other…and they could not have unity because they could no longer communicate with one another. ***People still don't know how to communicate with one another.***

Now fast-forward to the birth of the church – a different structure is being built. The Day of Pentecost (a feast of IN-gathering) in Acts 2. You remember that Peter and the apostles stand up in front of a mixed gathering of people that were scattered from all over and they begin to speak in everyone's language – a kind of reverse-miracle of the tower of Babel. At Babel tongues are confused. At Pentecost tongues regather and bring clarity. Man's attempt brought confusion, hostility, and the people are scattered. God's attempt gathers those who were scattered, the church is born, and unity and reconciliation begins. ***The church is now the reconciling force to bring unity of every tribe, tongue, and nation – all united by blood…the blood of Jesus Christ.***

Here is the lesson: God is the one who heals hostility – not us

Now this morning, by way of overview in our new section, I just want you to see how Paul describes reconciliation in chapter 2 of Ephesians. Chapter 2 can be divided into TWO sections:

1) Paul describes individual/vertical reconciliation in 2:1-10

2) Paul then moves to horizontal/relational reconciliation in 2:11-22 and beyond.

CHART

Notice that Paul moves in both sections from the plight of hostility, to the divine solution, to positive results. In 2:1-3 – we saw our individual/vertical plight of hostility - man is dead to God. Then in 2:4-8 Paul gave us the divine solution – that we are saved by grace… we were dead, "But God" (v.4)…I titled one of my sermons "But God" – we were dead, BUT GOD made us alive. Then in 2:10 we saw the positive results – we now walk in good works as a result of being united to Christ.

Now notice the similar structure of reconciliation…but now applied to the Jews and Gentiles, and both Jews and Gentiles to God!

In 2:11-12 – we see the plight of hostility just as we did in 2:1-3:

> **Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision** [circumcision was the mark that identified the people of Israel from all the nations – Gen. 17 – given as a covenant to Abraham], **which is made in the flesh by hands—** [we have been circumcised by the Spirit of the Living God!] **12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world**. (2:11-12)

So in 2:1-3 we were dead to God. In 2:11-12 Gentiles are dead to God and dead to Israel. "separated from Christ", "alienated from Israel", "strangers to the promises", "no hope", "no God".

In 2:13-18 after seeing the plight, we see the divine solution. Notice that in 2:4 the divine solution begins with "But God". Here in 2:13…

> ***But now*** **in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.** [the same blood that reconciles us to God, now reconciles the Gentiles to God] **14 For he himself is our peace** [notice Paul moves from "you" to "us" – there is a unity that has happened, because not only the Gentiles, but the Jews were in need of peace with God], **who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God** [Jew and Gentile, one new man, the wall torn down…we'll talk about that in coming weeks…now reconciled to one another, and both reconciled to God] **in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.** (2:13-18)

Then, in 2:19-22 Paul shares the positive results. A reconciled structure, a body, a building that is growing. Built by both Jew and Gentile brick by brick as individuals are brought into the household of God. It's a glorious dwelling place of God, a temple, a household of redeemed and united people.

> **So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,** [Paul uses "household" language here as we'll see when we go through this passage] **20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.** [do you see how not just the mission of the church, but its very structure, the household itself, is a reconciling structure because its members make up one structure] (2:19-22). ***This is the kind of unity that God envisions for us church***!

So the big picture of this text this morning, is that the plan of God to reconcile all things through Christ (1:10) happens through Christ making peace between us and God, and then bringing us into the reconciled/diverse church that is united in Christ, which then goes on mission to reconcile all things in all places (1:23). Christ fills us, we fill the world. This is a MASSIVE vision for the church.

God intends our church to be a reconciling force in this part of the world. To invite ALL people who have been dispersed. To unite together…different blood, biologically…but all under the blood of the cross, all speaking the same language of the gospel! There is unity alongside a glorious, colorful mosaic of diversity in the church. When people say, "There is so much disunity and hostility in the world!" We can say to them, "Come to the church!" Where diversity is celebrated and unity is elevated under the same banner of Jesus…Christ…Lord!

Now in order for this to happen…you and I must first be reconciled to God, but then we must humbly and sacrificially take every opportunity to be "reconcilers" towards others.

How do we do that? Three things for us to consider this morning:

1. Be the first to reconcile when reconciliation is needed

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Mt. 5:23-24)

God initiated our reconciliation, so we must initiate reconciliation between ourselves and others. Notice the sense of urgency that Jesus gives! The gift to the altar is probably referring to the offerings that the people of Israel would bring to the priest to be offered to God – ***so think worship.***

Reconciliation is so important to God that it will impact your ability to worship. For some of you, your relationship with God feels cold and stuck, and it's because God is waiting for you to open the door that has been shut and reconcile with that person.

Do you ever play the door game? You open the door for someone, and then there is another entry way, it's in every Starbucks, and there's another door. So you open the door for an older lady but then since she's in there first, she opens the door for you…which almost cancels out your good deed! You almost want to open the door then say, "ok now stand over in that corner…I'm going to open this one as well." But if that doesn't happen and they open the second door for you…now you're the one who gets to go in line first…and you don't want to do that…so then you say, "after you!" And you both just had this awkward exchange of outdoing one another at putting the other first. It's almost like a game…who can open more doors for the other person!

Be the first to reconcile. Run at the opportunity. This is so challenging for us because so often we say, "NO! I'm tired of opening the door for them. They need to open the door this time! They closed the door on me! I didn't close the door." The problem is, that both of you are probably thinking the same thing….someone has to open the door! ***You're going to both end up outside in the cold stuck in your relationship with one another and with God***. It's so hard…so awkward…the temptation is to avoid it. You're going to remain cold. You can't open their door…that's their job. All you can do is open YOUR door…they need to open theirs. Notice Jesus says, ***"if your brother (or sister) has something against you."*** That's your door. Do they have something against you that you haven't yet addressed? "Yeah but it's not right that they have this against me because they started it when they did…" Ok…but is there anything left unsaid on ***your part***, undone on your part that you could reconcile for by asking for forgiveness? I've noticed that when I open MY door, and I am willing to do MY part, I am able to be at peace even when they leave THEIR door shut. Worship is restored.

2. Be at peace with the outcome

If possible, *so far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18)

Notice what Paul says here…he says, "so far as it depends on you". There are people that you seek to be reconciled to who simply will not reconcile. Reconciliation is a two-way street. God doesn't reconcile with everyone – you must confess your sin and receive reconciliation with God or it will NEVER happen. So too with people. You do not have to carry the burden that is not yours to carry. There are people who you may need to simply separate from who are toxic. So you keep opening the door to this person, and they keep slamming it in your face. They will not reconcile with you, it's unhealthy for them and unhealthy for you. You feel the pressure to reconcile, because you want to be free. Sometimes reconciliation means walking away. Sometimes it doesn't depend on you. All you can do is your part. If they are unwilling, you must be at peace with the outcome. **But here is the question: Have you truly done your part??? Then you can leave this with the Lord and it may be that the person is toxic and will only continue to cause grief for you AND for themselves.**

3. Be the first to welcome all people in all places – even those different than you.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. [35] For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. (Matt. 25:34-35)

There are different interpretations of this passage. I think it's speaking of the millennial Kingdom when Jesus returns and establishes His Kingdom. One thing is clear – there are strangers, and entrance into the Kingdom is granted for those who welcome them! Jesus so identifies Himself with the stranger that He says, "***I was a stranger*** and you welcomed ***me***."

Each person we welcome into our lives, Jesus sees it as us welcoming Him. "But they're weird!", Jesus would say, "Will you welcome me?" "But they're difficult!", "will you welcome me?". "But I'm uncomfortable!", "Will…you…welcome…ME?"

The church is the one place on the planet where everything that would normally divide us is removed. Think about this… everyone who comes to the church has something in common…all of us are needy, and all of us are created in the image of God. That weird, difficult person who makes you uncomfortable was once a child in a womb that God knows and loves. We all are broken. We all struggle with sin. We all need forgiveness daily. We all need God's mercy. We all need to be loved. We all want relationship. We all need the gospel.

This was the problem the Jews had with the Gentiles! Look at v.11: they were called "uncircumcised" – ***this is probably a pejorative statement…name calling…"those who are called 'foreskin'!"*** They were labeled "foreskin!" by the Jews because their uncircumcision defined who they were to the Jew. They were labeled – one who was unholy, unclean, and unworthy – "foreskin". Have you ever felt marginalized like that? Have you ever been called names? Be careful defining people by a particular tribe, "Gay!"… "thug!"… "Hick!"… "immigrant!"… be careful. We assume that if someone fits our label, that the label defines everything about them. The problem is that people are EXTREMELY

COMPLEX, each with a complex history that we know nothing of…until we welcome them! Don't just place them in a tribe and then think you understand everything about them! They may be more open to the gospel than you know!

Notice in v.12 they are "separated from Christ" – χωρις Χριστου – cut off from the promise of Messiah. They are "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel" – Paul uses a word here that speaks of citizenship that would be known to the Gentiles. There is some irony here because Israel didn't have a citizenship…this word was only used of Gentiles and their citizenship…so Paul could be poking at the Jewish reader who would be beside himself to hear Paul use Gentile language to speak of the nation of Israel. **You were, "strangers to the covenants of promise" – ξενοι.** Have you seen the movie "My Big Fat Greek Wedding"? Her Greek father is beside himself that his daughter wants to marry a non-Greek man. "ξενοι, ξενοι, ξενοι" – it means stranger. Have you ever been a stranger? Unaccepted. What does that feel like? Having "no hope" and "without God in the world". The word used here is the same word used for "atheist". **When you think of the word "atheist" what type of feelings does that conjure up within you? "bitter, closed off, prideful…" Be careful! They may be closer to a relationship with God than you know!**

We have to rethink our way of looking at others! We have to be the first to welcome all! "Come as you are…you may have this label that others put on you, you may be cut off from God, you may be a stranger, a foreigner here, you may come with no hope, you may be an atheist, but we're going to love you in such a way where when you leave you just might say to yourself, 'maybe there IS hope'…or… "if there is a God, those people know Him! I have never felt more loved more welcomed than when I walked into that church."

River Ridge Trevor…we're in a season of building…God is building this church. So many of us want to go out to reach the lost…but we must first be strong within these walls. I just want to encourage you…get into one of these small groups…get to know one another. Here is the challenge…it may be uncomfortable, and the closer you get to me the more you will smell my stench…we need to become more than a church – we must become a FAMILY!

People are messy. People have baggage. People are difficult to be with. People are sinful. Christ died for sinners. Church, we will be the reconciling force to the world around us…or not.