

**illus:** This week as I've been writing my sermon, my son has been writing a report for his grade 6 teacher. Each student was asked to write about a person who had an impact in history; my son loves sports and so he chose someone from the realm of athletics.

The year was 1936, and the Olympics were set to be held in Berlin. Berlin had been chosen as the host city a year before Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party were voted into office. Hitler was not excited about hosting the Olympics but his ministers assured him that it would showcase Germany on the world stage.

Originally, Hitler intended to refuse Jews and black people the opportunity to participate in the Games, but when threatened with a boycott by other countries, he relented. The 1936 Olympics was about more than athletics, it became about Nazi ideology. Hitler was determined to demonstrate the superiority of the Aryan race—his Germans would run faster, jump higher, and prove themselves the best athletes in the world.

And it might have happened. White Germany athletes didn't win every medal that year, but they did win substantially more medals than any other country. But there was one athlete, one African American man, whose performance thrilled the German crowds and obliterated the myth of Aryan supremacy—his name was Jesse Owens.

Jesse Owens won an unprecedented 4 gold medals in track and field —100 m, 200 m, 4x100 m, and the long jump. Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, later explained away the losses, complaining that it wasn't fair for white athletes to compete against black athletes, being that black athletes were essentially animals.

While it was customary for leader of the host nation to shake hands with gold medal winners, Hitler refused to do so in public. When asked why Hitler didn't shake Owen's hand, he remarked "*Did you think I would allow myself to be photographed shaking hands with a negro?*"

After the Olympics, Jesse Owens arrived by boat in New York and he was celebrated as a national hero. A parade was thrown in his honour, thousands of people lined the streets, and he was escorted by luxury car as though he were a royal; Owens was on top of the world. But things are not always as they seem.

A reception was to be held in his honour at the famed Waldorf Astoria Hotel, but because of the colour of his skin, he was not allowed to use the elevator in the main lobby; he was escorted to the freight elevator to make the short trip up. In the streets he was a hero, but inside the hotel he was still a man with the wrong colour of skin.

The racial inequality that existed in Germany was not foreign in his own country. He once remarked, "*Although I wasn't invited to shake hands with Hitler...I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the President, either.*" He was arguably the most famous athlete in the world and yet this fame didn't translate into dollars as it had for many other white athletes. Other white athletes secured endorsement deals, or acted in movies, but Owens had to make ends meet by running exhibition meets against dogs and horses.

So what did Owens' 1936 performance prove? I'm not exactly sure. On one level, it exposed Nazi ideology as bankrupt, but on another level, it exposed the bankruptcy of human nature. It revealed the depths to which human bias and prejudice runs.

It would be much easier if we could simply villainize Hitler and the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Sadly, their behaviour reflects the history of humanity. History has proven that humanity, left to itself, doesn't come together in unity—it divides. We are, as a human race, predisposed to mistrust, name-calling, division, and alienation. This “natural tendency” is a part of the larger picture that the Bible describes as sin—a turning away from God and others.

The question for this morning is: *What can bring humanity together?* The Bible's resounding declaration is: **only Jesus**. Jesus himself is our peace. Jesus alone can reconcile us to God and to one another. In Jesus we find level ground upon which all humanity can stand. In Christ we can grow beyond mere tolerance to something much more praiseworthy and excellent—love.

At this time I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 2:11-22. If you are using the Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page \_\_\_\_\_. **Read.**

*“11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—  
12 remember that at that time 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. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

*14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.*

*His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

*19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”*

Our text last week, Ephesians 2:1-10, describes the human predicament and God's plan to rescue us. The apostle Paul writes, “*you were dead in your transgressions and sins...But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ*”.

When Paul says that we are “dead,” what he means is that we are separated from God and unable to reconcile ourselves. We needed God to act; we needed God to move towards us. Jesus came, full of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father, to tear down the barrier between God and humanity. At the cross humanity's sin was dealt with and provision was made for our return. When we receive the forgiveness Jesus offers, we are restored to relationship with God—the barrier that divides us is destroyed and we are adopted into His family.

If Ephesians 2:1-10 speaks about being reconciled to God, then Ephesians 2:11-22 speaks about being reconciled to one another. Jesus came to save us from death, but He also came to save us from the name-calling, division, and alienation that exists among humanity.

There are three movements within our text—vs. 11-13, vs. 14-18, and v. 19-22—and these three movements will provide the outline for my sermon this morning. Let's take a look at the first.

### **1. Vs. 11-13, The Problem of Alienation.**

Vs. 11 and 12 paint a picture of division and fracture. Notice all of the words and labels that highlight the divide: Gentile, circumcision, uncircumcision, separate, excluded, foreigners, without hope, and without God. It's a bleak picture.

Paul invites his original audience to remember what life was like before Christ, I want you to remember the diversity present in Ephesus and in Paul's churches. Ephesus was a cosmopolitan city, housing people from every nation—it was home to rich and poor, young and old, free and slave alike called. Ephesus was a profoundly spiritual city; the temple of Artemis was given priority, but there were many other available options. We may not readily identify with the Jew vs. Gentile division today, but we know firsthand about the barriers that divide us.

**illus:** There's a story told of a bus driver in Australia. Every day this bus driver would pick up kids and transport them to school—some were Aborigines and some were Caucasians. This poor bus driver experienced division firsthand: the name-calling never stopped, the

bickering was constant; there were even fistfights. One day the bus driver got fed up and pulled the bus off to the side of the road.

When he had stopped the bus, he turned around and looked at the white kids and said, "*What colour are you?*" And they replied, "*We're white.*" The bus driver said, "*Not today, not on my bus. You're not white, you're green, you're all green! Now what colour are you?*" Rather reluctantly, and feeling a bit foolish they said, "*Well...I guess we're green.*"

Then he looked at the aborigines and said, "*Now what colour are you?*" They replied, "*We're black.*" The bus driver said, He said, "*Not today! You're not black, you're green. On my bus you're green—everyone on this bus is green! Now what colour are you?*" Rather reluctantly they replied, "*Well...I guess we're green.*" And with that response, the bus driver returned to his seat, but not before he gave the children one last menacing stare.

They drove down the road in an eery sort of silence, but just a few miles the driver heard a student in the back say, "*Okay, light green on this side, dark green on that side.*"

This story nicely sums up human nature. Left to ourselves, we find reasons to judge, exclude, and divide. In fact, the Bible tells us, this kind of division is the result of trying to live life apart from God. The turn away from God inevitably leads to the turn away from others. The barriers we experience are multitude.

**We experience age barriers.** One generation misunderstands, judges, and writes off another. **We experience gender barriers.** We stick one another in simplistic boxes—men are from Mars and

Women are from Venus. We exploit one another's strengths and weaknesses. We look out for our own interests instead of serving the interests of one another.

**We experience ongoing racial barriers.** I have visited countries where the colour of your skin determines what kind of job you can get. And while we talk in politically correct language, many of the old prejudices lurk just under the surface. **We experience economic barriers.** The divide between rich and poor is significant in North America, and even more significant in other countries around the world.

**We experience religious barriers.** The divide goes beyond the Buddhist, Muslim, and Atheist; look no further than the dozens and dozens of different Christian Churches. The Eastern Orthodox Church thinks the Catholics are a rebel group, the Catholics look at the Protestants the same way, and the Anglicans, Baptists, Charismatics, and Alliance folks all think that they've got the truest form of Christianity.

*What can bring humanity together?* Jesus alone. Let's take a look at the next movement in our text, vs. 14-18.

**2. Vs. 14-18, Jesus is the great Reconciler.** Paul tells us about the double reconciliation that exists at the heart of the cross. Jesus died so that we might be reconciled to God—our sin was paid for, the barrier between us and God was torn down, forgiveness is offered, and the result is new access to God. Verse 18 says, that through Jesus, we have access to the Father, by the Holy Spirit. Paul is

speaking about the work of salvation through a trinitarian lens—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all involved.

This word “**access**” is an interesting word; it is the word for ushering someone into the presence of royalty. William Barclay writes, “Jesus ushers us into the very presence of God...and when that door is opened what we find is *grace*; not condemnation, not judgement, not vengeance, but the sheer, undeserved, unearned, unmerited, incredible kindness of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus has ushered us into God's presence, He has reconciled us to God, and He has secured our adoption into God's family. And this is where the double reconciliation comes in. Vs. 15 and 16 give us a window into God's larger purpose, Paul writes, “*His purpose was to create in himself **one new humanity** out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross*”.

Jesus came to do more than simply save individuals from their sin. Jesus came to proclaim and to inaugurate the kingdom of God. And what good is a kingdom without a people? Jesus came to form for Himself one new humanity, a people who bear His name. In order to do that, He needed to destroy the division that keeps us alienated from one another. Jesus has a vision of God's family—it includes the rich and poor, male and female, young and old, along with every nation, tribe, and language. Jesus' vision of God's people is one defined by unity in diversity.

---

<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Letter To The Romans*, 71.

We may ask, *how can this become reality?* Diversity tends to propel us towards division, not towards unity. How are we brought together?

At the cross of Jesus Christ, our former distinctions are dealt with. Formerly we defined ourselves by certain markers—the colour of our skin, the country we were born in, by gender, or the size of our bank account—but all of those markers have been relegated to secondary status—our primary identity is now found in Christ. It's not that these distinctions are rendered null and void, it's that they no longer need to divide us. We are God's people—through Jesus, we have been granted access to the Father, by the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 3:26-28 says, “*in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*”

The foot of the cross is the only place where there is truly level ground for all humanity. The cross has destroyed former distinctions and former barriers. Male and female, Asian, Iranian, and Caucasian, old and young, rich and poor, together we constitute the community of the pardoned. Not a single person has earned the favour God has granted—*it is by grace we have been saved, through faith—and this is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*

In the midst of all of our diversity, what binds us together is the reality that we are all created by and for God, and every one of us is equally needy, broken, and in need of God's rescue. It is nearly impossible to feel superior to someone when I recognize my own

neediness before God. When I understand that God loves you every bit as much as He love me, the possibility for unity blossoms.

Let's now take a look at the final movement in our text, vs. 19-22.

### **3. A People (Building) In Whom God Dwells.**

*19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”*

In verse 19, the effects of our alienation from God and one another has been undone. Paul writes that we are now “God's people” but the literal translation is that we are now “God's holy ones”—we have been rescued, reconciled, and set apart; we are His, and He is ours. We are no longer on the outside looking in; we have been brought into God's family and we have been bound to one another.

In vs. 20-22 Paul moves from a relational metaphor—*we are members of His household*—to a construction metaphor: *we are being built together to become a holy temple*. Paul reaffirms the idea that we are holy—that is, we have been set apart, that we belong to Him—but he goes on to tell us why God is forming this one humanity. We are being built together into a holy temple, and His goal is to fill us with the fullness of His presence.

But before I talk more about this goal, let's fix our attention on Jesus, the chief cornerstone.

While the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, that is, upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets. God divinely inspired authors so that what they wrote was the very words of God—the Scriptures tell us who God is, who we are, what this world is all about, and why we are here. God's word provides a foundation for our lives.

But Paul goes on to talk about Jesus; He is the fullest revelation of God's nature and character. When people ask the question, *what is God like?*, Christians respond, *He's just like Jesus*. Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being. And it's upon Jesus that this one new humanity is being built; He is the chief cornerstone.

In ancient architecture, cornerstones were the primary load-bearing stones that determined the lines of the entire building. All communities exist for a reason, but the church exists in Christ, because of Christ, and for Christ—He is the reason for our being.

Jesus Himself is our peace, the one in whom we are bound together, and through whom we have access to God. Without Jesus, without the cross, there is no us, there is no North Shore Alliance Church, in fact, without Jesus, the church would have never come into existence at all.

We are being built together into a holy temple, a people set apart for God, and His goal is to fill us with the fullness of His presence. All throughout the Old Testament, the temple imagery is rich. In the

beginning, in the Garden of Eden, we are given a picture of a Garden-temple. God walks with Adam and Eve in the cool of the garden—they are His and He is theirs; no barriers, no division, nothing to get in the way of relationship. This has always been God's desire for humanity—unhindered relationship with Him and one another.

Later, we read about the construction of the Tabernacle, essentially a moveable temple for the time when Israel wandered in the desert. Whenever Israel stopped moving, the Tabernacle was set up in the centre of the camp—a visual reminder that God dwelled in the middle of His people. This was always God's intent, to dwell

Moses understood this full well. In Exodus 33:15-16, he asks, "*If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?*"

Most religions have holy books, that give instruction about life, about their god, about the afterlife, etc; in this regard, Christianity is no different. And while we treasure the word of God, the Bible, we treasure it because it tells us about Him; what sets us apart is the fact that He comes to dwell in the middle of His people. We are people of His presence.

At one point in Israel's history, the Tabernacle was traded in for a fixed Temple, but the building wasn't the goal, the goal was to have God dwell in the midst of His people. And with the coming of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus, our Great Reconciler, we have

been built together into a holy temple to become a dwelling in which God now lives by His Spirit.

In Christ, the barriers that kept us separate from God and one another have been dealt with. He is our cornerstone, the One upon whom our lives are being built. We are His temple. We belong to Him. We belong to one another. We are His dwelling place, the people in whom He delights.

### **The Lord's Supper**

Sometimes I think about the team of disciples Jesus formed and I shake my head—they are an unlikely team if I ever saw one. His team was made up of four uneducated fishermen, a professional extortionist, a couple of freedom fighters (a.k.a murderers), and an assortment of others.

And they were all there at the Last Supper—Jesus welcomed them and washed their feet; each one belonged because they were loved by Jesus. Jesus was the One who brought them together, He was the One who formed them into a team. These 12 would have never come together on their own—not only would they never have met, they would have never chosen one another.

And isn't this what it's like to be a part of God's family. In Christ, the Father chose us to be adopted into His family. I wonder, left to ourselves, would we have chosen to belong to one another? Jesus is the One who has brought us together in all of our diversity; we belong together simply because we belong to Him.

This morning, we gather around a family table, remembering that what binds us together is Jesus. All of us—male and female, old and young, rich and poor—are bound together in our common need for grace. When we were at our worst, while we were God's enemies, Jesus died to reconcile us to God.

As we eat this bread and drink this cup, we remember Jesus our cornerstone. We celebrate the forgiveness He won for us. We celebrate the truth that we have been chosen. We celebrate the truth that we have been bound together, that we belong to one another, because of Him.

*The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*