

July 19, 2009  
Ephesians 2 : 11-22  
Christ is our Peace

## Holy Common Ground

When I was a girl, my best friend was named Sue. Sue had another friend named Claudia. Claudia and I really didn't like each other. Claudia also thought Sue was her best friend. This meant that Claudia and I didn't like each other very much. We were very competitive for Sue's attention and affection. If I was playing with Sue, or even if we were just watching tv together, when Claudia showed up, I left. Or if Claudia was already there when I got to Sue's house, I left. Or sometimes Claudia did. We just didn't want to be in the same room together.

And then a day came when we had to be. It was Sue's birthday. Of course neither of us was willing to miss the party! So we tolerated each other.

But our attitudes, our thorough dislike of each other came through.

We were not exactly subtle about it!

We each wished the other one would just disappear! Go home!

Leave!

It was me against her, an on-going battle.

It seems very childish to me now, but when I look at the world around us, I see the same kind of behavior everywhere!

Maybe none of us has ever really grown up.

Today in so many ways we live by an “us vs them” mentality. It’s Democrats vs Republicans, conservatives vs liberals, rich vs poor. Big business vs worker. Everywhere we look we see and hear people demonizing other people. We can’t seem to agree to disagree any more. Everyone who disagrees with us is completely, totally, stupid, wrong, horrible, socialist or fascist. There is no in-between, no middle ground, no shades of gray. Only right or wrong, only completely good or completely evil.

Even in the Church we see arguments between progressives vs evangelicals, traditionalists vs postmoderns, literalists vs “the big picture” people, etc.

We spend a lot of our time, our money, our energy, on arguing who is right and who is wrong, about which part of the Bible is more important than the rest, exactly which doctrines are necessary and which are so last century!

We find very little to agree on, very little common ground.

Back in the first century, when the letter to the Ephesians was written, Christians were having their disagreements, too. Jewish Christians understood their heritage as being important to their faith, as being the foundation of their beliefs.

Gentile Christians, on the other hand, dismissed the importance of the Jewish background of Christianity. They believed that being Christian had nothing to do with, had no basis in, the Jewish faith.

And so they argued, just like we do today, over what's important, what parts of the tradition are basic and what doesn't matter any more.

In the language of Ephesians, the circumcised and the uncircumcised just didn't see eye to eye.

Was circumcision part of the new covenant as it was the old covenant? Was keeping the Jewish law important?

The author of Ephesians says no, that circumcision is something done in the flesh by human hands and that Christ came to abolish the law. I am not saying this passage is wrong, but I do have to ask questions, especially when I remember that Christ said that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. So how can I understand the two ideas together?

Circumcision was by no means merely a physical, human act in Jewish tradition. It was a physical sign of God's covenant with Abraham, a permanent mark that God had claimed that person. It had a very deep spiritual meaning. And keeping the law was part of the people's covenant with God from the time of Moses. There was nothing insignificant or wrong about it.

The argument about whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to become Christians had been settled, to some degree, at least among the apostles, including Paul, with the answer being that circumcision was unnecessary to become Christian, that only baptism was required,

but evidently the argument continued among the people themselves, with a growing division between the Gentiles and the Jews, at least in Ephesus.

The letter of Ephesians was written to Gentile Christians. So it was very reassuring to them to the point of being insulting to the Jewish Christians, treating circumcision and the Law as being insignificant, of the flesh, and the law as being something from the past and no longer relevant.

The intent, the purpose, of this part of this letter was to strengthen the Gentile Christians enough so that they could feel fully a part of the Church, so that they would not feel persecuted or shoved aside by the Jewish Christians.

It was probably written to help stop the arguments that were heating up even among themselves about what should be done in their own congregations.

The main point of this part of the letter was to unify this group with other congregations of Christian believers, to bring the church together with other Christians by pointing out what they had in common.

The Good News here for them is that they have something very important in common with all other Christians. Regardless of differences in practices, despite some people thinking that all Christians should be doing the same things, the most important thing of all is that all Christians have **Christ** in common!

And this is Good News for us as well!

Christ brings us together! Christ loves all of us, came to save all of us, continues to bring us all together in love and worship and service to the one true God.

Now, please notice that this passage says nothing about making us all the same. Christ breaks down the barriers between us, but that doesn't mean that we all become identical.

We are still different. We have different experiences of God, understand God differently, cherish different ways of worshipping, find different types of music to be meaningful, etc.

We pray differently, we find meaning in different things, and we have different ways of loving God and each other.

I will be talking more about this in a week or so.



But for now I want to say this----

What the letter to the Ephesians is saying is not that one group---“them”---needs to change to be like the other group---“us.” What this letter is saying is that BOTH groups will indeed change when they know Christ. BOTH groups will be different from what they once were.

The Jewish Christians will still have their Jewish heritage and traditions, but they will become new people in Christ, with a new understanding of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Gentile Christians will still have their own life experiences and their Greek or Roman ways of thinking, but now they know God, now they believe in the eternal God and experience the love of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Both groups changed to be God's people. They still had their differences from each other, but the barriers between them were gone because Christ stands between them, breaking the barrier down. Christ stands in the gap, bridges the gap, between "us" and "them."

The one thing that everyone has in common is that we are all loved by God and we all love God.

Everything else pales in comparison.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, and that means not even disagreements or differences in values or in different beliefs or experiences.

Christ has broken down the walls, he has done away with the hostilities between us.

And what has he put in place of those hostilities?

Himself. God's love incarnate.

And when we recognize that we have the love of God in common with each other, then everything else will become unimportant.

We will focus on God and not on each other. And when we are not looking at each other we will no longer be able to recognize "us" and "them." We will only see the light of God's love reflected on each face.

At Sue's birthday party all those years ago, an amazing thing happened. Sue's mom took Claudia and I aside and told us that we were spoiling the party.

Sue was not having a happy birthday because of the way Claudia and I were treating each other.

Sue's mom pointed out that both of us must be pretty good people or Sue wouldn't be friends with us. She told us that we couldn't go back to the party until we said something that we liked about each other and shook hands.

I thought about going home, but I did it. I told Claudia I liked how she made up fun games. And Claudia told me she liked my jokes. We shook hands. We went back to the party.

All because we loved Sue enough to not want to ruin her party. Our love of Sue overcame all of our hostilities, and we ended up becoming friends.

The world became a better place between the two of us.

It can become a better place for all of us if we focus on Christ and see what we all have in common-----

Because of our love for Christ, the world is no longer divided into “us” and “them.”

Christ is our peace, bringing us together and making us new creatures, creatures who live in love together.

We find that what we have in common is far more important than what is different between us.

And we find that we stand on holy common ground, the ground at the foot of the cross.

Amen.