

## Radical Community – The New Humanity

### **Ephesians 2:11-22**

2:11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" --a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands--

2:12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

2:14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

2:15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,

2:16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

2:17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

2:18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,

2:20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

2:21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

2:22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Kyle Fever, in his online commentary on today's epistle passage [1], points out that the apostle Paul uses terms that are not likely to connect with congregations today. We lack the background and the culture that Paul is referencing. Certainly we know what circumcision is, but for Christians, it lacks the religious symbolism and cultural identity that it had in Jesus' time. Fever suggests that examining the historical perspective can illuminate lessons we can take away today. That is what I hope to do over the next few minutes. But first, please pray with me:

Dear Lord, may my words be faithful to your words and may You guide our thoughts to a fuller understanding of Your Kingdom, here on Earth. I pray in Jesus name, Amen.

So, "circumcision" and "uncircumcision". Paul wants to talk about bringing people together, about unity under Christ, so he chooses a metaphor, an outward physical sign that carries with it a certain tradition, an identity that the God of Israel, Himself, has cultivated and nurtured in the past. That tradition includes the creation and flood stories, but the key cultural elements started with Abraham. What are those elements? Belief in one God and a covenant that Israel will be God's people, through whom he intends to bring all people to Him. The Old Testament details the ups and downs of God's relationship to His people, but He has never abandoned them, even though they have at times turned away from God.

Before Jesus, God led Israel through a number of transformations, each of them expanding the Jewish identity and deepening their understanding of God's ways. Let's take a look at a few of them to gain an appreciation for the work of the Kingdom. The story of Abraham starts before he was called Abraham. He was Abram and he lived in the land of Ur. Abram feels called by God to leave Ur for a country far, far away. Now, in those days, if you travelled as far as Abram did, you would encounter a very different culture with very different gods. To have any hope of assimilating in that new region, you would need to switch out your old gods, who only had power in your homeland, for the set of gods that held sway over your new land. Abram, however, brought his God with him and stayed faithful to Him, so Abram became Abraham, which means 'father of a multitude', and the world was introduced to the concept of a single God that is the same over time and space. Eventually, Abraham did become the father of a multitude. So, the God of a single man, Abraham, became the God of a family, then of an extended family, then of a tribe, then of a nation of twelve tribes, then of a kingdom. Along the way, the Jewish people experienced droughts, exile, slavery, emancipation, nomadic wandering, military conquest, the benefits and ills of dictatorship, subjugation and oppression, in other words, millennia of being a people defined by their singular God. Perhaps most importantly, along the way, Israel's relationship to God stopped being a personal one; instead, the divine was co-opted to form a theocracy and personal relationships with God were reserved for the elite and the powerful. Jesus came to fix that, to bring individuals back to Abraham's devotion to a God that was close and loving.

Paul, the author of our text from Ephesians, was the embodiment of the old traditions at the time of Jesus' death. He knew all the Scriptures and all the commentary on all the Scriptures. What he couldn't see, was that his dedication to tradition was literally killing God's people.

Then Paul had what we now identify as a conversion experience, and that miracle shows Paul how God, through Jesus, a Jew, intends the Good News to be for everyone, those within the tradition and those outside.

One other phrase that Paul uses deserves further examination. He says God “has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two.” One new humanity, in place of the two. God is replacing both Jew and Gentile, merging them together, such that no one can tell who is who. They become indistinguishable, cherishing each other’s company, relishing in each other’s celebrations, commiserating in each other’s losses, encouraging each other’s hopes, calming each other’s fears. Now that’s pretty radical, especially coming from someone once hell-bent, literally, on preserving the purity of Israel. I find hope in Paul’s conversion and I find inspiration in his radical concept of community. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of that new humanity?

Now, all this is well and good, and I hope it all sounds familiar, because we inherit this history as part of our own tradition. What it lacks, however, is relevance to today. So, let’s examine how Paul’s teachings would translate to 2021. Imagine, if you will, a modern-day Paul, invited to preach in this sanctuary. I’m sure we would welcome him, at least to start, because we know his story so well. But, I’m guessing it might get a little uncomfortable in short order. For starters, he would probably want to invite Temple Beth Elohim, the Jewish community in Acton. He might even want to move the whole event to the Temple, off Prospect Street. I can almost hear him questioning why we worship separately. After all, we worship the same God, we send our kids to the same schools, we live side by side, we work and shop together, we have largely the same dreams for the future, the same fears for our town, our country and our world, I’ll bet we even argue over the same things. The only thing that keeps us apart is our traditions, our celebrations, our human desire to belong to a group, our fierce clinging to a specific identity. And it’s those identities, and our attempts to defend them, that are responsible for so much of the evil in this world. I’m absolutely convinced that Paul would marvel at how similar Judaism and Christianity are today in Acton, how different they are from both the early church and the temple of that day, and how stubbornly we cling to our separation. I’m also convinced, that where we let our differences divide us, Paul would counsel we are straying from the Jesus way. Instead, Paul advances a ‘radical community’, where the measure of our success is not the traditions that bind each group separately, but rather the lengths we go to include those who have different practices.

But, perhaps Paul would take a different approach. Maybe in transplanting Paul from the first century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we should also give him an awareness of current events. In that case, he might ask “What’s up with all the Christian denominations?” Do we not all agree that Christ was crucified that we might know the powerful love of God? Do we not all share Christ’s concern for the poor and the oppressed? Do we not all seek a deeper relationship with the Father? Are we not all moved by the same Holy Spirit? I confess that I’ve never understood the differences between denominations. And as communications and transportation networks have made the secular world more global, it seems to me the church, in general, and ACC, too, have been slow to adapt. In my own life, I find that my employer has been more

comprehensive in embracing the current movement toward racial and gender equity than has my church. At my work, we're mostly a bunch of nerdy engineers, but we are making a strong effort toward diversity. So, my workplace has resourced an LGBTQ+ employee group, open both to people who identified as such and their allies. There is mandatory annual training for every employee that stresses ways to create an inclusive and supportive environment. This past year alone, book study groups on over a dozen titles were offered during work hours and on company time. My supervisor is female, as is the leader of my group, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico. My company recognizes there is much more to do, but there's a commitment to widespread and permanent change. Could ACC be a leader in this area? The national UCC, after all, has long been hailed as a progressive church on racial and gender equity. Calling Rev. Paulo was a big step for ACC, and so was voting to approve our ONA charter. But what would it look like if we were a wonderfully diverse congregation, what would those Christians wish to celebrate? Juneteenth? The Feast of the Annunciation? Pride Month? Dia de Los Muertos, The Day of the Dead? Mardi Gras? All of the above? Paul envisions a radical community with no boundaries. Not where everyone is welcome, so long as they conform to some arbitrary set of norms and traditions. But where the only test is whether it is pleasing to God. If ACC is to reach a broader audience, it will need broader practices. It's worth thinking about.

Up to this point, I've talked about radical community at a fairly high, organizational level. Embracing the Jewish traditions and becoming aware of the systemic racism and sexism in our culture are topics this congregation has addressed through Seder services and book studies. These have been informative, but hardly transformative. The Social Justice Task Force has suggested steps to help inspire lasting change, but to date, the most sacrificial ask of the congregation is a few hours of sign-holding on the common and modest donations through Mission and Outreach giving.

But the radical community that Paul preaches, reaches to the very personal level and is not for the timid or faint of heart. The Christians in Ephesus faced very real threats, and overcame the dangers and social divisions of their time to come together in fellowship. Their risks were no less challenging and the cultural pressures no less complex than those we face today. In spite of those risks and pressures, or maybe even because of them, they came together to celebrate Christ's love and accepting mercy. We have the "Gentile" Christians of the first century to thank for giving us our own opportunity at radical community, right here at ACC. So, how might that play out?

While there are potentially many examples to choose from, I feel the subject of COVID protections is a pretty good one. The pandemic news headlines this week have largely been negative. The CDC is not ready to talk about booster shots. The pandemic is becoming a disease of the unvaccinated. Los Angeles has reinstated a mask requirement. The number of COVID cases has risen in 45 states, including Massachusetts and in Florida it has tripled in the last week. At the same time, anti-vaccination rallies have attracted national attention and at least in my experience, few people are wearing masks. Even in our own congregation, there is disagreement over the right policy for ACC.

Personally, I've been fully vaccinated since March 26, which reveals that I am in a high risk group. My health is very good, I'm just getting old. (And as an aside, that's actually very hard for me to admit.) I don't often take unnecessary risks, but I'm not risk-averse, by a long shot. I mean, I do commute to work by bicycle, against doctor's orders, whenever the weather permits, rush hour traffic and all. I do not enjoy masks and have struggled to find a style that is comfortable. On balance, I would choose to not wear a mask, if I was just thinking about myself.

But I had an experience this week that convinced me of the complexity of human emotion on this issue. My workplace has been aggressive in testing and contact tracing and even requires a daily health survey in order to gain admission to the building. They take this pandemic quite seriously. Still, as of July 1, their indoor mask mandate was dropped for vaccinated people. Almost instantaneously, masks were few and far between. So, for the first in-person meeting I led last week, I chose to wear a mask, making it clear that I did not need to, but rather that I wanted to make a point that anyone could wear a mask, without questions or judgment, in my meetings. Imagine my surprise at this week's meeting, when almost everyone showed up masked. It seems that young, logical engineers are subject to the same doubts and fears as all the rest of us, and the same peer pressure.

So I ask you, what does radical community look like regarding masks? In spite of what I just told you, I have my doubts. I want to be welcoming to those who feel safe masked and also to those who want nothing to do with masks. I want to relate to both vaccinated and unvaccinated people. I want ACC to regain its sense of community, but to do it safely and respectfully.

To be blunt, I want to be in radical community with you, all of you, with the folks in this sanctuary and with everyone tuning in online. The best way I know to do that is for me to wear a mask while worshipping indoors this summer. As I've said, I'd rather not, but it's a small sacrifice for something far more important, our radical community. For those sitting here with me, thank you for being here on a muggy summer day to listen to a lay preacher. Whether you need me to wear a mask or not, it seems that you agree that being in person is worth the risk. For those online, I want you to know it is OK to wear a mask, you won't be the only one, when you are ready to join us in person. And for those that disagree with me, and would like me to remove my mask while talking with you, just ask.

Paul introduced Christianity to what it is really like to live in radical community, harmony that breaks down all barriers. As we work toward that goal, he claims we will be remade into a new humanity, one that also finds favor with Jesus Christ. That is our quest. May God grant us the strength and compassion we will need to achieve it. May it be so. Amen.

[1] Fever, Kyle, "Commentary on Ephesians 2:11-22", July 19, 2015, Working Preacher website, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-ephesians-211-22-4>, accessed July 11, 2021.

Good morning and welcome. My name is Jeff McHarg and before Kyoko provides the official welcome and announcements, I want to provide a special announcement. Rev. Andrew is on vacation today and as one of this church's lay preachers, I will be providing the sermon today. This much was planned many weeks ago. What is news is that Rev. Paulo has called in sick and will not be with us today. His voice clearly attests that he has a virus, but he has received a negative COVID test result and says he is feeling better than two days ago. He would really like to be here, but even preachers need to stay home if they aren't feeling well. We pray that he has a speedy and complete recovery.

In the early church, it was common that people would give everything they had to the church and the church would provide for every member of the congregation. ACC is not prepared for that level of responsibility, but we are dependent on your giving for all that we do. Please give generously as we take the morning's offering.

In preparation for our time of prayer, please take a couple of deep breaths and sit comfortably. Let us pray:

Creator God, maker of the galaxies, stars planets and ultimately each one of us, we are amazed that you know us better than we know ourselves and that you love us. Give us a sense of wonder at each new day and help us to see you, not just in beautiful sunsets or vistas of nature, but also in the simple things, soft rain that waters everything, birds flying above, toads that serenade us at night.

Christ, our brother, inspire us to be our very best selves, to love you and to keep our focus on you as guide and example. Lead us to radical community, where everything we do pleases you and demonstrates our love for others. Forgive us when we fail to live by our own standards and help us to learn and to atone for our mistakes.

Holy Spirit, come and enter our deeds. Remove the barriers between us and mold us into a new humanity. Where there is sickness, heal us and where there is hurt, lead us to provide comfort. Help us be in tune with those in our community in special need today. We name before you, Rev. Paulo, Linda, Margie, Janet, Joel and Kendra, Kevin, Ebit, George, Zachary, all who have lost loved ones to COVID-19.

Holy Trinity, we strive to be your people. Give us strength and wisdom in our efforts and be our constant companion. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught his disciples to pray with the words we now repeat:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, for ever. Amen.