

NO LONGER STRANGERS AND ALIENS

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

22 July Anno Domini 2012

Ephesians 2:19-21

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Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with all the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Ephesians 2:19)

Today is part two of what it means to be “in Christ.” Last week we heard the lengthy litany in a glorious run-on fashion: In Christ we are blessed, in Christ we are chosen, in Christ predestined for adoption, in Christ we are loved, in Christ we are redeemed by His blood, we have an inheritance given to us in our Baptism in Christ. All of this of course is in and through Christ.

Today, the apostle Paul expands on that theme of our being in Christ and focuses on our unity in Christ. In Christ we are now citizens of the commonwealth of God, members of God’s household, living stones built into a temple, the dwelling place of God by His Spirit. We are one people, one family, one faith and one temple in Christ.

In Christ, the walls come tumbling down. Walls that separate and divide! Walls that exclude and keep us away. In the Old Testament, there was a great wall, the wall of separation between Israel and the other nations, between God’s chosen people and all the other people, between the “circumcised” and the “uncircumcised.” The Law of God set the Israelites apart, consecrated them and made them “holy.” The Law said, “Don’t touch, don’t handle, don’t go near, ye be separate.” It set Israel apart from her Gentile neighbors with a wall of commandments the Gentiles didn’t have to keep. Like dietary laws, Sabbath laws, feast days a plethora of cleansing rituals.

If you were an Israelite, you were different, set aside from birth for a holy purpose. That purpose was to be the bearer of the Promised Seed to the nations of the world. To be the womb that bore the Messiah in the fullness of time. To bear the promise to Adam and to Abraham, that through the promised Seed of Woman, that through offspring of Abraham, God would bless the nations. And so if you were an Israelite you were set apart.

From your mother’s knee, you learned not to associate with those “unclean ones,” those goyim, those uncircumcised. You didn’t eat at their tables, you didn’t play with their children, and you didn’t enter their houses. Remember how the apostle Peter had to receive a three-fold vision from the Lord before he would go to the house of the Gentile Cornelius, and even then he was uneasy about it and almost apologetic as he stepped through the door. Recall how the inclusion of the Gentiles, the uncircumcised, as full-fledged members of the church caused such a ruckus in the early church. They had to call a special meeting in Jerusalem to sort out the logistics. When some visitors from Jerusalem came to Antioch to see what was going on, Peter visibly withdrew from the table of the Gentile believers and was publicly rebuked by Paul. The old walls come down slowly, but they came down hard.

We know about walls. We have walls separating us from our neighbors. In the Midwest they used to say that good fences make for good neighbors; many homes have brick walls. We even have some “gated communities” with high walls and security gates. An outsider might mistake them for some luxurious prison for committers’ of white collar crimes.

Sin causes the walls to go up. Sin divides, wedging between us and God. Our sin separates us from God and sets us against and apart from one another. That’s the whole nature of sin at its heart, a wedge driven deep between us and God, leaving us alone, isolated, self-absorbed. It was for the sake of sin, your sin, that God put up His own wall, formed His own gated community called “Israel,” a nation of nomads from Egypt, a chosen people set apart for one holy purpose – to bring forth the Christ at just the right time.

Jesus was a Jew by birth, circumcised into Israel on the 8th day of His life. He walked on Israel’s soil. He also walked on Samaritan and Gentile dirt across the Jordan. He didn’t shake that dust from His feet, but He left His footprints there. He proclaimed the peace of God to those who were near – even His fellow countrymen, who often rejected Him. And He preached peace to those who were far off – to the Gentiles who would often welcomed Him. He reached out to the Samaritan woman at the well. He let the bread from Israel’s table fall to a Canaanite “dog.” He touched the lives of the Roman soldier, the synagogue ruler, the tax collector. He ate at the table of the priest and Old Testament scholar along with the tax agent and the prostitute. He embraced the excluded and welcomed them to the kingdom of God; He warned the included that their self-righteousness and self-justification put them on the very threshold of exclusion.

The appearance of Jesus brought the division of the Israelite and the Gentile, of circumcised and uncircumcised, to an end. The wall which had stood for some 1400 years cracked at the sound of His preaching, and tumbled to the ground as the earth shook in His death when the curtain of the temple, the dividing wall between holy and unholy was torn in two from top to bottom.

Jesus said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all to myself” (John 12:32). In the death of Jesus, the wall that divides comes tumbling down and the world is one in Him. He has brought the far and the near together by His blood. He has made peace, reconciling the world to His Father, reconciling us to each other in His crucified body. His blood brings peace; His wounds bring healing; His separation brings our union. In Christ we are one in the most profound sense of the word “unity” – we are one with Christ and in Christ one with another.

But you say, “So why are we still so divided? Why are Jew and Christian divided? Why are Christians divided among themselves? What’s all this ‘unity’ talk when the world is more divided today than ever?”

And the answer is the same as it was last week. It’s all “in Christ.” This profound reality of our union with Christ and our unity with one another is still all “in Christ.” It’s not in ourselves! Were it left up to us, we’d be back in the business of wall building. We love our walls. Where they’ve been knocked down, we’ll try to build them back up again. Where God in Christ had tom down the wall between circumcised and uncircumcised, some in the church tried to put the wall back up again. We do the same. We throw up walls of opinion, division, and politics. We have walls of jealousy, envy, anger, walls of prejudice and pride. We take the body of Christ and tear it into a million pieces, each piece claiming to be the true one.

“Yet there is but one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all”
(Ephesians 4:5-6). There is one Savior – the Lord Jesus Christ, one Spirit to whom we have access through Christ. We may come from different nationalities, speak different languages, have different cultures, but we all have a baptismal passport stamped “citizen of heaven.” You and I are citizens with the saints, members of the family of God. You are built on the firm foundation that God laid down – the prophets of the Old Testament, the apostles of the New Testament, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone who sets everything straight and in order, the key that joins together the old and the new into one undivided people – a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people who belong to God and it’s all in Christ. In Christ means you didn’t do it; you must believe it, trust in it, take God at His Word on it. Simply put, this truth you must not be reject.

The Church is never spoken of in a singular term in the Scriptures. Ever notice that? No “I am the church” and “you are the church” but only an inclusive “we” – together with the saints who have gone before us. We together are one people, one family, one faith, one temple of the Holy Spirit. You might even say that Christ is the end of our idolatrous rugged individualism, where each of us has made ourselves into our own gods. Instead, we get ourselves back in a new way, a way free from the barriers and dividing walls of sin, a way that unites and embraces and gather and includes.

That’s what the Church is called to show forth into the world – our unity in Christ Jesus. One Baptism, one Bread, one Cup, one Savior with one Death and Resurrection for the life of the whole world.

Once you were far off, isolated, walled off, excluded. Now you have been drawn near, gathered and included. You belong. Your Baptism testifies. Christ’s Body and the Blood testify. You belong to the people of God. You belong to the family of God. You belong to the Royal priesthood of Christ. You belong to the Body of Christ, the Church, the dwelling place of God by the Spirit of God.

You are privileged people. Gifted, holy, one in Christ. For in Christ Jesus all your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. All thanks honor and glory be to God. In Jesus name and for Jesus sake, amen and amen!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
AMEN!