

July 22, 2018 • 9th Sunday in Kingdomtide

BIND OUR HEARTS IN LOVE – SUMMER SERMON SERIES

“An Inconvenient Truth”

Sermon by the Rev. Larry Young



Ephesians 2:11-22

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

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. 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, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Our human need to feel included is a potent force in most of us. There are a few loners out there who seem happier not being a part of any group, and that may include even their family of origin. But for most of us, being included in at least a few groups of our choice matters a great deal to us. And sometimes we're even happier when our groups don't just include everyone. Groucho Marx once famously said he would not want to be a part of any club that would accept him as a member—by which he seemed to mean such a club would not be exclusive enough for him! We humans are good at finding all sorts of dividing lines and barriers and differences that can serve as a pretext for keeping others out of relationship with us and us with them. I like to think I have some skill at doing crossword puzzles; but I wouldn't be happy thinking that everyone I know can do them just as well. Some of you professional women have likely run up against “glass ceilings” and gender-based discrimination in your work life. And yes, some religious groups won't accept you if your beliefs don't toe the line.

Our reading from Ephesians today tells us that a spirit of exclusion was a problem in the early Christian church. As we know Christianity started as a reform movement within Judaism; and for awhile the assumption was that the Jesus way was meant exclusively for Jews, building as it did on that long faith tradition. But when Paul came on the scene and started preaching to and winning converts among the Gentiles, the movement had to rethink its position. And the New Testament scriptures tell us that people started lining up on both sides of this issue, and we can imagine that impassioned speeches were made in council meetings and doubtless carried over into the parking lot afterwards. But at last the church arrived at the conclusion that the Gentiles should be included—not because the Jews particularly liked them; mostly they didn't know them. And not because they thought the Gentiles would strengthen the church; probably they wondered what kind of crazy ideas they would bring with them. No, the church let the Gentiles in because of how they understood Jesus, as spelled out in this Ephesians passage. They couldn't get around the conviction that Jesus had given his life for all humanity—Gentiles as well as Jews—and therefore had broken down the human divisions so that all people might know their oneness in him. That was revolutionary stuff—to perceive that God was at work bridging all our taken-for-granted and even cherished human gulfs and dividing points. And we can hear the wonder and amazement in the writer's words as he spells out the reconciliation of all people—Gentiles and Jews—that has been effected through Christ's coming.

This truth is foundational to our Christian understanding: a loving God has embraced all of us as members of God's family, and so at the deepest level we are brothers and sisters to one another. But to use Al Gore's phrase, this is often an inconvenient truth at the same time. We want very much to believe that our views, our beliefs, our take on current issues is right; and it really goes against the grain to embrace those who differ from us as still being members of our family. This “us versus them” mentality seems deeply ingrained in our psyches; and we may fear our own identity will be diminished by any status we give the “them” in our lives.

Generational life-style differences are one potential issue we may face. For example, how do you feel about people who sport tattoos? Time was when only rough-and-ready types like construction workers or seamen would have them—but today they can show up on anyone who identifies with that generational culture. As you know they can be decorative art or have symbolic meaning, or both. So how do you feel about the tattoo-wearers around you? Probably that has a lot to do with the generation you are a part of. I grew up just assuming our bodies were complete in themselves and were not a canvas for any further decorating; so I have to admit that seeing tattooed people often triggers an “oops” moment in me. But I know that's my own value system speaking; and tattoo-wearers are operating out of a different set of values. Sometimes it's a stretch to own that if the tattoos are really wild—but if I push past my prejudices—and that's what it takes—I can honor the choices that tattooed people make. I really do know that God loves and accepts them just as God does me.

But many of the issues that divide us go a lot deeper than that. Most of you know that our United Methodist denomination, along with several other Protestant groups, is caught up in a major conflict over the issue of how the church should regard

homosexuality. Parts of the church advocate for full acceptance of it as an alternate lifestyle, and other parts believe it is contrary to Christian belief. And whether we can stay together as a denomination is now at stake. A special called session of our General Conference, our national governing body, will meet next February to try to resolve this divide. Beliefs on this issue go deep, and not surprisingly each side's conviction that it has the truth is in full bloom. We are sorely tempted to demonize the opposite side from our own. Now I don't know whether it's God's will that our denomination stay together in its present form. But surely it is God's will that we recognize we all have a place in God's family in our world, whatever our differing convictions may be. That may well be an inconvenient truth, but I believe it is God's truth.

In a real sense the political and cultural divide across our whole nation now is a larger manifestation of the same human issue. We have differing beliefs and convictions about a whole array of things: the priorities government should address, the goals of economic policy, immigration policy, our national strength, what cultural and religious values should be safeguarded, and many more. And today our divisiveness seems only to be growing because of how strongly we feel about these issues. For some, much is at stake in how these issues are dealt with; and for all of us, the cohesion and well-being of our nation is on the line. And you know the larger problem our divisiveness creates: instead of reaching out across our divisions to try to resolve issues, we tend to hunker down defiantly in our own bunkers, which only serves to deepen our division.

This is where we desperately need the inconvenient truth that the writer of Ephesians offers us: whatever our views, we are all children of a loving God who meant us to live as family. This does not mean sacrificing our convictions and beliefs; but it does mean recognizing and honoring the larger bond that makes us brothers and sisters in our world. In our differences we are not called to let hatred and animosity have the last word. And while we can't control how others act, we can, with a lot of effort, determine what our own attitude to others who differ from us will be. That's no small task, but how much it matters now!

The church as a visible manifestation of God's family drawn together in Christ is always called to model this inclusive and accepting spirit. I'm encouraged by our progress in recent years; I sense we are doing a better job of accepting a broader range of human differences and perspectives. But given our humanness, we are always a work in progress. And that's a key reason for our ongoing involvement in the life of the church: we need the reminders and support we find here for living as brothers and sisters in our world.

Loren Mead tells the story he heard from a cabbie one day in Hartford, CT. When Mead told the cabbie he wanted to go to Hartford Seminary, the driver replied, "That's a place they teach people to be ministers, isn't it?" And when Mead said yes, the cabbie took that as permission to start telling his story. "My life is a mess," he said, and he described how he had worked as a guard in a nearby prison and was now hacking to supplement his retirement income. "I never felt I got it all together, and especially my religious life. But recently I got interested in religion again and started reading the Bible. Don't know why I started—it just seemed right. There's this little church I found—a pretty little place. They have real nice cushions with embroidery on the seats. I don't like to stand out, so I saw this back pew—the one they store all the old books and leaflets on. It didn't have a cushion. I pushed the books all over and sat down. It felt right, and I'm sort of a regular now. The people are okay—they invite me to suppers and things like that, but I just don't like that stuff. You know, my prison work made me pretty anti-social. But the people have learned to let me be.

"Something happened last week, though," he continued, "and it took me by surprise. I was late to church—they were already singing the hymn. I went into my pew and joined in, then some other stuff they do; and then it came time to sit down for the Bible lesson. When I sat down, it felt funny." The cabbie looked back at Mead and grinned. "Somebody had fixed a cushion for my pew. It felt good!"

That's what it means to live as members of God's family, friends. In a symbolic sense we make sure everyone has a pew cushion that says they belong in the family—because we have all known the cushion of God's love drawing us together in Jesus Christ. Amen.