

Jesus is our peace. Ephesians 2:14-18

Intro:

How many of you have flown in recent years?

Have you ever been upgraded to first class? How does it make you feel? On a recent trip, I was able to purchase a first-class ticket. I must have timed things perfectly because the price was not that much different than coach. But I tell you – it was nice! Not only did I get first class, I got seat 1 A! When they called boarding group 1, my chest puffed a little bit. I was barely in my seat when the attendant asked me if I wanted something to drink before take-off. That Coke zero tasted so good! And then I got to watch everyone else board the plane while I sipped my coke. A little part of me was hoping I would see someone I knew. Once we were at cruising altitude, the attendant did not bring a cart by, instead he asked me what I would like to drink and brought it in a glass glass! And then he came with a tray of snacks to choose from, kind of like the dessert tray a nice restaurant brings around so you can see the options and then choose – and I could take more than one! Could this really be? I was excited about a little bag of mixed nuts and free refills on my beverage. I was sitting high. And then on the last leg of my return trip, I was still seated in the first row, and I happened to look down at my boarding pass and realized that I was in boarding group 3! I was more than a little indignant! After all I had paid for access! I had to fight the urge to demand my rightful place with the gate attendant. So, I just stewed for a while, and contemplated my entitlement while waiting to board my 30-minute flight.

How about the signage that says first class or boarding group 1 on one side of the sign, and the remaining boarding groups on the other side of the sign? I have actually had gate attendants make sure people go on the correct side of the sign. There is nothing there but the sign on a pole, but you better be on the right side of it.

Have you noticed the number of boarding groups? It feels like a caste society. I flew on one airline and they had 7 boarding groups! How is that even possible? The plane wasn't that big. Imagine if I had drawn boarding group 7 when sitting in seat 1A? I surely would have protested.

And now, the window seat and the aisle seat are premiere seats, meaning you pay a premium to not sit in the middle seat. Even Southwest Airlines, who is known for their general seating arrangement, has their own system of paying for early boarding, or the race to the best seat. Just go to their FAQ page, it is full of hacks to get better seating. Then make sure you line up at the correct pole!

Way back in the dark ages, planes were loaded from the back to the front, and before they had the jetways, you walked up the stairs. If a plane had two doors, they had 2 sets of stairs and you took the one closest to your seats. It was pretty simple.

You've got to be wondering where this is all going? Trust me, there will be a connection. Flying can give us an idea of how easy it is for us to want to feel better than. It seems to be a natural thing.

As we have been making our way through the book of Ephesians Paul has been working on the Ephesians perception of themselves and at the same time corrected the perception that many Jews had about themselves.

In the context of the reminder of the Gentile's exclusion from Christ, from citizenship in the country, from the promises of the covenants, without hope and without God, Paul declares that Jesus is our

peace. Paul also has demonstrated that both Jew and Gentile are on equal footing – we were all separated from God. Clinton Arnold puts it this way.

Slide *”Paul is simply helping the Gentile readers understand and appreciate their new situation in Christ, which has resulted in peace with God and peace with the Jews. Now the blessings that once belonged to Israel belong also to them, including the priestly blessing of peace:” (Clinton Arnold)*

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Num 6:24–26).

And Isaiah also reminds us that Jesus is the Prince of Peace

Slide *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

So, what does it mean that Jesus is our peace? If only it were a simple answer! The depth in the book of Ephesians is a bit overwhelming and at the same time encouraging.

Let’s take a look at today’s passage.

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.

Slide *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.

I’ve attempted to break this down into bite sized pieces but know that it still can feel like you put a whole footlong bubble gum in your mouth! There is a lot here!

Slide *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.*

How is he our peace?

“In his flesh” is parallel to vs 13: “by the blood of Christ, which is referring to the death of Christ on the Cross. In verses 11 and 12 Paul uses the phrase “in the flesh” referring to the “sacrifice” of flesh in circumcision. The Jews had turned this into an idol and into an “entrance key” to Judaism, Paul is declaring that it is through the flesh of Jesus that the law with all of the added rules and regulations has been abolished. Without the sacrifice of Jesus, there is no destruction of the wall of hostility and no access to God.

Let’s take a look at what is meant by this wall of hostility. First of all, there was a real wall, secondly, there were also non-physical walls erected between people groups.

The temple complex in Jerusalem (known as Herod's temple, because it was refurbished and expanded during the time of King Herod the Great) was the centerpiece of the Jewish religious system. It is where the sacrifices were made for individuals and for the whole nation. It housed the Holy of Holies – the place where the high priest went once a year to take a sacrifice that would make atonement for the whole nation. Jews made, potentially, several pilgrimages to the temple annually to bring their offerings. The temple complex was huge. The whole complex was about 40 acres and was the ancient world's largest religious structure, with many different courts, or areas where people could gather. There was a great degree of social interaction attached to the temple complex as well. To say the least, it was a busy place.

One of the courts in the complex was known as the Gentile Court. This was a place where Gentiles who were interested in the God of Israel, but not interested in fully converting (it required circumcision) were allowed to be. There was a wall that was put in place as a line of demarcation. It showed how close they could get. This area is where the selling of animals and other items for sacrifices took place. It is where the money changers set up shop. Money changers were like a currency exchange place. If you've traveled out of the United States, you know that you need the currency of the country you are visiting. When you arrive in another country, you will find places, along with banks, where you can exchange your dollars for whatever the local currency is. Generally, there is a fee of some kind that is required for the exchange. In the temple complex, people came from all over the known world and they needed to exchange their currency. In essence, the temple area had become a center of commerce. It served as the bank, just like the temple of Artemis in Ephesus. So, in some ways, the Jewish temple had culturally become like pagan temples.

Most of us have read the passage that describes Jesus turning over the tables in the temple. This was likely in the Gentile court. For context, this took place during what has become known as the passion week. It was the day after Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, being hailed by the crowds as a king.

Slide *Mark 11:¹⁵ On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'^[c]? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.*

The Jews had lost track of the fact that God's people had always been a mixed multitude. It was during the intertestamental period between the Old and New Testaments that they had changed the meaning of the word Torah – the name of the first 5 books. Torah means "the teaching". In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, it ended up being translated as the Law. We've learned over the past several years that the Law (Torah) was not given as a club, but as a way for us to understand the character of God. In other words, to teach us about God. It got turned into something that allowed the Jews to elevate themselves over other people, and they ended up using the Law to keep people away.

PIC 1 **PIC.** In the Gentile court they erected a physical wall of separation to keep the Gentiles from getting any closer. Here is someone's idea of what it looked like. This wall had insignias on it forbidding a Gentile from crossing over it. A couple of been unearthed.

PIC 2 **See PIC** Let me translate that for you: "No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and forecourt around the sacred precinct. Whoever is caught will himself be responsible for (his) consequent

death...” Think about it. The Jews were law keepers, and yet, they were willing to break one of the 10 commandments in order to preserve their “special status”. So, killing on God’s behalf!

This would be akin to NCC putting up caution tape around our building and only allowing certain people to come through, while telling others, if they tried to come in, we would take them out! This sounds absurd, however, this being Black History month, it doesn’t take much reflection to recognize the ways black people have been treated by the church at large. In fact, history is full of examples where the “church” continued with the attitude of the Jews, thinking that they had some special dispensation before God and had been granted authority to protect their status. This includes, not only racial separation and mistreatment, but poor treatment of women and children.

We have to be cautious regarding casting aspersions towards the Jews who got it wrong. We all have the ability and sometimes the inclination to create our own versions of walls of hostility.

So, back to Jesus and the donkey...As Jesus was approaching Jerusalem with all the shouts of Hosanna to the King coming from the crowds, I imagine that Simon Peter and Simon the Zealot, may have been high-fiving each other and the other disciples over what Jesus was doing. He just came to town like a king, and now he’s taking over the temple. They were likely still hoping for a physical takeover by the Messiah. And there are those of us today who would welcome this kind of takeover. We’re still looking for a king and yet missing him.

But Jesus...

Here we have Jesus coming into the temple area as the true High Priest, as the true Holy of Holies, and he doesn’t go to the designated spot for the Holy of Holies. He goes straight to the Court of the Gentiles. Think about the statement he is making. Jesus was not inserting himself into the Jewish religious structure, he was abolishing it! He was teaching through his actions. He bypassed the place of the Holy of Holies so that he, the Holiest of Holies could be with the marginalized.

What is Jesus doing? Paul makes it obvious. Jesus’ purpose was

Slide that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

Paul has been leading us to this point throughout the letter so far. He has been teaching the gentiles that they have been brought near to God and also teaching the Jews, that they were much farther away than they thought and Jesus is erasing the chasm between the two groups, forming them into one body. At the end of this chapter Paul tells us that we, the church, are being knitted together to be the dwelling place of God. In Chapter 3 Paul lets us in on a secret:

Slide *Ephesians 3: 4 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. 6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*

What we have here is Jesus exercising his creation power. The creator of the universe is not creating an environment where the Jews and the Gentiles can get along and live peaceably together. This is not a way for them to co-exist! There are no bumper stickers or yard signs. Jesus has voided the law, the Mosaic covenant, and he has created a whole new people group. One without class and racial distinctions. Every Sunday, we hear the words, “This cup is the New Covenant in my blood”. Through

his death, burial and resurrection Jesus has abolished the old covenant, put to death the hostility between the two, created a new covenant and a new being, which is his body, the church.

Paul is reiterating what he states in Chapter 1 – we have been adopted as sons and have an inheritance as such. We, meaning all who are in Christ, regardless of background or gender.

His Method: He Came

Slide *Eph 2:17 **He came** and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*

Slide *John 17:1 When Jesus had spoken these words, (referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit) he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. 4 I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. 5 And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*

Slide *20 “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”*

Overall outcome

Smarty word Our smarty word for the day is Access. Jesus gives **access** to the father Through the Spirit: In the John passage it's impossible not to see that Jesus desired for us to be with him and with the Father. Hebrews tells us to come boldly into the throne room of God.

What does this mean for us today?

Through his death burial and resurrection Jesus has simultaneously reconciled us to God – the vertical relationship that Dan mentioned last week, and he has reconciled us to each other, the horizontal relationships.

And yet, there still are Walls of hostility within what is referred to as the church. And I say referred to as the church, because I wonder if a church is demonstrating hostility and we know that Christ has wiped out the hostility, are they really the church? Some examples of hostility that we can see are racial, social, political and religious.

Let's think about where we might be creating walls of hostility.

What barriers do you have in place racially?

What barriers do you have in place socially and socially/economically?

How about political barriers?

What religious barriers do you have in place? Do you have a need to make sure that people are cleaned up before they can be let close to God? Are you trying to “protect” God from people?

Are you imposing on others, practices that would be considered heterodoxy and thereby turning them into orthodoxy?

Access

In verse 18 Paul tells us that through Jesus we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. I like the way Constantine Campbell summarizes this.

Slide

”Finally, the access of Jew and gentile, mediated through Christ in the common sharing of the Spirit, is to the Father. No longer is the Israelite priesthood, sacrificial system, or temple complex required for genuine access to God.⁷⁷ Christ is the only mediator needed, and sacred space is rendered obsolete since the Spirit dwells among people of all nations. Relationship with God is facilitated by means of his triune nature, with Father, Son, and Spirit, and with each playing their role in enabling human worship.” Constantine Campbell

Jesus put to death the hostility. There is no place for exclusivity in Gods economy! There is no place for hostility! There is no triage tent outside the Kingdom! There is no first class! It is not possible to pay for access. There is only one door to God’s presence and that is through Jesus by the spirit. None of us can open or close it, there are no push or pull signs on it. And all whom God draws to himself will go through that door, not on their merit, but because Jesus granted access.