

Pentecost 8 7/19/15
Ephesians 2:11-22 11B

“BUT NOW IN CHRIST JESUS YOU WHO ONCE WERE FAR OFF HAVE BEEN BROUGHT NEAR BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST”

So, what did Pastor do on his vacation? Well, I’m going to tell you. In fact, even if you don’t want to know, I’m going to tell you anyway. I spent my vacation hiking in the Black Hills of South Dakota. It was fun and beautiful, but it was also exhausting. As you go up, the adrenaline is pumping, the sense of adventure is still a thrill, but what comes up, must come down. And coming down means being tired, really tired. In fact -- I do walk by faith, not by doubt -- but once or twice, it did enter into my thoughts that I could get lost and get eaten by a bear. Do they have bears in the Black Hills? Well, Pastor didn’t want to find out.

Now, you wonder why I’m talking about getting lost. In our Epistle, St. Paul writes about getting lost, lost from God and one from one another in sin. But the Apostle also has good news for us, **“REMEMBER THAT YOU WERE AT THAT TIME SEPARATED FROM CHRIST ... BUT NOW IN CHRIST JESUS YOU WHO ONCE WERE FAR OFF HAVE BEEN BROUGHT NEAR BY THE BLOOD OF CHRIST.”**

Sin divides. God created us to be together, one with Him and one with each another. But sin brought division and isolation.

There are examples throughout the Bible. God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But, they sinned and hid from God. They were cast out of Eden, divided from God.

In his anger and jealousy, Cain killed his brother Abel, forever dividing himself from his brother.

Noah and his family stood out as righteous in an unrighteous world. Even though Noah faithfully preached repentance, all others refused to believe that God's judgment would ever come. But the flood did come, forever dividing the believers inside the ark and the unbelievers outside.

All the people of the world shared a common language. In their pride and arrogance, they decided to build a tower to make a name for themselves, rather than bearing the name of God. For their wickedness, God confused their language. People could not understand one another and "Babel," "confusion" resulted. They drifted apart from one another into different tribes, cultures, and nations and history chronicles the distrust, prejudice, and violence that the division sin has brought.

If we want to see the division sin brings, we don't need to look at Scripture, we only need to look at the world and our lives in it. Our work places – instead of being places where all work together for the common good – are more often places of envy and power plays, gossip and back stabbing, all to get ahead. Families – the most sacred of institutions God has given for strength and comfort – are often where we see the greatest, most emotional of conflict. Children hear from their parents are "Can't you do anything right?!" And parents hear, "I hate you," from their own children. When words of hate are not filling the air, deadly silence fills our homes.

Sin divides; it isolates us God and from one another. It ends friendships, destroys marriages, alienates family members from one another, and tears apart congregations. Ultimately, it isolates sinners into the grave and hell, isolating them forever from God. And that, Dear Friends in Christ, is the greatest isolation of all.

St. Paul has Good News for us who live in the division of sin: "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ ... But now in

Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

St. Paul is teaching us this: Division is not from God. Division is man-made; it is the result of sin. Jesus Christ came to end division; to restore communion between man and God. What the Apostle says is true of you: once you were separated from Christ. You were born sinful and separated – divided – from God. Therefore, you had no hope. Because of your sin, you were destined to be divided from God in hell for eternity.

God does not want us separated from Him and from one another, and so He sent His only-begotten Son, Jesus, to reconcile us to Himself and to one another. The Son of Man became man and dwelt among us. As God and man, He bore your sin and the sin of all the world to the cross. His blood was shed so that you would be forgiven. He suffered God’s condemnation so that you would be spared that condemnation. He was abandoned by God so that you would never be abandoned. He died, so that you would not die. And, the 3rd day, He rose again, so that you would rise to eternal life in Him.

In our lesson, Paul says it this way, “For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility ... and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross.”

In our Gospel, Jesus has compassion on the crowd “because they were like sheep without a shepherd,” and fed them their daily bread. The Good News of the Gospel is that who had come to be our Peace has compassion on us, Dear Friends. As He fed the crowd, He gives you your daily bread, all that you need for your body and life.

He has compassion on you in your Baptism. There, He marks you as one redeemed, and unites you to Himself in His death and resurrection. Jesus lives in you and you live in Jesus. That is true unity, in which not even Satan and death can divide.

Once you were without God, left to deal with the devil, the world, and the weakness and doubt of your sinful flesh all on your own. Despite their flatteries and seductions, these unholy three want only to keep you separated from God, broken in pieces, and captive to death and the grave. But, you are no longer separated from Christ, having no hope and without God. You can gladly say that you are God's own child.

As you journey upon life's way, Jesus still has compassion on you. Your Good Shepherd journeys with us and gives us promises, provisions, strength, hope for our journey, and joy in our journey. "His rod and His staff, they comfort me," we know from that blessed Shepherd Psalm. Jesus has compassion on us, He comforts us, He does His work in us, through the hearing and learning of His Word and the eating and drinking of His life-giving Body and Blood – to give us all these things for our journey to heaven.

What does this mean for our life together? We are Christ to one another. This means that there is simply no place for prejudice, bigotry, hate, division with the Lord's Church. These are divisions that sinners make all over the world. These are the distinctions between "us" and "them," and the purpose of division is power, we want to be lord over "them". We can blame "them" for our problems. We can belittle "them" to feel better about ourselves. Sinners divide to elevate themselves as they put down others.

This is contrary to Scripture. It is sin. And, it's easy to fall into sin. Division is not only a sin against our neighbor; it is a sin against Christ and His Gospel. This is the point of the book of Ephesians – Paul is teaching the Gentiles that Jesus is the Savior of all! To harbor prejudice is to deny the Gospel. Should you harbor prejudice against someone because of their race, because they have more money or a bigger house than you, because they got the promotion at work you believed to be yours, because they have sinned against you and hurt you badly – repent. Repent, and believe that you are one with Christ and with your neighbor – even the ones with all the thorns.

For once you were lost and condemned in sin. But, now, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ and you are forgiven in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.