

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

Our primary Scripture this morning starts with verse 11 in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. But that verse starts with the word "Therefore...", and you just can't start with "therefore" without knowing what came before that. Paul used that device several times in his letter to the Romans, where he would spend some time establishing a premise, and then transition to the application of that premise with "therefore". So when you see this passage starting with "therefore", you have to look back and see where he had been.

Go back to verse 8.

**READ Ephesians 2:8-10**

There is a perfectly clear statement of the doctrine of our salvation by grace through faith in a nutshell. It is God's idea, God's gift to the people that God made for Himself, given as a gift of grace and not as a reward for anything we might have done or not done or might ever do or not do. We are saved for a purpose greater than ourselves – a purpose larger than our personal salvation; we are saved to be instruments of God's grace in the world.

That's our starting point. We have been saved by grace through faith, therefore...

**READ Ephesians 2:11-22**

The people of the church at Ephesus were living in a culture where Christianity was not the dominant influence. That immediately makes them people we can relate to, and people we can learn something from about how we can live as faithful Christians in such a culture. In this passage, Paul is addressing another significant issue facing the church at Ephesus, and we have something to learn here, too.

Like many of the churches of the first century, the church at Ephesus was apparently challenged by internal division. In Corinth, the big problem was people who had been given some gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly the gift of speaking in tongues,

and those people were holding themselves up as better Christians because of their particular gifts. In other places, like Ephesus, the principal division was between Christians of Jewish heritage and those of Gentile heritage – basically anybody who was not Jewish. The problem of that division is the same problem at Corinth and the same problem with any division between people – some of the people on one side or the other thought that they were better than the others because of who they were.

The problem that Paul is addressing here is that the Christians of Jewish heritage, or at least some of them, believed themselves to be superior because of their ancestry. Paul lays out some of the advantages that ancestry had given them in a lot more detail in the letter to the Romans. Here he does that by naming some disadvantages of the Gentiles – they had no relationship with God at all, and had no hope. But through their common faith in God as demonstrated to all of them in Jesus Christ, those advantages and disadvantages have disappeared. The playing field is leveled through the grace of God, and even the Gentiles are heirs to the promises of God going all the way back to Creation. All Christians, regardless of heritage or history, have full access to the same God by the action of God's grace. Of course, this is not news to God, because God had made it that way since Creation, but it was apparently news to some of the good folks at Ephesus.

Jesus had addressed this issue in the parable of the workers in the vineyard in Matthew 20. The owner of the vineyard had hired people all through the day to work, and at the end of the day paid all of them the same wage, whether they had been there for an hour or 12 hours. The ones who had been hired first complained, but the response of the owner was essentially that it was his vineyard and his money. It is God's grace, God's gift of salvation, and He has chosen out of His love for all His created people to offer that gift to all His people. Paul is telling them that they all have the same salvation, the same gift of abundant and eternal life. The reality of God's grace as demonstrated in Jesus Christ is that those coming latest to relationship with God inherit the full revelation of God from the beginning. Christianity has its origins in Judaism, but the roots are

deeper than even that. The roots go back to Creation, and in Christ, all the barriers that would prevent anyone access to that entire relationship with God have been broken down.

That does not stop us from building new walls. We may not have the exact division of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, but we have not overcome the basic human tendency to divide people. We could very quickly make a very long list of ways that we divide people both in the world outside the church and within Christianity. We divide ourselves by race, gender, nationality, region of the country, city or rural, family background, economic status, blue collar or white collar job, positions on all kinds of political issues, and religion. Within Christianity, we split up by denomination, over differences in the form of baptism, the manner of serving Holy Communion, the use of ritual and liturgy, form of church governance, and sometimes even real theological, doctrinal issues. Some of the things that we divide people over are about choices we make, like most of the stuff within Christianity, and some of them are over characteristics what we have no control over, like race and gender. At the national and international level, the United Methodist Church is being roiled by debate over same-sex marriage. It doesn't matter what the issue is, the result is the same whenever we divide – we are on the side of “us”, and they are on the side of “them.”

The message of this passage – grace is universal – from Ephesians is repeated throughout the Bible. When John Wesley was exploring this issue, he used a text from the Old Testament.

**READ 2 Kings 10:15-16**

This came from a time when the kingdom of Israel after David and Solomon was disintegrating. Jehu and Jehonadab came from different backgrounds, including some sharp differences in religious practices. But that was not what Jehu cared about – he just wanted to know if he and Jehonadab were of the same mind about God.

The Bible paraphrase “The Message” gives us these same verses this way:

<sup>15</sup> He went on from there and came upon Jehonadab the Recabite who was on his way to meet him. Greeting him, he said, "Are we together and of one mind in this?" Jehonadab said, "We are – count on me." "Then give me your hand," said Jehu. They shook hands on it and Jehonadab stepped up into the chariot with Jehu. <sup>16</sup> "Come along with me," said Jehu, "and witness my zeal for GOD." Together they proceeded in the chariot.

That was the example of cutting through differences to the basic question of our position with God that John Wesley commended for our use. He talked about the inevitability of differences in Christian practice, and the irrelevance of most of those differences. There will always be differences of opinion and differences in practice, but the only question that matters is whether we have heard and understood and claimed for ourselves the fundamental, essential truth of salvation by grace through faith. Other things may give us character and make us interesting or entertaining, but if we are of one mind on the basic truth of salvation by grace through faith, the other stuff will not divide us.

Unity in grace is what enables us to accept our differences without allowing them to divide us. That is true within this congregation, within the United Methodist Church, within Protestantism, within Christianity. It is unity in grace that makes us all members of God's household, with all the variety that you can imagine within a household. Unity does not mean uniformity. If we were all exactly the same, we would be really boring, and that is certainly not one of God's characteristics. But unity does mean that we are of one mind as to the fundamental truth of salvation by grace through faith. That is what allowed Paul to go on with his "therefore": therefore, since we are all saved in the same way by the same grace, we are all building on the same foundation to become a dwelling in which God lives. We will offer our hands to all others of the same mind, and will, as John Wesley said "love all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, regardless of their opinions, forms of worship, or congregational membership... [they] have an

indescribable affection for them, yearn for their welfare, and intervene with others on their behalf. They speak encouragingly to them, and all their words they work to strengthen them in God.”

Hear all that for yourself today. See each other, inside and outside this congregation, through the eyes of Christ, who loves us in all our variety and saves us all in the same grace. All Christians are saved to the same purpose – to be instruments of God’s grace to each other and to all those who have not yet heard and accepted God’s gift of salvation. It is grace that saves us, grace that compels us to bring others in, and grace that makes us all one in God. Wesley closed his sermon with this: “... think on these things. If you are already living in this way, continue doing so. If up to this time you have taken the wrong path, bless God who has brought you back.”

Thanks be to God, who always brings us back.