

March 12, 2017

TEXT: Ephesians 2:11–22

TITLE: Unfaithful Phrases: I Got Here First

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

We had one big rocking chair in our family room growing up. The other two chairs pulled close to the 16 inch TV were small vinyl covered metal kitchen chairs that belonged around the table in a kids' play dining set we were slowly outgrowing. My sisters and I would get our snacks and race down the steps to see who could claim her spot on the rocking chair. We hoped that we wouldn't need to refill our glass of water or be summoned to set the table or have to answer that the phone mounted on the wall at the bottom of the steps. Life operated under a "*you move it, you lose it*" principal, where prime seats and TV remotes were claimed by the one who could say "I got here first." Whoever got there first was the winner, the one in charge, the one who set the rules.

Isn't that how it is with us? Whether we are driving around crowded mall parking lots during the holidays or staking out aisle seats on the airplanes, we tend to agree that the first will be, well...*first*. We see this in grocery store checkout lines. We see this in workplaces that reward seniority. We even see this philosophy in action by those who believe that the immigrants who settled in this country in the 18th century are somehow less immigrants and more citizens than those who arrive across this nation's borders today.

On September 21, 2001 a white man entered a mini mart in Dallas. He approached the Bangladeshi immigrant who was working behind the register and asked, "Where are you from?" before shooting him and two other men in retaliation for the attacks on September 11, 2001. Two of the three men died, but the Muslim Bangladeshi immigrant behind the counter—a man named Raisuddin (ray-su-dan)—survived. He lost his eye, lost his home and lost his fiancée—and he ended up with over \$60,000 in medical debt. But he *lived*. He ignored his family's pleas to return to Bangladesh. He remained committed to realizing the American Dream that brought him here. He "worked his way up"—getting a job at the Olive Garden, and eventually working his way toward job as a computer programmer with a six-figure salary. And ten years after his assault, rather than testify against his imprisoned assailant, he visited him on Death Row and fought against his execution, even suing the state of Texas and its governor that he might live.

An author writes of Raisuddin, saying:

A newly minted American citizen, he had come to believe that Stroman (the gunman) was the product of a hurting America that couldn't just be lethally injected away... This immigrant begging America to be as merciful to a native son as it had been to an adopted one. In the mini-mart, all those years earlier, not just two men, but two Americas collided. An America that still dreams, still strives, still imagines that tomorrow can build on today, and an America that has resigned to fate, buckled under stress and chaos, lowered expectations, an ducked into the oldest of refuges: the tribal fellowship of one's own narrow kind. And it was

Raisuddin, despite being a newcomer, despite being attacked, despite being homeless and traumatized, who belonged to that republic of dreams and Stroman who belonged to that other wounded country, despite being born with the privilege of a native white man.¹

If there is one thing that the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath has made clear is that we live in a nation that is still nursing deep wounds. We are wounded by manifestations of painful division between the people of our nation - a people who are professed to be citizens of *“one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”* We are wounded, too, by the legacy of our sins—sins like: colonization’s genocide of Native Americans; capitalism’s enslavement of Africans; and the countless ways that indoctrinated fear has led to the internment of Japanese, the profiling of Muslims, and the mass deportation of Mexicans. And we are wounded by the flawed claim of superiority by those who assert, in word or in deed, a mentality of “I got here first,” even when the claim is outright untrue.

Although this mentality haunts our collective identity, we are not the first, nor the only ones who have fallen prey to this mentality. We see this philosophy play out across continents, race, religion, and even across time.

Take a look at scripture. As the narrative of God’s people spans families, tribes, and nations—crossing deserts and seas and borders—we see this dynamic play out. We see it in its most primitive incarnation when brother fights brother: when Cain kills Abel, when Jacob steals Esau’s birthright, when Joseph’s brothers throw him in a pit. These brothers are wrestling for the rights and privileges that come to those who got here first, just like we do today.

We see it in the early church, where believers tried to figure out who belonged and who did not. Schism arose when believers disagreed about how God’s salvation worked, and tried to serve as gatekeepers regarding who could claim the mantle of child of God. *Were only those who were born into Jewish families members of God’s chosen people? Did Gentiles have to convert to Judaism in order to be claimed as God’s own? Or were God’s promises offered to Gentiles too simply because God is a gracious God and Christ came to set God’s people free?* How did it all work?

Into this conflict, we get our word for today. We receive Paul’s teaching that the boundary lines in our spiritual community had been erased by God in Christ. The saving work of Christ has a far reach, he tells us. In Christ, God’s salvation and claim were extended beyond Jew to Gentile alike. The old definitions no longer applied. Why? Because the pinnacle of God’s initiative to reconcile God’s people came in Jesus Christ, and *He* made all things new. In fact, Christ’s saving work was so powerful, so thorough, that it conquered all of the walls humanity constructed that divide.

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https://www.ted.com/talks/anand_giridharadas_a_tale_of_two_americas_and_the_mini_mart_where_they_collided/transcript?language=en

Paul reminds us that those who were once foreigners are now citizens; those who were far away have been brought near. Paul says: “*He himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,...*”

Because of God’s love for us in Christ, the quality of our community—in fact the state of our whole *being* has changed. We have been infused with a peace that comes not as a result of human negotiations, but as a *Divine gift*. We live in peace because we live in Christ—and it is Christ alone who has made us one. All we have to do is live like it! As one commentator states: “the peace of Christ is a shocking new reality in which former enemies who would not touch or eat with one another now reach out to one another in recognition of their common humanity.”²

Our text asserts that in the midst of worldly divisions, we have a new identity formed by God. This identity testifies to the truth that the core of our identity is anchored in Christ, and replaces old lies in which we have trusted that have grounded our identity in the norms of this world. This truth challenges us to look beyond the distortions we are fed about earthly models of superiority and to trust in the gracious redemption won for ALL in Jesus Christ.

What does this look like? What might this mean for us? Well, one commentator writes of an icon he saw in an abbey in Austria, entitled *Xenophilia*—meaning “love and friendship for strangers.” He writes:

In the background was a small town or community. People could be seen walking the streets of the town...in the foreground was a large table. Seated around the table were people sharing a meal. Everyone in the icon looked quite ordinary except for one thing—a glow or halo encircled the head of each person....The title invited me to look at the icon differently, for it suggested that not everyone walking those streets or sitting at that table was a citizen of the town. Some were strangers and outsiders, immigrants from elsewhere. But they were able to enter the town because there were no walls surrounding it, nothing to suggest that some were welcome and others were not...Instead of “xenophobia,” the fear of the stranger that increasingly grips our society, this little town embodied the befriending hospitality of God. Everyone who walked its streets glowed with holiness because they had learned to love whatever neighbors came their way, especially those neighbors it is easy to fear and, therefore, exclude. Everyone in the painting radiated the goodness of God because whether they were host or guest, citizen or stranger, love was being given and received.³

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16)

³ <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53384.pdf>

There is a quality of being—and a quality of community—that has been won for us in Christ. Yes, the reconciliation of which we read this morning is of a spiritual nature. We are claimed as a people redeemed, named as beloved children who have been grafted into the family of God. We have been made new, identified not according to our sin or limitation, but by the love of God for us in Christ.

But what if this abundant peace of this spiritual claim overflowed into and transformed our worldly lives? What if God's promises to us and for us changed us so much that we lived, truly, as a changed people? What if we trusted our inheritance so thoroughly that we were assured that there was enough room—in heaven and on earth—for everyone? What if we experienced the peace of Christ so thoroughly that we extended it to others? What if we saw the holiness in one another—stranger and friend, enemy and ally, citizen and immigrant—and allowed the quality of our lives together reflected the love we freely shared between us? What if we dismantled walls, crossed boundary lines, and deconstructed hierarchies and instead lived with arms stretched wide and hearts open in welcome?

See, wherever we fall in the systems of this world—outsider or insider, privileged or struggling, powerful or disempowered—we were all spiritual aliens. Yet we were welcomed in, claimed as God's own, not because we wooed our Maker or passed a test or were thoroughly vetted. In fact, quite the contrary! In spite of our sinfulness God extended a strong welcome to us in Jesus Christ, carrying us over any boundary line that sought to keep us out. We became citizens of the kingdom of God not because of our own initiative, but because of God's gracious welcome.

What if the grace, the generosity, the radical inclusion that WE have received in Christ truly changed us? What if it gave us eyes to see that every good gift comes from God—even every good gift planted within ourselves that allows us to give and to serve? What if, rather than sort one another out as immigrant or citizen, rich/poor, gay/straight, cis/trans, man/woman, black/white—we looked at the diversity within our human family and labeled it "US."

What if our fears gave way to acceptance, our ignorance gave way to understanding, and we, like Raissudin, believed that ALL were equally worthy of achieving our dreams?

May we, named as heirs to God's kingdom, recognize in the other a shared citizenship, perhaps even a family bond. May we give up the lie that says "I got here first," and replace it with the truth, saying: "In Christ, we are all one."

May it be so.