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**July 22, 2012**

**“Real Belonging”**

**Ephesians 2:11-22**

Read the scripture online (NSRV): <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=209631753>

In 1971, the city of Alexandria, VA, decided to fully integrate its school system. The district appointed African American Coach Herman Boone to serve as the first head coach of the consolidated football team, a real-life story captured in the blockbuster movie, *Remember the Titans*. Boone’s leadership accomplished the impossible: where racial lines bred enmity, Boone cultivated friendship; where the local community and national culture created a climate of separation and suspicion, Boone instilled within these young men a sense of solidarity and trust. The young men who were a part of the ’71 Titans team learned some counter-cultural lessons that enabled them to trust one another, to work together, to share an identity as teammates when their community thought they would never succeed. Their genuine teamwork and dedication earned them a State Championship. Their unity modeled that a new way was possible for the town. Even Nixon commented: “The Titans saved Alexandria.”<sup>1</sup>

Coach Boone said years later in an address:

*Diverse unfocused boys who were unwilling to talk to each other, broke the mold in the state of Virginia because they found a way to accept their teammates as equals at a time when it was neither popular or, in many cases, safe. That brave mentality started them on a journey of a lifetime and once they decided to become a team, they battled under extreme circumstances until reaching the pinnacle of high school football, a State Title.*<sup>2</sup>

The Titans were not alone in their struggle, and their triumph did not end the conflict of human division. Humankind has struggled to find acceptance across cultural dividing lines since the dawn of human difference. Race, culture, class, gender, sexual identity, age, ability, religion, belief system: all have become qualities by which we have “measured one another up,” drawn circles around groups to determine who is on the inside and who is on the outside. For some reason, these distinctions have been important: to middle school students as they form cliques; to adults as they form alliances. Individual and corporate identities have been grounded in these differences. They have been the basis for community, and the basis for exclusion.

The church in Ephesus was no different. Even as a common belief in Christ began to draw Jews and Gentiles into community together, stark differences were present. Jewish faith and community was grounded in the worship of the one God of Israel, while Gentile faith was rooted in polytheistic pagan worship. Jewish Christians saw their faith in Christ as being grounded in their Jewish religious and cultural identity. As such, customs such as Sabbath-keeping, dietary laws, and circumcision were integral to Jewish-Christian practice. Yet these customs seemed foreign and odd to Gentile Christians. So as the early church grew, so did the need to answer the question: what

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Nixon.

<sup>2</sup> Boone, Herman. Speech to Providence College.



does Christianity look like? What customs and beliefs are fundamental to all believers? What must one do to be a part the church of Christ?

Questions were asked along cultural and religious lines: What practices were necessary to unify the church? What differences could remain? For example: Must Gentile Christians be circumcised and obey Jewish dietary law? Or could they believe in Christ without first converting to Judaism?

Into these questions, Paul addresses the church in Ephesus. He writes that the church's identity rests in Christ. Christ extends to the church unity in their division. Christ blesses the church with a spirit of peace. He argues that the qualities that bred enmity and division have been overcome in Christ. Or, rather, their importance has been trumped by Christ's unifying grace extended to all. Both Jews and Gentiles are offered acceptance in Christ, who is hope for salvation for all. Paul argues that unity is not something that the church needs to figure out. Christ IS the unity of the church, overcoming the dividing walls within the community of faith, putting hostility to death on the cross, and making the church a new creation. Christ has done the heavy lifting, transformed the church from a hot-bed of division into a household of God.

Paul's message is revolutionary. In an era when people cling to the differences embedded in their traditional identities, Paul lifts up a new way. There are no negotiations to be had nor any deals to be struck. Christ has made them one, for, as Paul points out, in Christ, humanity has been reconciled to God and to one another.

The thing is, Paul argues, people may choose to cling to their differences, but that doesn't change the reality of our faith: Christ HAS made a new creation. Something definitive has happened in Christ: acceptance has happened. Unconditional love has happened; unity has happened. We can reject that truth or we can accept it, but it doesn't change the truth itself. Christ has done a new thing.

As the church of today we, too, are invited to live into this new reality, to dare to dream about what the church—what the world—might look like if we really believed the promise of our faith: that we are truly accepted by God in Jesus Christ. Scripture assures us: There is nothing that will separate God's love for us in Jesus Christ. We are made a new creation; the old has passed away.

What would it look like if we believed this truth—really believed it? What would our interactions look like? What would our homes look like? What would our bank statements look like? What would our church look like if we trusted this truth?

We live in a world that still clings to identity differences a sources of polarizing division rather than embracing the richness of diversity. These polarities mark lines: we are either black or white, young or old, woman or man, gay or straight, liberal or conservative; the list goes on. But Jesus has given us a new identity: we are members of the household of God, part of God's family, all living under God's roof, all covered under God's care. We are part of a home that will never pass away; we are claimed by a God who will never leave us nor forsake us. We are the household of Christ.



But too often we put up walls. These walls are often walls of hostility about which Paul writes. Sometimes we kid ourselves, though, into thinking that these walls are safety walls, protective walls, retaining walls. They buttress the church, help us stay strong, ensure our safety. However, the energy we put into building these sorts of walls often becomes consumed with an agenda focused on trying to protect God or protect privilege: neither of which, frankly, need our protection.

Thomas Merton writes that we are committed to the pursuit of peace. But he writes of the harsh truth that too often our idea of peace is defined by personal agenda and not Godly love. The church is not immune to this brand of peacemaking. He writes:

*To some...peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others peace means the freedom to rob others without interruption. To still others it means the leisure to devour the goods of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving. And to practically everybody peace simply means the absence of any physical violence that might cast a shadow over lives devoted to the satisfaction of their animal appetites for comfort and pleasure...So instead of loving what you think is peace, love others and love God above all.*

*And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed: but hate these things in yourself, not in another.<sup>3</sup>*

In our Old Testament text, David desired to build a temple for God, to move the ark of God out of the temporary, more flexible dwelling into a permanent residents within the courts of his kingdom. While he undoubtedly desired to honor God, he likely desired to secure his own dynasty: God's presence marking the seal of his worldly power. But God told him that such a residence was not what God desired. God would be the home-maker, the one who would build a household for David, that would continue on for generations.

So it is with us. We, even in very well-intentioned moments, too often try to tuck God into the pristine corners of our church walls, rather than honoring God's presence in the messiness of our human lives. If our faith life is relegated to the walls of this building; if our worship, our mission and our fellowship resides here, we limit God. God has called us to be the household of God, too. In Christ, God has claimed us as God's own, has accepted us as God's own. God's Spirit dwells within us. By taking residence within our hearts, has the potential to reach out in love, ever broadening, ever welcoming.

It is hard to grasp this truth. It is hard to grasp the impact that this tenet of our faith has on the world, and on our lives.

When we strive for worldly acceptance, when we play games, dress up, posture for attention we ignore the deeper, more beautiful reality: that we have a genuine acceptance at the heart of our lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. P 122.



What would the church look like if we accepted our own identity, and likewise accepted the identity of others, won for us in Jesus Christ? What if the energy the church puts into staking out turf, setting up lines of difference, and put our energy into being the body of Christ. What if we put our energy into offering a witness to the world where we said, "Yes, we do disagree, and we are, in fact, very different. But we are committed to loving one another because Christ has loved us. We are committed to accepting others, because Christ has accepted us. We are committed to working for reconciliation because God in Christ has reconciled us to himself. We know it will be hard, and even scary. We know that people will not understand how we can love someone we might not really like. But this is who we are as the household of God. And the door is always open...that's how we entered in."

