Brushing Away Dividing Lines

Ephesians 2:11-22 (NASB95)

[11] Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," *which is* performed in the flesh by human hands— [12] *remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. [13] But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, [15] by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace, [16] and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. [17] AND 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 our access in one Spirit to the Father. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, [20] having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, [21] in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, [22] in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

I grew up watching the Simpsons, often with my Dad. Think what you want about that show, but strangely enough it has provided me with a number of illustrations and insights as a pastor. As I read through this section of Ephesians, a Simpson's reference immediately popped into my head. Homer was upset at Marge for something she had done. When Marge tried to smooth it over, Homer defiantly said, "I have nothing more to say to you, Marge. I'm drawing a line down the center of the house á la "I Love Lucy." You stay on your side, and I'll stay on my side." He looks back at the line he had drawn realizing he had drawn himself into the corner of the house. "D'oh!" I know it's just a cartoon comedy show, but how true is it that we draw dividing lines within our own homes, ones that we look back on and say, "D'oh!" when we realize how foolish the division was?

God drew dividing lines around his people to separate them from people of other faiths. One such dividing line was circumcision, that a piece of flesh that was cut off from the male reproductive organ was done to symbolize that God would bless all nations through the offspring of Abraham, that from his family line the Savior, the Messiah, would come. For 2,000 years the Jews kept the practice of circumcision, looking for the fulfillment of God's promise. But even after Jesus Christ came, there were certain people who held the belief that you had to be circumcised in order to be forgiven by God, to be saved by him. They formed a group called the "Circumcision," and they drew dividing lines between themselves and those who had not grown up Jewish, a group they called the "Uncircumcision." They made this issue of circumcision a barrier among fellow Christians, a kind of believer elitism, that the Circumcision group was better than the Uncircumcision group. They drew a dividing line in their church over this issue.

Nowadays, we don't talk about circumcision in terms of a religious issue, but more as a medical one. We don't circumcise because we are looking forward to the promised offspring from Abraham's family line; Jesus Christ has already come. The promise is fulfilled. God kept his word. All nations are blessed through that offspring of Abraham. We aren't debating whether or not the men and the baby boys of our church should get circumcised. But do we draw other dividing lines within our congregation, between us and other believers like these Ephesian Christians did?

When it comes to this church, this group of believers, am I guilty or drawing lines of division? Am I a contentious person, one who purposefully or unknowingly pits people at church against each other? "Do you know that George thinks this is what we should do at church. Can you believe that? That's so stupid! You don't agree with George, do you?" Are the lines of division that you draw ones that you draw in your mind, in your heart, lines that only you can see? Do you look at how someone is dressed – whether it be dressed up or dressed down, whether they are neatly groomed or not, whether they look like you or not – and draw a dividing line between you and them, that they are not like you and you are not going to get along so there's no reason to even try? What do you think of the leaders of your church? Later in this service, four men of our congregation will be installed in their elected positions on our Church Council. When they come up, will you draw a line in your heart as you think to yourself that they are not worthy to be in these positions, that you could do a better job than they can? Do you look around in a church service, see people you don't know, and don't give it a second thought to introduce yourself to them, to welcome them, that the whole greeting other people is someone else's job? When you socialize with people at church, do you only talk with the people who share your hobbies and interests or your political views? And when you socialize, do you gather in such a way that you are closed off to others, that you don't acknowledge other people who are on the fringes, that when someone tries to join in on a conversation you ignore them and continue with what you were talking about?

When we draw dividing lines like these, we are exposing the attitude of our heart, an attitude that says like the Circumcision group, "I am better than they are. I am a better Christian. I can do this better than them. I dress better. I act better. I worship better. I am more pleasing to God than they are. I am what God needs, not them." Do we think of ourselves more highly than we ought, which then leads to drawing dividing lines within a body of believers, within the Church?

Paul dealt with dividing lines among the Ephesians Christians when he wrote, "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (verse 13) God brought near these Gentiles who were far off, these Gentiles who did not grow up with faith in God. He did this with the blood of Christ, the one who fulfilled the promise symbolized by circumcision. He is the blessing to all nations because he is the one who takes away the sin of the world. He sacrificed himself one time for all people to make all of us perfect, not just the circumcised, not just the religiously elite, but all of us.

Christ's sacrifice on the cross tears down any religious superiority that we create among believers. "For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity." (verses 14-16) This enmity, this hostility, in our hearts is what causes us to draw dividing lines among fellow believers in a church. Christ put this enmity to death with his death on the cross. He heals the divisions that we make as he draws us all to himself.

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." (verse 19) God brought us together through Christ, through his blood shed on the cross. He is the great equalizer among all believers. All our sins separated us from God and required the death penalty. We all were under the same sentence. But Christ stepped in and suffered the death penalty for us. And so all sins are forgiven to every single one of us, no matter how bad our faults and flaws are. Because of Christ and his death on the cross he erased that dividing line of sin between us and him. By Christ, we are equally saved, equally made holy, equally washed in Christ's blood, and brought together. He granted each of us equal citizenship in heaven, in his kingdom, with equal rights with all the saints gone before us. He even made us a part of his family. No one is excluded. In this way, Christ established peace among us.

It is in Christ that we find peace with each other, among each other, to see each other as what God has made us. When that attitude of the heart crops up to think that we are better than another Christian, we remember that he brought us together with the same standing, the same rights, the same blessings of forgiveness, of heaven, of belonging to the family of God. And we were brought together in these blessings the same way: "You are…of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone." (verses 19, 20) It was the same Word of God that brought the Ephesians together as one group of believers that has also brought us together with each other and with them. It's the same Jesus. The same Word of God preached by the prophets in the Old Testament and the apostles in the New Testament. By his Word, only by what Jesus did, we are brought together, all dividing lines removed.

Here, as the Church, as this body of believers, we are not defined by our work, our hobbies, our dress, our political views, or even our personality. We are defined by Christ, his death died for both you and me, his forgiveness equally covering you and me, his kingdom equally given to you and me and all the saints, equal members of his household. How will we make sure that we don't draw any dividing lines? When I speak of other people of this church, I check myself and ask, "Am I speaking what builds this person up, or am I dividing people against them, forcing them to side with me and my opinions over what brings us together?" When I talk with the group of people that I enjoy similar interests or political views with, do I sit or stand in a way that invites others to join in? Do I speak respectfully? Do I actively listen before disagreeing or objecting? When I see a person I don't know, do I take it upon myself to go up to that person and introduce myself or do I leave it to someone else, not wanting to go out of my comfort zone? Do I actively support my pastor and the men on the Church Council who are working to serve me, even when they don't do exactly what I want them to do? Will I resent them for not doing what I want them to do, or will I pray for them, encourage them, respectfully bring my concerns to them?

Our egos will tempt us to draw dividing lines among us, among fellow believers. When you are tempted in this way, remember the cross. Remember our God who equally died and shed his blood for you as he did for that fellow believer. He died and in doing so broke down the barriers, erasing the dividing lines that we make between each other. By Christ and his Word, we are one whole building. We are a holy temple in the Lord. We are built together into a dwelling of God by the Holy Spirit. Christ has brought us near and together by his blood, removing our dividing lines. Amen.