

### **Ephesians 2:11-22**

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by those who are called ‘the circumcision’—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

### **“One New Humanity”**

One new humanity. After I typed this phrase into our prayer of confession in Microsoft Word that green dotted editor line appeared under the phrase. My curiosity got the best of me so I right clicked my mouse on the editor line and found this advice, “Number Agreement (consider revising)”. Apparently English grammar stands ready to remind us of what we already know from life experience; humanity united as one appears to be impossible. One new humanity—quickly we see the need for our own editing line. Surely we are not supposed to be one with them, him or her! How could we be expected to live in unity with them?

Can we be one? We, who divide, create lines, and build walls!

Maybe the author of Ephesians, either the apostle Paul or one of his associates, was simply off his rocker when he proclaimed that we, Jews and Gentiles, are made one new humanity through Jesus! The state of the world, the state of the Christian church, even the state of our own personal relationships show plenty of dividing walls, lines, fences, even blockades that we’ve built. The truth is we are often comforted that the walls and divisions exist.

A Methodist minister in North Carolina reflects, “We need walls: walls in our homes to protect us against wind and rain; walls to keep livestock safely in and predators out; walls to help us separate spaces and improve organization and efficiency. But one does not have to be a sage to comprehend how walls, both literal and spiritual, can lead to grief, division and even violence. All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God.”<sup>1</sup> All walls serve a purpose, but not all walls serve the purposes of God.

The New Testament claims over and over that we are reconciled to God and one another through a gift we had nothing to do with: the person and work of Jesus our Christ. God’s fidelity to us is what makes our formation into one new humanity possible because God has chosen to dwell within us. Without our attention to God’s indwelling Spirit, our chances of living into Christ’s call to unite in him are nonexistent.

Throughout the scriptures God has always made a way for community and reconciliation. At best, we follow where God is leading us. The author of Ephesians writes that the call of God for Jew and Gentile live as one in Christ is only possible because we have been “brought near” to God by Jesus’ incarnation, life, death and resurrection. We were aliens from God’s promises to Israel, outsiders...the uncircumcised! It was the people Israel alone who received God’s covenantal promise “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” God kept that covenant throughout time, though the people continually broke it. When David declared he would make a house for God to dwell within, God told the prophet Nathan to inform David, “Are you the one to build me a house to live in? ... the Lord will make you a house.” Jesus’ work fulfills God’s promise that humanity will be made into a dwelling place for God. Only with God’s Spirit working within us can the dividing wall between our neighbors and us be torn down. Without Christ’s peace, we are far too full of fear to let peace reign in our own hearts.

“Unity, peace and hope are not things at all; they are a person. Christ is our peace. In Christ’s death on the cross, peace has been achieved and hostility has been crucified. Jesus is the singular, God-human wrecking crew that demolishes division and gifts us with unity, peace and reconciliation. It is this gift and its givenness that create a scandal. It is hard to receive a gift when your hands are not open. It is even harder when your hands are clutching bricks for personal building projects that have nothing to do with the inbreaking kingdom of God. ...It is an extravagant gift, one must put away pride and clothe oneself in humility...one must put away closed-fisted objections rooted in dogged self-sufficiency...one must be willing to let go of self-centeredness.”<sup>2</sup>

Grace alone frees us to let the peace of Christ work within us. Grace releases us from our own egos and needs to enable us to follow the will of God, to be one new humanity.

The history of Central Presbyterian Church bears witness to the divisiveness of wall building and joyfully to reconciliation. Our church’s dividing wall went up in the 1850s. Presbyterians in Geneseo became caught up, a bit late, in a controversy that split the General Assembly we were under in 1837. The dividing line arose out of differences of opinion over theology, polity and mission or revival endeavors. Those who believed as the New School did in “moderation in thinking” stayed at First Presbyterian Church of Geneseo, or the White Church down on Main Street. The Old School adherents organized the Central Presbyterian church of Geneseo on our current site. *Through the Years*, written for our 150<sup>th</sup> celebration states, “So pronounced was the difference that a division occurred, in our own church, in 1858. From that year until 1880, a period of 22 years, two Presbyterian churches were functioning in the Village of Geneseo, almost within sight of each other, the New School followers worshipping in the old White Church, the Old School adherents establishing a new place of worship...” Imagine the tension as the congregants passed each other on the streets!

The name Central Presbyterian Church and our current location mark our 1858 split. The denomination reconciled in 1861 but our new division took longer than a few years to heal. From 1869-1877, the Rev. Isaac Newton Sprague who served as the New School minister of the White Church promoted and held union services of the two churches where the congregations finally worshiped together again. The White Church and the Central Church were reunited in 1880 due to the foundation he laid and the

diligent work of the Rev. Charles Stoddard Durfee who served the Old School Central Presbyterian Church from 1874 – 1880 the year we reunited. *Through the Years* states that Durfee “devoted himself untiringly to the cause of uniting the two Presbyterian churches...he willingly, but not joyfully, resigned his position as pastor of the Central Church so that there might be a reunion” under the White church’s minister, the Rev. Josiah Edwards Kittredge. The wall between the two congregations came tumbling down as reconciliation was pursued! Revs. Sprague, Durfee, and congregation members of both churches believed in unity in Christ and opened themselves to the Spirit’s reconciling work within them. We wouldn’t be together today if they hadn’t proclaimed their belief that a wall of hostility, which they had built, could come down.

As Christians, we believe that eventually all hostility and division will be brought to an end by God. In the meantime we proclaim the good news that God’s Spirit within us allows us to work for peace and reconciliation first in our own lives and then in the world. Thanks be to God for the assurance that we can live as one new humanity because of the power of God dwelling within us. May the Spirit embolden us to live as disciples of Christ who broke down all dividing walls. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> “Living by the Word” by Kevin Baker in *The Christian Century*, July 11, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p 21.