

NO LONGER STRANGERS: Aliens Brought Near

Ephesians 2:11-22

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I.

On our June trip to Kenya, I heard something I had not heard in a few years.

It was on a morning walk with our group of about 30 Kenyans from the Well our partner children's home and the nine of us from First Baptist. For nearly two hours, we walked the country roads through the community just over the hill from the Well. We passed houses and gardens of various sizes, ornate fences, and a small flock of sheep and goats. Our little caravan walked far enough that we eventually passed by another school.

As we approached, the familiar noise of children playing at recess changed as they noticed this strange parade passing by. Soon, the trees and bushes along the road were full of children peeking through at us, shouting with delight, "MZUNGU! MZUNGU!"

Mzungu is Swahili for someone of foreign descent or an aimless wanderer. We felt a bit like aimless wanderers on that long nature hike under the Kenyan sun. But the shouts of mzungu were not because of our wandering but rather our white skin. We were strangers and aliens to these children, who didn't see many foreign or white visitors.

It's been a while since I was called Mzungu in Kenya. It was more common 15 years ago when we began our trips. But the children at the Well are so familiar with foreigners coming to visit they no longer use the term with us. Instead, we are Uncle Rand and Auntie Melissa or Auntie Lisa. We are family now.

This year, in Kenya, we built a fence as requested. But we also continued to tear down cultural walls among brothers and sisters in Christ through building relationships.

In Cincinnati, our youth tore down walls between generations. More than one senior adult told me they are isolated in that care center with only the news to tell them the story about the younger generation. And the news wasn't good. Then, these young people from our church came to listen to their stories, and in doing so, the walls built on false stories and assumptions crumbled. The elders learned there is much to be hopeful about regarding young people. And our youth learned there is much to enjoy and learn from their elders.

In Texas, our children tore down walls as they learned about the need for food, shoes, and Jesus in Arlington, Texas, and beyond.

In Oklahoma this week, we tore down walls between cultures as we began a partnership with two Indigenous congregations in the communities of Geary and Watonga, OK. We don't force

our ways as some of our Christian ancestors sought to do, often horrifically. We do not go out of pity or shame for what has been done in the past. We go with a shared hope for the present and the future. We go to learn, build a genuine community with other Christ followers, and encourage them as they encourage us.

I'll confess that while we've been away this summer on these trips, working to tear down walls, it feels like many in our country are feverishly building and defending walls—walls of hostility and hatred, division and dehumanization, walls of exclusion.

One of the reasons we invest in these summer mission experiences is to remind ourselves that our primary identity is not in where we live or what we possess. It is not how we vote or what country or tribe we belong to. Those are parts of our identity but not our primary identity. Our primary identity is in Christ. Our text today states in verse 20 that Christ is our cornerstone. Those words are etched into the very cornerstone of this building outside our front doors. Christ binds us together into the church, a dwelling place for God. Christ is the mortar, the glue that binds together all these unique bricks and stones, stones like you and me, and makes us one people.

II.

The church in Ephesus consisted of a very diverse group of people who professed a common belief in Jesus Christ. Some men were circumcised, some were not. Some ate meat that had been sacrificed to Greek gods, while others followed kosher dietary laws from the book of Leviticus. Some were committed to worshiping one God, while others were new to the idea of only one god.

Despite their differences, they formed the Christian community of Ephesus, united in Christ. The Gentiles, who were once far off, have been brought near in Christ.

It wasn't easy. It is easier for churches to gather around commonalities like money, race, ethnicity, and politics. We tend to live, work, and worship in echo chambers. Yet, Christ calls us to gather and worship together as one family in Christ, even with our differences. It wasn't easy for the believers in Ephesus, but as they surrendered every part of their lives to the ways of Jesus, dividing walls began to crumble.

III.

The Chosen is a television series about Jesus and the people who followed him in the first century. In season four, episode six, Jesus and his close followers of men and women went to the temple in Jerusalem. In the show, Jesus sits on the steps outside the temple to teach his followers and anyone who would listen.

In the scene, Jesus speaks the words of John 10, identifying himself as the Good Shepherd, saying, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. **I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So, there**

will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:14-16) In the scene, one of the religious leaders listening utters in shock and disbelief, “Other sheep? Is he talking about the Gentiles?”

You see, the holy temple, the house of worship, the building right behind Jesus, was made of walls around and within, keeping people in their proper place. Gentiles, non-Jews, were restricted to the outermost court area, which was more a place for trade than worship. In 1871, archeologists found this limestone plaque that had been posted separating the Gentile court of the Temple from the Jewish inner court. It read, “No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure round the Temple. And whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for his ensuing death.” It seems welcoming warmly was not part of their mission statement like it is ours.

In this episode, it was in the shadow of this posted warning of death to outsiders that Jesus announced he had other sheep to bring in, sheep that had been excluded up to then, the Gentiles. Jesus was including them so that there would be one flock, one shepherd.

Many Bible scholars believe Paul was referencing this wall of separation between Gentiles and Jews in the temple when he wrote these words beginning in verse 14, “For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace ...” (vv.14-16)

IV.

Paul talks a lot about peace in our text. Verse 14 begins with the phrase, “For he is our peace.” In the late first century, talk of peace within Ancient Rome would have been heard as politically charged. Roman emperors alone were hailed as those who brought peace. They were the peace-bringers and celebrated as such. This Roman brand of peace, of course, was an enforced peace wrought through military dominance and even terror, terror like crucifixion on a cross for anyone who challenged peace on the Roman Empire’s terms.

One commenter on this passage suggested imagining that we, a community of Christians in Asia Minor, are tightly packed into the largest home available for the first reading of a new letter that has arrived - the one that will later be known as the letter to the Ephesians. We’re gathered to hear it read out because most of us cannot read. As the reader gets to the part that says, “You who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ .. He is our peace,” there is a quick intake of breath at the final phrase and nervous glances toward the door. Did anyone hear? “Jesus is our peace” would be a pronouncement bordering on treason. It is something protestors would chant against the state at risk of their lives. This phrase meant that despite all the boastful claims of Rome’s emperors, true peace has been found not in the state’s leaders but rather launched by a man the state crucified. To have heard that spoken would set any listener’s blood racing.ⁱ

Peace was and is not achieved by the empire or any political leader or decision. Peace is not created through the building of literal or metaphorical walls. Peace is found only in Jesus. He is

our peace. (repeat) He is our peace, and he brings peace by breaking down walls. And if we wish to experience His peace, we must join him. Verse 16 says God has put our hostility and division to death on the cross. If that is true, hatred and division have no home among us as followers of Christ. We must practice a new way of living as one flock with one shepherd. If we are a church where Christ is our cornerstone, we will be of different nationalities, races, ethnicities, genders, incomes, political persuasions, and much more. Our church will look more like July 7 when Familia Cristiana Internacional, the Hispanic congregation we helped start, was here leading us in worship. But even with all our differences, our most important identity will be in Christ. We are no longer mzungus. We are family.

Jesus broke down the dividing wall and, in its place, built a unified people in Christ that is a dwelling place for God. We are a glimpse of the kingdom of God to the world, a glimpse of what is possible when God reigns, and Christ is the cornerstone. He is our peace, and we are called to partner with him in breaking down walls within and without. And we are called to build something more beautiful, more lasting in their place.

Perhaps instead of bigger walls, you and I are called to build bigger tables with more seats for everyone. Maybe that's the kind of peace that this world needs right now. Perhaps we can build others up instead of wasting time and energy and Christian witness tearing one another down. Perhaps instead of circling the wagons, we can load them up with diverse people united in Christ, sending them out with the message of Christ's love, hope, and peace — whether to Arlington, Texas, Cincinnati, Ohio, Geary and Watonga, Oklahoma, or southwest Kenya—and right here in Jefferson City, MO.

May we continue to build something beautiful, something sacred with Christ and one another - nothing less than a dwelling place for God as one people with one Shepherd - for the glory of God and the good of the world. Amen.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-ephesians-211-22>