

***No Aliens or Foreigners in the Kingdom of God!***  
**Ephesians 2:11-22**

Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
October 5, 2008--World Communion Sunday  
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About 10 years ago in the small east Texas town of Jasper, a horror unfolded before the eyes of the nation. John William King was arrested for the brutal murder of James Byrd, Jr. On the night of June 7, 1998, King and two of his friends took a drunk James Byrd, bound his legs with a chain, and dragged him behind King's pickup truck down a country road for three miles. The descriptions of what happened to Byrd as he was being dragged along are too horrible to repeat here. The only reason given for the killing is that John William King is a white man, and James Byrd, Jr., was a black man. And King simply wanted to kill a black man in order to gain notoriety for a white supremacist group he had founded.

There's something terribly wrong with our world when something like the color of our skin is cause for division, hostility, hatred. There's something terribly wrong with our world when people despise those who are different. The truth is, we live in a world where things like race, language, culture, and economic status divide us. We create classes of people based on the color of their skin or the amount of money they have.

It's not something that is unique to American society. Around the world people have created boundaries and erected walls to keep "different" people out of their lives. You could pick up the newspaper on any given day and find different ethnic groups that are at war with each other, different nationalities that despise each other. In places like Sudan or Nepal or Northern Ireland or Bosnia you find the same dynamic at work - one class is pitted against another in a struggle for racial or economic or religious superiority.

I wish I could say that it's something that is unique to our time, but it isn't. The fact is, for as long as history itself, people have used things like race, language, culture, and economic and social differences to erect unseen but real barriers between themselves and others. One race is lifted up over another. Male is lifted up over female. Master is exalted over servant. From one generation to the next, things remain essentially the same. Divisions are created, and have resulted in hostility and conflict and even warfare.

This was a problem that Paul repeatedly addressed in the early church. For Paul, the problem was the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles, a problem that remained even after both Jews and Gentiles converted to the Christian faith. In the eyes of many Jews, the Gentiles were despised people. The Gentiles represented everything that was dirty and immoral and unrighteous.

In the Temple in Jerusalem, there was a series of courtyards and inner rooms. The Gentiles were allowed in the outermost courtyard, but no further. There was a wall, a dividing wall, that prevented the Gentiles from entering further into the Temple compound. Even Jewish women could go further into the Temple to worship than the Gentiles; even Jewish women, who were considered little more than property, were accorded more rights and values than the Gentiles.

Paul recognized that this hostility existed. Indeed, he was raised as a righteous Jew, and he had lived much of his life filled with contempt for the Gentiles. And in the Ephesian church this tension between Jew and Gentiles continued to exist.

This tension between the races, this dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, was a reality that troubled Paul. It troubled Paul, because in Christ he recognized that there was a new reality, a new reality in which we are governed not by the standards of this world, but by the standards of Jesus Christ.

"For (Christ) himself is our peace," says Paul, "for Christ has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility..."

The reality we find in the world is that people are different, and we use those differences to separate us from each other and to erect barriers and create hostility. But Paul tells the church to stare that old reality right in its face and to declare "No more!!" It is a new reality that now governs our lives. It is a new reality that now determines how we are to view one another. You see, a miracle takes place when Christ takes over our lives: it's the miracle of common citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Persons who were formerly strangers and enemies are brought together through the blood of Christ. The things that once kept us apart, the walls that have divided us, the boundaries and the

borders that have separated us -- these things have all dissolved through the blood of Jesus.

Don't you see--there are no more foreigners or aliens in the kingdom of God! All are one! Whatever it is that divides us, says Paul, has come tumbling down in Christ.

What is it that this world has put in our way of getting together?

Language? (chop, chop) No more! That wall has come tumbling down.

Social and economic status? (chop, chop) No more! That wall has come tumbling down.

The fact that we live on opposite sides of the railroad tracks? (chop, chop) No more! That wall has come tumbling down.

The color of our skin? (chop, chop) No more! That wall has come tumbling down.

You see, in Christ these divisions dissolve. The differences remain. The differences have not been taken away, but the walls of separation created by the differences have now come tumbling down with a great big crash.

It's a miracle that we who once were foreigners to each other, who once were unknown to each other, who once might even have avoided each other -- it's a miracle that we who once were foreigners and strangers are now brought together in Christ. For the new reality that we celebrate in Christ is that we have all become members of the family of God, and that means that we have become brothers and sisters. From strangers to siblings -- that's a true miracle!

There is in Christ a new reality, a reality in which no one is a foreigner or alien.

No more hostility. No more alienation. No more separation.

I marvel every time I consider the people who have come into my life simply because we share a common Lord and Savior. People with whom I would not normally have come into contact. I have shared meals with the villagers of Kantunilkin in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, people to whom I would never have given a second thought were it not for the fact that Christ brought us together. I would never have met my wife were it not for the fact that we shared a common Savior who brought us to worship in the same church in San Antonio 22 years ago. There is in North Carolina a small town of about 1,000 people and a few cattle that I would never have encountered except for the common lordship of Jesus Christ that we shared for 3 ½ years. How else do you think someone whose blood runs burnt orange would end up in Georgetown, South Carolina, the land of Gamecocks and Tigers, except that the Lord has brought us together?!

Today we celebrate communion. The first Sunday in October is traditionally designated as World Communion Sunday, in recognition that Jesus Christ unites us with others of different race, different culture, different language from all around the world. But the truth is, every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we are celebrating the communion of saints from all around the world. Because the body and blood of Christ serve to bridge the gap not only between us and God, but also between us and our fellow human beings. And so we need to see each other not as the world would tell us to see each other, but as Christ sees each and every one of us.

I started out by talking about something that happened in Jasper, Texas. In the press there were stories of rallies by the Black Panthers and by the Ku Klux Klan, of clashes between white supremacists and militant blacks. The thing is, these rallies and clashes came from groups outside of Jasper. The citizens of Jasper did not participate in those protests and rallies. Instead, blacks and whites throughout the town came together and declared their outrage at the hatred that led to the brutal murder. They came together to declare that they won't be torn apart by race. And the one unifying factor that brought them together was Jesus Christ. It was through the Church acting as the voice of Christ that the citizens of Jasper joined hands and refused to be torn apart over racial hatred.

The truth is, as horrible as the crime was that killed James Byrd, Jr., the coming together of the community in the aftermath is an even greater demonstration of the reconciling power of God.

Because in Christ there are no more foreigners and aliens. Amen.