

BUT NOW...

EPHESIANS 2:11-22
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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OCTOBER 6, 2013/20TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
(WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY)

Today is World Communion Sunday, and the focal point of our service is The Lord's Supper, not the sermon.

I simply want to reflect a bit on our text from Ephesians today as a preparation for coming to the Table.

G.K. Chesterton famously said that original sin is “the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved.”

Many people are uncomfortable with this doctrine—we like to imagine that we are basically good—but I think that if we are honest, we will acknowledge that all of us have deep-seated inclinations toward both good *and* evil.

Whenever I come across theological themes or doctrines that that I find difficult, I lean on metaphors for help.

One metaphor that I have found helpful comes, ironically, from a novel by an avowed atheist ☺.

In 1995, the Nobel prize winning Portuguese author José Saramago, wrote a book called *Blindness* (which, in 2008, was turned into what was by most accounts a very bad movie starring Mark Ruffalo and Julianne Moore).

The story is about an epidemic of blindness that descends upon an unnamed city.

It's an interesting plot line, isn't it? We don't often associate the words “blindness” and “epidemic.” Blindness is not contagious—we can't “catch” it like we catch a cold.

Yet in the story, everyone just goes blind without warning and for no discernible reason.

Imagine what that would be like. *Nobody* can see. Imagine what would happen in traffic. In the dentist's office. In the police station. At the grocery store. Imagine the desperation and chaos that would ensue.

Imagine the opportunities for evil and destruction that would be opened up if everyone knew that what they were doing could not be seen.

Well, Saramago does a lot of the imagining for us in the novel.

The city descends into absolute anarchy and violence. Government officials from far away places decide to quarantine all the blind in an empty mental hospital because they don't understand the epidemic's cause or how to cure it.

Conditions in the city deteriorate rapidly. The economy basically shuts down, food becomes nearly impossible to come by, and violence and despair begin to take over.

The picture Saramago paints is one of a gradual descent into depravity and chaos.

So how does the story end? Well ultimately, the blindness just disappears one day. People gradually regain their sight and wake up in a world that looks totally different than they remembered it.

It is a picture of the world that is possible when everyone stops seeing.

I think that Saramago's novel serves as a kind of metaphor for the pervasiveness of human sin, for the problem Paul sees Jesus as the solution to in our text this morning.

This image of an epidemic of blindness portrays our need for a peacemaker, someone to break down walls of hostility, confusion, and chaos... Someone to dispel the darkness in which the human race stumbles around.

The Bible often refers to human beings as "blind" and "lost." The prophets (such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, right down to Jesus himself) often use variations of this phrase: "they have eyes to see but do not see; ears but do not hear."

They repeatedly compare Israel's lack of justice, their oppression of the vulnerable, their clinging to their ethnicity as their identity, their building of walls between them and their neighbours as opposed to living as a light to the nations... to blindness, to an unwillingness to see correctly.

In Saramago's novel, the blindness just one day disappears as mysteriously as it originally appeared.

This is not the case for us. The blindness we face as human beings does not just lift one day. It needs to be defeated, fixed, *healed*.

But how?

In our passage this morning we read:

*For he himself is our peace, who **has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility**, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. **His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility**. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*

Jesus' work on the cross did not simply provide a way to make peace between God and us.

This is frequently how the cross is portrayed. Jesus died so that God could forgive us. But there is so much more to the story than this. We are not only saved *from* something but *for* something as well.

Jesus' death breaks down walls between people.

In Ephesians, Paul is emphasizing the common humanity between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus made possible.

Just as Jesus enabled first century Jews and Gentiles, with centuries of hostility in their past to come together, so he provides a way for us to walk out of our blindness and

embrace our fellow human beings, regardless of their race, their skin colour, their social status, their denominational identity, etc.

Jesus' work allows our sin to be forgiven *and* helps us to see properly.

Our job as those who have seen the light, who are in *relationship* with the light, is *not* to just grimly hang on until the disorientation and confusion disappear like the woman who can see in Saramago's novel.

Our job is to show a better way—to show what it looks like to see.

We are to comprise part of the solution in a world stumbling around in darkness and confusion—a world that does not see properly.

This is a good reminder for us on World Communion Sunday.

Despite sharing a common allegiance to this Christ who put to death natural human hostility... the church has historically proved quite skilled at hostility and division.

We divide and criticize each other

- over theology
- over how and when to baptize
- over how and when to celebrate communion
- over the posture we ought to take to the broader culture
- over "positions" on hot button ethical issues like peace and justice and sexuality,
- over our views about church structure and governance..

And over innumerable other issues that would take hours to enumerate... and be painful and dull to listen to.

Indeed, many people look at the church and say, "all you're really good at doing is fighting with each other." I've heard this comment from those who want nothing to do with the church.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are reminded that we, as part of the Lethbridge Mennonite community, as well as the broader provincial, national and

global Mennonite family, are part of a much bigger body of those who have cast their lot with Jesus.

We don't all think the same. We don't all behave the same. That's ok.

We are part of the same structure, to borrow Paul's language from our text today. We are built on the same foundation.

In our text today, Paul *declares* what is now the case.

You were...

- strangers
- aliens
- without hope
- apart from God

but now...

- children
- citizens
- saints
- members of the household of God

Paul declares that these things are true *right now* because of what Jesus has done.

But the kingdom of God is always both now *and* not yet. And we always have a role to play in the story.

Jesus is our peace... but he doesn't force his peace upon us.

This is not God's way. God invites, never coerces. The unity and reconciliation achieved by Jesus between differing groups is a reality that we are always *invited to participate in*.

The choice is always ours.

I think that those two little words from Ephesians 2:13 are the two most important words in this text.

Indeed, I think that the whole biblical narrative could be located in these two words.

But now...

We are always faced with the challenge of living into the “but now!” of the gospel.

You *know* how things were... You *know* what comes naturally to you... You *know* how easy it is for divisions to be erected and for hostility and misunderstanding and apathy to take hold...

But now...

There is a different way.

Will we live according to the one new humanity that Jesus has made possible or will we persist in the blindness and divisions and hostility that come so naturally to us?

Will we cling tightly to the rights and privileges we imagine that we have or will we live with grace and openness to those around us, inside and outside the church?

Will we look at Christian sisters and brothers whose perspectives differ from our own with suspicion and mistrust, or will we embrace them as dearly loved members of the same family?

Will we criticize and judge and label, or will we approach those whose views we don't share with charity, openness, and respect?

Will we will we focus on what divides us...

... Or will we gather at the table and celebrate the love and sacrifice that unites us?

The choice is ours. The choice is always ours.

Thanks be to God.