

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 23:1-6  
SECOND LESSON: Ephesians 2:11-22  
July 18, 2021

***“Building Bridges”***  
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In the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century the apostle Paul, born and raised a Jew and highly educated in Jewish law and tradition, did something no Jew of the time would have ever done. He began an outreach to Gentiles, and he wasn't trying to convert them to Judaism. That *was* sometimes done. But Paul had a powerful spiritual encounter with the risen Christ, and he believed that Jesus the Messiah came not only for the Jews, but for everyone. This time marks the very beginning of what would come to be called Christianity, but then there was still hope that Judaism and Christianity would survive as one faith. While Paul had numerous arguments and was run out of town by infuriated local Jewish leaders on more than one occasion, he still believed that the dividing wall between Jews and Christians could be broken down and removed through faith in Jesus as Messiah.

We know it didn't happen. There were Jewish-Christian believers. All of Jesus' first followers were Jewish. But the majority of the Jews were not convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and things went sour between the two groups relatively early. As more and more Gentiles became Christians Jewish roots and Jewish understanding became increasingly foreign. Instead, a new doctrine came into being. According to this idea, which some within Christianity still believe, the Church replaced the Jews as God's chosen and called people. Presbyterians in our denomination do not believe this. We believe that when God makes a covenant it is permanent. While I don't intend to go into the long and tragic history of Anti-Semitism here, it is worth noting that things did not go as Paul hoped they would.

The Gentile believers to whom Paul wrote no doubt had Jewish believers in their midst. Otherwise, they would not have known they had acquired the rather strange name “the uncircumcised.” Nor would they have understood that as far as the Jews were concerned, they were outsiders. While Jews and Gentiles did live side by side in many communities in the Roman Empire, the two groups did not have much to do with each other in practice. Jews couldn't run for local political office because that would involve the worship of pagan gods. They kept kosher and had their own markets. To share a meal and socialize was unthinkable. Neighbors might have said, “Hello, how are you today?” but that's about it. And they did NOT intermarry! Except when they did and the couple ended up not belonging in either community.

Paul begins this conversation emphasizing to these Gentiles just how much they owe to their Jewish origins. He tells them to remember that they

were at one time separate from Christ and alienated from God's Chosen people. They were strangers to all of the promises found in scripture. They had no hope and were without God. The promises came through Israel. Jesus is a **Jewish** Messiah. But, writes Paul, Jesus is our peace "who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."

This dividing wall is only removed through faith in Christ. Jesus came to do what the law could not. According to Paul, God's purpose was to create in Christ one new humanity out of two, thus making peace. Both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God and to one another through Jesus who came to break down the barriers. This, however, as far as many Jews were concerned, was heresy.

Peace can mean many things. It can mean inner peace. It can mean political peace. The peace Paul spoke of was reconciling peace—the full restoration of relationship—first with God, and then with one another. To fully reconcile Jews and Gentiles in the 1<sup>st</sup> century would have been miraculous. As it was, some Jews did come to believe in Jesus, but when they did their synagogues threw them out. It proved to be either/or, not both/and. Messianic congregations who try to hold on to Jewish faith and practice and also worship Jesus encounter the same problem today. They are neither fish nor fowl. They are rejected by the Jews and misunderstood by the majority of Christians. It is a clash of cultures.

Culture is a subtle thing. Those part of a given culture are largely unaware of the huge shared assumptions and inside jokes. It is only when we are on the outside looking in do we realize **just how much is assumed**. I lived in Scotland for twelve years. "Technically" we speak the same language. Note the word "technically." It took me a long time to figure out what was expected of me in different situations. Things like how to offer hospitality and how to receive it, how formal or informal to be, where the line between being caring and being viewed as meddling is, all have to be learned. When you're invited for dinner at someone's house you bring a box of chocolates. It's just what you do. As soon as someone comes into your house you make a pot of tea and break out the good cookies, known as biscuits. It's just what you do. As soon as I became a Church of Scotland minister's wife, I then had a whole new set of expectations placed on me. I automatically became head of the Women's Guild, whether I wanted to be or not. I was expected to entertain visitors with the good china. I haven't really used it since! I was expected to know how to bake. I learned fast. I was expected to visit members of the congregation and offer pastoral care. I was expected to be available at any time for guests to arrive on my doorstep and miraculously provide full meals. God was good. I figured it out. I now know a million ways to expand meals on short notice including prayer. But I was one person learning a new culture. We live in a nation filled with different cultures, including majority white and majority black cultures, who share everything except a basic understanding and experience of reality. When our black sisters and brothers speak of systemic racism many white people say, "What racism? I haven't seen any racism!" Like the Scots and the Americans different racial groups within our nation speak the same language but mean entirely different things.

It is people who create walls. We are the ones who divide God's children up. We are the ones who accept or reject people according to their beliefs, how they look, how they talk and their cultural assumptions about life. Bringing people together who are different is not easy to do. It requires of us that we lay down our defensiveness and learn how to truly listen to one another. But there is ONE who can truly break down the walls between us, and that one is God. I may have no understanding of how Christians from an Ethiopian Orthodox Church live and worship, but if they know Jesus, they're my family. We both have access to the Father through the one Spirit. We are all saved by grace. There is no "them" versus "us" in the kingdom of God.

God's plan is to save THE WORLD. That does mean everyone. Even the people we are in conflict with. Even the people we think are strange and don't understand. In Christ we can find true healing of divisions because strangers become family. And in the world among those who do not know Christ we are entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation.

I can't claim this story as my own, and I don't know who the author is, but the message is wonderfully clear.

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict with each other. They had spent 40 years farming side by side. They shared machinery and helped each other out without a problem. Then the long happy relationship fell apart. No one knew exactly how it happened. It began with a small misunderstanding which then grew and finally exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. The younger brother then went and took his bulldozer, made a deep gash through the meadow they both shared and went right up to the river levee. He plowed into it to let the water escape, and created a new creek to separate them.

Not long afterwards a knock came on the older brother's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work," he said. "Do you have any jobs needing doing?"

"Yes," said the older brother after mulling for a few moments, "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor. In fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence -- an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place anymore!"

The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. Instead, there was a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! It was a fine piece of work with handrails and everything. And walking across the bridge was his younger brother, arms outstretched.

"After all I've said and done," he said with tears streaming down his face, "You go and build a bridge. Can you forgive me?"

The two brothers met in the middle and held on to each other. Just then they turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox up on his shoulder and turn to leave. “No wait!” said the older brother, “I have more projects for you to do.”

“I’d love to stay on,” said the carpenter, “But I have a lot more bridges to build.”

Jesus is our bridgebuilder. If we let him, he will build bridges between us and other Christians who we do not understand, who come from a different place or culture. If we let him, he will even build bridges to those outside of the faith so we can reach out in love. Being reconciled with those who are different from us is not easy, but in Christ, it can be done. Amen.

**23** “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. **2** Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord. **3** “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. **4** I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord.

**5** “The days are coming,” declares the Lord,  
“when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch,  
a King who will reign wisely  
and do what is just and right in the land.

**6** In his days Judah will be saved  
and Israel will live in safety.  
This is the name by which he will be called:  
The Lord Our Righteous Savior.

Ephesians 2:11-22

**11** Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)— **12** remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

**14** For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15** 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, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. **17** He came and preached peace to you who were far away

and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.