

Lectionary 16/Proper 11 (B)
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Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

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Over the past couple of weeks I've been interested to learn about the Uighurs, an ethnic minority group in western China. There's been a lot of rioting and unrest because the Uighurs feel they are being culturally invaded and taken over. For generations they have lived in the dry western region of Xinjian. They are Muslims, and they have their own language and their own cultural traditions. But in just the past few years, as China's economy has been booming, there's been a massive in-migration of members of China's ethnic majority, which are the Han people, so that now the Uighurs have become a minority in their own homeland. But the real root of the unrest is that the Uighurs object to the ways they feel their language and culture are being repressed. The ethnic Han Chinese have all of the advantages of power and access. They get all the good jobs. They control the government. Their language is taught in the schools and their cultural traditions are honored in public, while the Uighurs experience severe limits on expressing their traditions, their religion, their customs. And the result has become explosive.

Multicultural relations and the role of privilege were significant dynamics in the world in which the early church grew up, and from which our scripture reading from Ephesians came. Ethnic identity and the privileges that came with being part of the majority shaped a culture in which a variety of dividing walls separated people and created suspicion and hostility. People always gave preference and privilege to "their tribe," and there were all sorts of cultural practices and ways of dressing that served as boundary markers for tribal identity. In our reading for this morning we hear about one such boundary marker—circumcision. It identified the boundary between Jew and Gentile. It was a sign of the covenant between God and Israel, a sign of Israel's special relationship with God and Israel's special status as the chosen people.

Of course the Gentiles, or non-Jews, were the majority across the cities of the Roman Mediterranean. But there were Jewish communities living as minority groups, and those small Jewish communities were where the early church began to grow. The first Christians were Jews who heard the good news of Jesus and recognized him as the fulfillment of all of God's promises. And thanks to the pioneering work of people like the apostle Paul, the early church made room for Gentiles, welcoming them into the family of God. The early church became something that had never existed before—a community of love that transcended tribal loyalties and ethnic heritages, a community of Jews and Gentiles together, the beginning of a new human family.

Our reading for this morning is addressed to the gentile Christians, reminding them how there was a time when they, as uncircumcised people, were outside of the covenant, outside of God's loving relationship with the human family.

They were without hope and without God in the world. But now, in Jesus, all of that has changed. The writer says that the Gentiles, who were once far off, have now been brought near. The Gentiles were once aliens, outside the circle of privilege that belonged to Israel, but have now been made part of God's household.

The message is that God is doing a new thing in the world. Where tribal loyalties and systems of privilege divide people and create hostility, God is creating a new human family, one community of Jews and Gentiles together. God is building a new household, one that has room for everyone, and Jesus is the cornerstone for this new dwelling place for God. There are no more insiders or outsiders, but one beloved people living in unity and mutuality. But it's very easy for me to imagine one powerful factor that could undermine this beautiful, new human family—and that is if the people in it continued to live just the way everyone else did.

The danger, you see, was that the Gentiles, who in the wider culture enjoyed all of the advantages and privileges of being in the majority, would let their privileges influence life in the community of the church. What if they began to treat their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters as less than equal—the same way the culture at large did? I can imagine this wonderful new gift of unity that God was giving would be seriously undermined. And in fact, scripture gives clues that there were tensions between Jewish Christians and gentile Christians. That's why our author wants to remind his Gentile readers that they were the newcomers to God's family, and were part of this family only by the amazing gift of God. It was their responsibility, as part of the privileged cultural majority, to make a welcome space for their Jewish Christian sisters and brothers. And not only that, but to respect and value the differences that existed in this cross-cultural, inter-tribal new community God had created through Christ. That is the only way a new community would grow.

The divide between Jew and Gentile is no longer the most significant dynamic within the Church's life. But issues of power and privilege are certainly not unknown to us. We face our share of other cultural dividing lines—between wealthy and poor, women and men, gay and straight, young and old, college educated and high school graduates, and more. And across all of those divides, privilege generally falls one way. But just as living with blinders to the issues between Jews and Gentiles wasn't an option for the early church, living with blinders isn't an option for us either. It's not enough to be content with the dynamics we have inherited from the generations before us. We are called by God to be a different kind of community together, consciously trying to live by a different sort of script, one that makes room for all, one that gives life for all.

Jesus is the one who leads the way for us. He does this in part through his teaching and example. He raises up the weak and powerless; and he challenges the privileged and powerful to share their wealth. Throughout his ministry he is shaping a community of equality among the people of God. Perhaps

the most profound image Jesus gives is in his own suffering and death, and being raised to new life. We follow him in relinquishing our grip on our lives and offering ourselves in service for others, for the life of the world. We follow him also in being raised up by God, being renewed and empowered by God's Spirit and given new life. But because we are not all the same; because our lives are different, and the sorts of privilege we enjoy are different, the way we follow Jesus will also fit who we are and what our lives are like.

Some of us are more like the gentile Christians. We exercise a certain amount of power in our daily lives because of our privilege, our place in society. For us, the challenge will be to know when to step aside and practice humility, focusing on the needs of others, remaining quiet at times so that others may speak. We take up our cross to follow Jesus. Some of us are more like the Jewish Christians, farther distant from the power structure. For us the challenge and the gift is to let our voice be heard, to be bold in the power of God's spirit.

And all of us—regardless of our place in the culture's power—recognize that Jesus has not come merely to reverse the inequalities of the world around us, but to give us all a whole new way of being human. So when we have followed Jesus in his way of the cross, we look ahead—in our life with each other—to resurrection and being raised by God. And when we have followed Jesus in his way of bold new life, filled with the power of God's Spirit, we look ahead to ways in which we can give up our power in order to raise others up. It becomes a beautiful, mutual dance of speaking and listening and speaking, of serving and being served and serving. Jesus' life becomes our life together. (Adapted from Eric Law, *Cycle of Gospel Living*.)

We live in a world where there are so many dividing lines, where differences in power and privilege create dividing walls and hostility. But in us and through us, God is making something new—not just a place of tolerance, but of mutual care and concern. God is breaking down the dividing walls and creating a new human family. In this community, and in our lives, God is building something holy, a way of living together that offers life and blessing for us and for all. Thanks be to God. Amen