

“Citizens”
Ephesians 2:11-22
by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Ephesians Chapter 2 and I'm going to start at verse 11. "United by Christ. Don't forget that you are gentiles. In fact you used to be called uncircumcised by those who take pride in being circumcised in the flesh. At that time you did not know about Christ. You were foreigners to the people of Israel and you were no part in the promise that God made to them. You were living in this world without hope and without God and you were far from God. But Christ offered his life's blood as a sacrifice and brought you near. Christ has made peace between Jews and Gentiles and he has united us by breaking down the wall of hatred that separated us. Christ gave his own body to destroy the law of Moses with all its rules and commands. He even brought Jews and Gentiles together as though we were only one person when he united us in peace. On the cross Christ did away with our hatred for each other. He also made peace between us and God by uniting Jews and Gentiles in one body and Christ came and preached peace to you Gentiles, who were far from God, and peace to us Jews who were near and because of Christ, all of us come to the father by the same spirit. You Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are citizens with everyone else who belongs to the family of God. You are like a building with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and with Christ as the most important stone. Christ is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a holy temple for the Lord and you are part of that building Christ has built as a place for God's own spirit to live." The word of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Well, I've had a patriotic weekend. It started on Friday with going out to Medora and catching, well the steak dinner was really good, but the show there and then fireworks and symphony last night and have really enjoyed all of that. But, having experienced those events and heard that theme again and again of pride and devotion to our country, there is a contrast that I find interesting, or ironic.

I remember those Reagan years as the talk about this pride, or this surge in patriotism and pride in our country. I think we are on something of that kind of an upswing once again, and understandably so. We have a lot of family, friends, most of us know who are serving in Iraq or Afghanistan and even if we don't, we feel the desire to support those men and women who are serving on our behalf. There is this theme, or this current of patriotism and love of our country and devotion and service to it. But, there is sort of an ironic movement in our culture as well that seems, well that works against that a little bit. We are no longer a front porch culture. What I mean by that is our

neighborhoods are less neighborly. I didn't read anything or do research or find out the stats on this, but it's just sort of my observation and what I have heard from others; that in a world where technology has made our neighborhood very large, in other words we can talk to people all around the world by picking up the phone or turning on the computer, or in my kids' case, turning on the Wii. They can sign up for a game on Mario Carts and race against kids who are all around the world. That's amazing! That in a world where we have, in one sense the world has gotten very small, in another we are more isolated from one another. It's just an interesting contrast.

There was a commentator, this man lives in the Dallas area but I think his words apply beyond just the Dallas area, and he writes "We are repeatedly assured that this is one of the best areas of the United States to live in and to raise a family. This is supposed to be the gold standard of life in the US and the even world, and yet I feel that something is wrong. Our communities are fresh, new, clean and strangely soleless, isolated and impersonal. Don't get me wrong, there's a lot of very decent people living here, most of them in fact are, I don't want to bite the hands that feed me. There is no doubt various city administrators and elected officials mean well, but that doesn't change the fact that there is a lot that seems to be wrong." I'm going to skip a couple parts here, but he continues "I watch as families and children live isolated lives among the millions who reside in our neighborhoods." Then he gives this example from his own experience, "We lived in this house for three years before I ever spoke to my neighbor across the street. He actively avoided me all that time and I never made the effort to walk all the way across the street and talk to the 'mower guy.' I strongly suspect the only reason I met my neighbors on either side of me is because they are older and retired and thus are more available and sociable. All of my friends and colleagues report similar behavior in their own neighborhoods as well."

Keep that in mind as we think about the scripture passage from this morning. Paul is talking about some pretty deep stuff in this passage, but first and foremost is this idea of the reconciliation, or this community of God and the reconciliation between the Jews and Gentiles and he is talking to a people who are struggling to understand what it means to be God's community, to be citizens of the community of the Kingdom of God. I don't think we appreciate just how startling, how controversial, how revolutionary, what Paul is suggesting really is. Let me just tell you a couple of things that might help. Every devout Jewish male got up every morning and they had their prayers of thanks. It was a liturgy that they shared in common, that they all did every day. One of the things that they thanked God for was that they were not born a Gentile. That was a part of their prayer, a part of devotion to God, it was something they thanked him for every, single morning, that they were not born a godless Gentile, hardly better than the beasts. The barrier that Paul talks about was cultural and the law of Moses, and especially the traditions that grew up around it, created a huge divided between Jew and Gentile.

They couldn't eat with them, they couldn't go in their homes, it was very difficult for Jew and Gentile to have interaction, because of this cultural divide. But, Paul is also talking referring to a physical barrier. In the temple in Jerusalem there was a division that ran around the temple. There was a part of the temple that Gentiles could come in, but they could come so close but no further. Josephus, who is a Jewish historian from that era writes about this dividing wall. It was made of marble, it was intricately carved, it was beautiful, it was a sight to behold. There were pillars in it and a kind of latticework in between and about every 15 or 20 feet there was an opening into the temple. At every single opening, written in Greek and Latin, there was something to the effect of "on pain of death no Gentile can go beyond this point.", making it very, very clear, this division between the two.

That might give some idea or some flavor of how strong this division was. So when Paul talks about the two becoming one, it's pretty remarkable. That God reconciled people not only to himself, that in reconciling people to himself he reconciled them one to another so that our cultural and our social and our economic barriers that we build between one another, nationality, whatever barrier we can come up with, they are erased, or superseded, by this higher kingdom, this Kingdom of God, our citizenship in God's country.

Now, I understand that there is a difference between the connection, or the fellowship, the bond that I have with Christians, whether they are right here at McCabe, or even around the world, versus the connection that I have with non Christians. Whether they are down the street or again on the other side of the earth. But, there is a part where because God is our father, all of humanity is my brother and my sister. And there is a demand placed upon me about how I live in relation to those people because of my relationship with God the father.

There has been some interesting stuff written over the years about the various children who lived in the White House. One of the most interesting images I have from some of the different stuff I've read on that, has to do with Abraham Lincoln and his kids. It's interesting because children are not pretentious, they don't understand about who is powerful and important and needs to be respected. They don't have a feel for the social properness that needs to be shown. They are living in the White House, this is their home, they're family and so they have access to every knuck and cranny, they have access to the President, because it's not the President, it's their dad. The image I think of, Abraham Lincoln was having a very serious meeting with his generals and key advisers in the height of the Civil War and while they discussed strategy and literally the fate of this country hung in the balance, his children were playing underneath the table. We are children of God and because of the that, because of the family connection we have access to every knuck and cranny in every room, we have access to God the

father, but it's not just our access but its OUR access, we share that together. That we can play under the table with our brothers and sisters in Christ, no matter what culture, what country, what economic class. No matter who or where they might be. We have that kind of access to God the father, but also that kind of family connection with one another.

Well citizens have both rights and responsibilities and of course the right or the privilege is that access to God, but the responsibility is that we live according to the rules of that kingdom. If we as the people of the kingdom of God, as we as citizens of God's country can't live out the reality that Paul paints here, that we are in fact one people, that we share a common bond with one another, how can we expect the culture around us to have anything of that kind of connection. Because we live in this reality, whether we act upon it or not, it lays upon us the responsibility to be the ones that cross the street, that start the conversation, that reach out to our neighbors. First the ones across the street and the ones who are in our community, whether they are standing behind us in the grocery line or next to us on the capitol mall at the 4th of July celebrations and even to the ends of the earth. So that we can make real this community in which we live. Let's cross the street!