

July 21, 2024
Ephesians 2:11-22

Pentecost 9
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“One in Christ”

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

During a recent walk around our neighbourhood, I noticed a lawn sign announcing that the homeowners had installed an “invisible fence.” As I continued my walk, my mind began to wonder about the purpose of such a sign. If it is an “invisible fence,” how would one know it really exists? Could I put a sign on my front lawn announcing that I own an “invisible Ferrari,” or that there is an “invisible Jacuzzi” on my back deck? Assuming that there must be a better reason for such a sign, I went home and Googled “invisible fence,” where I discovered that such a barrier is not a figment of one’s imagination but is an electronic containment system designed to keep pets or other domestic animals within a set of predefined boundaries without the use of a physical barrier. The “fence” consists of electronic wires that are buried along the perimeter of the property, and the pets are fitted with an electronic collar that delivers a mild electric shock if the initial warning sound is ignored when the pet ventures too close to the boundary. Similar electronic containment systems are used to contain livestock in areas where ordinary agricultural fencing is not convenient or legal. As the company that installs such fencing boasts on its website, *“it’s more than a fence – it’s a lifestyle.”*

I am fairly certain that I will not have the need to install an “invisible fence” any time soon, but I have experienced the reality of fences and other barriers that may be invisible but are very real. I experienced an invisible barrier in my hometown, where the lines that kept racial groups separate were very well-defined and seemingly impenetrable. I would later witness such invisible fencing during my years on Long Island, where there was a stark difference in the social and economic conditions of communities that shared a common boundary line but lived very separate lives. Invisible barriers have separated people for centuries along racial, cultural, and religious identities; while there may have been situations in which physical walls were constructed, the invisible walls that kept people separate were far stronger than even the sturdiest physical barrier.

The world of the New Testament was one that was defined by the barriers that kept people separated from one another. While there is no evidence that such barriers

were built of stone or other physical materials, the invisible boundaries were very real and permanent; any attempt to cross over such a boundary was met with harsh judgment and could even lead to physical harm. We can witness the seriousness of such lines of demarcation when Jesus dares to cross over to the “other side,” both in his physical travels and in his interactions with those who were considered to belong across the invisible boundary line. When Jesus travels into the territory of Samaria, John informs the reader that such an action was not normal, since “*Jews did not share things in common with Samaritans*” (John 4:9). Even the Samaritan woman from whom Jesus requests a drink of water is taken aback by his presence and request: “*How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?*” On another occasion, Jesus travels north to the region of Tyre, across the border into Gentile territory, where he is met by a woman described as “*a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin*” (Mark 7:26); after a somewhat unusual exchange, Jesus heals the woman’s daughter of an unclean spirit that has possessed her. Jesus’ crossing of invisible boundaries also happened when he was among his own people; he often scandalized the Pharisees and other religious leaders when he sat down to eat with “tax collectors and sinners,” persons who were considered outside the boundaries of “acceptable” society: “*And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*” (Luke 15:2). Jesus’ practice of crossing boundaries both visible and invisible would become a key element of his Great Commission to the apostles who he would send out to continue his work; in his final appearance to them after his resurrection, Jesus charges his followers to “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...*” (Matthew 28:19).

The apostolic commission to cross over human boundaries with the Gospel that was to be proclaimed “*to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8) was at the heart of the ministry of St. Paul, who was called by Christ to be “*an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel*” (Acts 9:15). Paul’s boundary-breaking ministry would take him far from the origins of Christianity into communities where he would proclaim the Gospel to all people and welcome everyone who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord into the fellowship of Christ’s Church. Among the communities where Paul engaged in this ministry was Ephesus, the important port city on the west coast of the Roman province of Asia (modern-day Turkey) where Paul lived for three years and established several house churches in which people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds worshipped together. But even though his message proclaimed that all persons are one in Christ through baptism, he was aware that their former identities and the invisible barriers that had kept them separated from one another still lingered, with one group sensing

that they were still considered “outsiders” by others within the church. Paul addresses the challenge such “invisible fencing” is presenting to the Ephesian church in the second chapter of his letter, where the subject of his address – “you” – are identified specifically as Gentiles, while the “we” are those who, like Paul, belong to the “commonwealth of Israel” (Ephesians 2:12). The “once but now” pattern applies to the prior division of the two groups, now brought together as one. Through their one baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, *“salvation has brought Jew and Gentile together in a single body.”* (Pheme Perkins).

Paul calls upon the Gentiles in the Ephesian church to *“remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth ... were at one time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”* (2:11-12). By speaking of a *“physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands,”* Paul disassociates himself from those Jews who used the derogatory term “uncircumcised” for Gentiles. In the Old Testament and in the Judaism of Paul’s day, “uncircumcised” referred to those who were considered unclean or lacking the covenant relationship with God that Israel enjoyed:

- “If an alien who resides with you wants to celebrate the Passover to the LORD, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native in the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it.” – Exodus 12:48.
- “Thus says the Lord God: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter the sanctuary.” – Ezekiel 44:9.

Paul’s references to the Gentiles as formerly being without Christ, hope, and God situate the prior deficiencies of the Gentiles as not belonging to the Jewish people, those who were *“from the commonwealth of Israel”* with the corresponding rights of citizenship (*“I will bring forth descendants from Jacob, and from Judah inheritors of my mountains; my chosen shall inherit it, and my servant shall settle there.”* – Isaiah 65:9). The expression “without God” refers to a frequent motif in the Bible the identified Gentiles as being ignorant of God (*“Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you, and on the peoples that do not call on your name...”* – Jeremiah 10:25). Paul’s description of the invisible barriers that kept Gentiles and Jews separated would not have been news to his Gentile readers; but the purpose of describing the way things were is made clear when Paul now turns to the new reality that exists that overcomes all barriers, visible and invisible: *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* (2:13). The Gentiles among the Ephesian churches were people who once were “far off,” an

Old Testament term for those outside of the commonwealth of Israel (*“He will raise a signal for a nation far away, and whistle for a people at the ends of the earth”* – Isaiah 5:26). Now these people who once lived as outsiders have been “brought near,” not by their own efforts but through the death and resurrection of Christ, whose death has eliminated the causes of division between Jews and Gentiles and united both groups to God.

- “Although the emphasis of the passage is on oneness, the writer repeatedly states that this unity is created from two groups, who represented different customs, traditions, and perspectives. Unity between the two groups comes about not by one group giving up its identity to become like the other. Rather, unity arises from their shared identity in Christ.” – Holly Hearon.

Unity is not merely the end of human enmity; it also involves reconciliation with God through the cross. A key shift occurs in 2:14, where Paul shifts from the “you” of the previous verses to “we,” proclaiming that Christ *“is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”* This “peace” (*Eirene*) has the richer connotations of the Hebrew *shalom*: wholeness, well-being, and fullness of blessing. “In his flesh” Christ has broken down the “dividing wall” that kept Jews and Gentiles separated in “the hostility between us.” Such divisions and hostility had resulted in both groups historically looking upon each other with great suspicion and even as less than human; all of this has been nullified through the death and resurrection of Christ, through which all who are baptized into Christ have been *“a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”* (1 Peter 1:3). In this process of making peace, Christ has *“abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace”* (2:15). “Abolish” (*katargeo*) might be better translated as “vacating” or “nullifying.” By means Christ’s death on the Cross, a covenant relationship with God no longer depends on observance of the Law of Moses, for Jesus’ purpose was to create in himself one new humanity. Through the cross and resurrection of Christ, God has initiated the “new creation” promised by Isaiah, which will be the basis of Paul’s teachings in other letters:

- “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered nor come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and people as a delight.” – Isaiah 65:17-18.
- “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” – 2 Corinthians 5:17.

- “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” – Galatians 6:15.

Through their one baptism into Christ, both Jews and Gentiles have now been reconciled through the cross, which has put *“to death that hostility through it”* (2:16). “Through the cross” indicates that the death of Christ is understood as the sacrifice that brings reconciliation to all peoples.

- “Here, the reconciliation is between God and humankind ... This means that those who were once far off (that’s us) are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, the two groups together become members of the household of God, collectively growing into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God” – Hearon.

Paul uses the phrase “proclaimed peace” in reference to key Old Testament promises that God will send someone to proclaim the good news of peace: *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”* (Isaiah 52:7). This peace is now preached to all persons, *“to you who were far off and peace to those who were near”* (5:17). Access for one group does not mean exclusion for others, since through Christ all persons *“have access in one Spirit through the Father”* (5:18). Through Christ all persons in all groups can experience God as Father: *“And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God”* (Galatians 4:6-7).

Previously foreigners or resident aliens among God’s people, the Gentiles who have been born anew in Holy Baptism are *“no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God”* (2:19). They are built into the church that is built upon *“the foundation of apostles, and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone”* (2:20). The presence of God’s Spirit in the community that is described as a temple is well-established in Paul’s writings (*“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”* – 1 Corinthians 3:16); the apostle Peter calls upon his readers to *“come to him, a living stone, rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* (1 Peter 2:4-5). As the “house of living stones” in which God’s Spirit dwells, Paul is suggesting that the community will be the focus of God’s presence in the world.

- “Ephesians leave no opening for the continuing observance of the law by Jewish Christians. Despite all differences in their origins, both Jewish and Gentile believers are reconciled to God through Christ. Both are brought into the body of Christ and have the same Spirit. They have a common foundation and belong to a building designed to be held together by one capstone. While diversity of origins is no barrier to coming into the church, it is not an excuse for a building of clashing architectural styles! Thus the emphasis on unity in Ephesians rejects the possibility of God’s people being divided into multiple sects.” – Perkins.

While our reconciliation was accomplished once-for-all by Christ’s death and resurrection, Paul describes Christ’s ongoing work in the Church that makes his presence known in the present tense: *“In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”* (2:21-22). We believe that our Lord is present among us whenever we gather as God’s people around Word and Sacrament, and is with us when we go forth into the world to proclaim *“the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9). Our Lord is present with us as we welcome all people into the fellowship of Christ’s Church and break down all barriers that seek to separate people, barriers that have no place in the community that bears the name of the one who broke down all dividing walls of hostility that kept us separated from God and from one another. Our Lord is present with us so that we might proclaim the same *“peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [and] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:7).

- “The church does not belong to any supposedly privileged group. It is there for all who hear and are drawn to the gospel, and no one has any ‘right’ to membership and leadership within the Christian community because of the accidents of birth! We ‘belong’ in the church solely and simply because of the grace of God.” – Douglas John Hall.

The invisible fence in our neighbour’s yard serves the purpose of keeping their pets safe within their home; but fences – visible or invisible – have no purpose and no place within the home that is ours in the presence of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. As our Lord broke down dividing walls of hostility that once separated us from God and from one another, we must continue our Lord’s work of breaking down all barriers so that we might rejoice in the *“tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the unity of heart and mind is like to that above”* (ELW Hymn 656). As we have been reconciled to God through our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, may we continue to be ambassadors of Christ’s reconciliation

so that no barriers – visible or invisible – keep us separated from one another in the community into which we were incorporated by the one who came to bring peace and unity to us and to all God's people.

Amen.