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1Proper 11 • Ephesians 3:14–21 • July 26, 2015

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Proper 11 • Ephesians 2:11–22 • July 19, 2015

I say to my students with some regularity, “Careful exegesis often makes the text harder to preach.” What I mean, of course, is that the concerns of a particular text of Scripture might not, at first glance, be the sorts of things that concern a Christian/Lutheran congregation in twenty-first-century North America. When this is the case, there are several options. One can opt for a topical sermon that begins from the text and moves on to other pericopes before synthesizing and offering helpful truth for God’s people; this is fine. One could, of course, ignore the text’s concerns and use the reading as a pretext. (I know about this one because I’ve done it often enough over the years.) Or, one can try to discern the text’s interests, and the questions to which it gives answers—and then apply that.

This reading from Ephesians is about what God in Christ has done for people. Easy enough. Even better, it proclaims that people who were far off have been brought near, that people whose relationship with God was chaotic and hate-filled and alienated have been reconciled to God. Hooray! The death of Christ, his “blood” has done this and divisions have been removed.

Here’s the difficult part of the text. The people who were far off were Gentiles and they were far off precisely because they were not faithful Israelites. They had no access to Israel’s covenants with God, and they were not living in response to God’s mercy by seeking to keep his commands in the law of Moses (3:11–12). They were without God in the world. Paul proclaims in these verses the Gentiles’ reconciliation and peace with God—but even more emphatically, he proclaims the Gentiles’ reconciliation and peace with Israelites, with Christ-believing Jews. The good news is that the Gentile believers now fully belong as household members (3:19) to the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus (Eph 1:3). To be sure, this is so because they have been set into place as part of the building founded on the apostles and prophets who in turn take their direction and orientation from the cornerstone which is Jesus himself. In this reading, however, the negative “before” was Gentile alienation from God’s covenant people. The positive “but now” primarily (though not exclusively) consists of being made into a unity with Jewish believers.

Therefore, when Paul says and then explicates that “Christ himself is our peace” (v. 14), his concern primarily (though not exclusively) is to proclaim the peace between Jewish believer and Gentile believer. The both have become one; the law of Moses that divided the two has been torn down so that the two types of people might become one new man in Christ (3:14–15). The hatred and alienation between Jew and Gentile has been killed in Jesus’s own body (3:16). And now (to borrow a bit from Romans) there is no distinction; both Jew and Gentile have access in one Spirit to the same Father (3:18).

The issue of “Jew and Gentile,” however, is scarcely an issue for us today. In an attempt to apply *this* central theme of *this particular* reading, I suggest at least two directions for application. First, this would be a good text if the pastor wanted to supplant any sort of sinfully divisive thinking or behavior in the congregation with Christ-centered unity. The preacher can use a graphic image such as this: “When you try to

maintain your hatred or your anger or your separation, it's as if you are reaching into the wounds of Jesus—where all of that enmity went—and pulling it out again. Don't do that! Give the separation up! Let go of the anger! Leave it in the wounds of Jesus. He has reconciled you to God, his Father. Now, be reconciled to one another!"

Second, this would be a good text if the pastor wanted to assure all the members of the congregation (and indeed, all of his hearers) that “there is a place for you here, because there is peace and reconciliation for *all* in the body of Jesus.” All believers have been brought near—to God and to one another—by his blood (3:13). He killed the alienating enmity for *all* on the cross. No longer is *any* believer a stranger or a foreigner here in the assembly of the baptized. All share the same foundation, the same cornerstone; all belong here as part of God's house and building.

Jeff Gibbs