

NO LONGER STRANGERS AND ALIENS

Ephesians 2:11-22

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/no-longer-strangers-and-aliens>

Have you ever hated someone? I mean in an all-consuming way? Do you hate someone right now? Think about hate like a funnel. The funnel may be turned either way. We may start with one person and hate all who are just like him. Or it might be hatred of a race, religion, ethnicity, and you move to hate individuals who are in that group. Our hatred can be based on race, ethnicity, religion, politics, social class.

Paul reminds us in v. 12 that there are two kinds of loneliness and estrangement—being cut off from God and being cut off from others (read v. 12 carefully: without Christ, without hope, without God). Being left out...estrangement from God and others. Each loneliness makes the other worse. A man was once getting ready to embark on an overseas ocean liner. He came up to a little boy and paid the boy to wave goodbye to him as he left. He had no one. Who here enjoys being left out?

“But now in Christ...” (v. 13). I love those four words! In Christ and because of Christ, that wall between hated groups has come down (v. 14). Many Bible scholars believe that Paul was referencing the wall that separated the Jewish Court from the Gentile Court in the Temple in Jerusalem. In 1871, archeologists found a limestone plaque that had been posted separating the Gentile court of the Temple from the Jewish inner court. It read, “No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure round the Temple. And whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for his ensuing death.” Talk about a church that needs to work its hospitality!

But notice that Christ not only broke down the hostility between people groups; he also brought God and humans together (v. 16). This is what makes the Cross so powerful. At the Cross, all special claims of privilege (I’m innately better and more loveable than you) are done away with. At the Cross, the healing and blessing of God is poured over us from God who sees us as we are, broken sinners, all. This is also what sets off the rage against the Cross, because people want to maintain their special claim of being loved more than other groups [I am indebted to Myron Madden for this profound thought, from *The Power to Bless*, p. 155].

How does this play out in real life? In the 1800’s, as immigrants to the U.S. arrived in droves on Ellis Island, it was common to see signs posted outside business establishments, “Irish need not apply.” It’s interesting to note that our hatred of specific people groups changes, but the hatred itself continues. What does Paul say? No longer strangers and aliens. Last year, a predominantly black Presbyterian Church in South Carolina received an anonymous gift of \$2,000 as they were seeking funds to do a ministry to feed breakfast to hungry children. The gift included a typed letter in which the donor said he was a former racist who had been changed by Jesus Christ and

the Holy Spirit, as he was doing church work [*Christian Century*, June 21, 2017, p. 8]. No longer strangers and aliens.

Tertullian, a second-century writer, observed that strangers, who had been conditioned to hate, fear and mistrust one another, found a compelling reason to join the early Christian movement, because of the way they loved each other. The old categories of rich/poor, slave/free, Gentile/Jew, black/brown/white didn't work anymore. They were rendered obsolete, passe, old-fashioned, out of date! I once heard a seminary professor lecturing on global missions. He waxed passionate and said, "God can't tell a foreigner from a local without a program printed by a human!"

When one of our deacons, Fred Mackay, passed away last September, his next door neighbor told of the time when she was a little girl. Fred had built a fence between the two houses. But he came over and told them, "Now remember. There's a gate." Is there some way that as followers of Jesus, we could hear this text in a new way? In a way that would disrupt our hatreds and biases, our politics and our presuppositions? That the walls would come down so we could practice radical love.