

ONE HEART, ONE MIND: Pursuing Accord in a Season of Discord Series
The Gospel of Christ in a Purple Church (Ephesians 4:1-6)
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WATCH/LISTEN: fbcjc.org/sermon/the-gospel-of-christ-in-a-purple-church/

I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the number of times I've heard people say to me "I just don't understand what is happening to our country." In my adult life, I think I first picked up on this sentiment after 9/11 and then the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003 which remains deeply controversial; as a college student, I remember riding in taxi cabs and listening to the news in other countries and hearing a very different perception of America's actions in the world than I'd ever heard before, then coming home and hearing the same thing. What is happening to our country?

I felt it again in December 2012 after the Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. I remember sitting in the rocking chair in Katherine's nursery, rocking her long after she'd fallen asleep, and counseling people on the phone as they cried and agonized about the six and seven year-olds who died in that shooting who maybe hadn't been baptized—were they in heaven, how could this happen, who are we becoming, how can I send my babies into school in this world? What is happening to our country?

I felt this again, as I listened to vigorous legal, ethical, and theological debate in my graduate work following the shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin in 2012, then Michael Brown in August 2014, and finally twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in November 2014. Since that time, the question has surged continuously. What is happening to our country?

The good news for us today is that Ephesians has something to say about our current circumstances; there is some helpful wisdom for us. The churches who first read Ephesians, lived in a time of even more chaos and violence and change. I am sure they cried and agonized about what was happening around them—revolts and rebellions, poverty, change, shifts in power and authority, taxation, freedom, political corruption, epidemics—they could empathize with all of it.¹

Many of us have heard the phrase, "Rome wasn't built in a day." Rome didn't fall in a day either. I've always found it interesting to learn about the decline of the Roman Empire. Something particularly fascinating about the decline of the empire is how Rome's treatment of migrants impacted its decline. In the late 300's, the Huns invaded Europe. Their invasion sparked a mass migration of people. These people began to press further and further into the Roman empire—they were not the root of the problem. The root of the problem was the Huns.

One of the reasons the Roman Empire was so successful was because they followed a policy of syncretism--this allowed people groups in many instances, to keep their religions and their cultures (deeply held values) as long as they paid the Empire their dues. This practice was wildly

¹ Calvin J. Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul, Sixth Edition* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville) 2015, 171-177.

successful. So at another time in the empire's history, they might have viewed these displaced people groups as assets in defeating their enemy—the Huns.

But they didn't do this. When the Goths came to the empire seeking peaceful coexistence, the empire had stopped their practice of syncretism and became more demanding that people show their allegiance to the empire through things like emperor-worship.

The Romans allowed the Goths to live within their borders but rather than embracing the opportunity this presented, they were incredibly cruel to them. We have stories from ancient historians of the Romans forcing the starving Goths to trade their children into slavery in exchange for dog meat.

Spoiler alert—this policy did not work out well for the Romans. Side note--cruelty and exclusion are not a good growth strategy. This completely backfired on the Romans. They created a significant enemy within their borders. The Goths eventually sacked the city of Rome in the year 410.

I said earlier that there is some good news in our passage for today. There is also some bad news—or maybe just hard truth.

About the same time the Romans were missing opportunities to turn around the fate of the empire, the church was making the same mistakes. One theory suggests that Ephesians was circulated to address this specific issue, as if the writer of Ephesians was saying: "Guys, this doesn't all have to fall apart. There is a place for you in the church. There is a place for you in the church. You don't all have to think or behave the same way. All these dividing walls and barriers you're throwing up—Jesus got rid of those. The point isn't what makes us different. The point is Christ."²

In a lot of ways, the church ended up not getting it. By the year 135 (probably about 40 or 50 years after Ephesians was written), Christianity had almost completely severed from Judaism and Gentile Christian leadership wasn't playing so well with Jewish Christian leadership. This was not at all on the radar of the early church. It was not at all the intention.

But we hear a different narrative in this little circulatory epistle—the assurance that God believes the dividing walls and barriers between us don't matter as much as Christ matters. The assurance that God is invested in making Christ a reality in our world today.

There's an important theology shift that happens in the later epistles. The Christ of Colossians and Ephesians is no longer just the Jesus who carried a cross, taught as a rabbi, and sorta weird and radical guy who went from village to village healing the sick and feeding the hungry. The Christ of the later epistles is not just a body or even a resurrected body, it's a cosmic metaphysical force present in all things, holding everything that is together, the force that is working all things into God's dream for the world. So, when the writer says "There is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all in all" he doesn't just mean one in your Bible study group, one in your church, one

² Ibid., 171-177.

in your denomination, one in your religion—the writer means one period. All of it is held by Christ. Everything we can see, touch, smell, feel, hear, and think.

The people of the early church were suspicious of this, like—that’s cute, God, but surely you don’t mean those people too. This was not moderate enough for the early church. Maybe it’s a little too much for us too.

Our brains prefer difference. Our neural pathways can only tolerate a certain level of complexity before we start categorizing and putting information into boxes and bins. We tend to remember the negative rather than the positive. When we’re stressed, we start excluding, other-izing, thinking of ourselves as better or more important than other people because it helps us feel better. When we’re really stressed we get dug-in, we lash out, we resort to severed relationship and even violence.

At the same time, we are so hungry for something other than what’s happening around us. We are hungry to be grounded and humble, gentle, patient, and able to bear with others in love. We look around at our lives, our family, our churches, our nation and wonder what we can do to help—to spread something good in this world.

Christ is what makes this possible. Christ changes us from the inside out. Christ changes our thinking, our feeling, our moving around in this world, the way we treat ourselves the way we treat others. Rather than closing us down or cutting us off, Christ tends to open us up into ever-widening circles; this is who God is—God’s love is ever-expanding, just like the universe. Ephesians 3 calls this a “mystery”—this mystery of Christ. They didn’t know what else to call it. They kept wanting the things that made them different to matter. But what they kept discerning was that God wasn’t worried about the differences and, what’s more, Christ’s love isn’t about exclusion or punishment, or unanimity.

What we are hearing so powerfully right now is the myth that we are our politics and the myth of a win-lose scenario.³ These two myths are vying for our hearts, minds, and souls. I want to encourage you to pray with me that we can be free from these myths. They are destructive. They are not what is deepest and truest about us or about God.

If you are watching this and you are a person who has chosen to be a Christ-follower, here are a few encouragements I want you to take with you today:

- Our identity is not our politics. Our identity is in Christ. Christ is not working for a win-lose scenario in this election or in the universe. Christ is working for a win-win, because within Christ there are no losers.
- If this makes you uncomfortable, I want you to know that it makes me incredibly uncomfortable too.

³ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (Convergent: New York) 2019, 182-185.

- Paul Marshall puts it really well when he says that churches must continually ask themselves “which of our own preferences do we value more highly than the experience of this God-given unity? To what degree do we desire less unity than God intends?”⁴

In moments like these, we have to ask ourselves what we are willing to give up in order for Christ to grow in us? In order for Christ to grow in the world? If we really believe what the Bible says, that Christ is in all things and holds all things together, then we need to be about the business of finding Christ, seeing Christ in all things, all people. We need to be about the business of building up this body, this mystery, in all we do. Not just inside the church walls. Not just at mission projects. Christ asks a lot more of us than just a few hours a week on our calendar.

These days, anger and fear and despair are close. The idea of humility or gentleness may feel impossible. It is possible. We just need to know that choosing Christ may require us to give up some things that are really hard for us to give up: Things like needing to be right, letting hatred or anger steer the ship, thinking that our thinking can save us, other-izing those people who believe or think or act differently than we do, lulling ourselves to sleep when what we really need is to wake up. Getting to this place of letting go and letting God requires a great deal of time, openness, and prayer.

The only ruler Christians have, the only true measure of how we are doing, is love. And not love the feeling or the noun, love the verb—the action. Are we loving the people in our lives more today than we did yesterday? Are we loving our neighbors more today than we did yesterday? Are we loving our enemies more today than we did yesterday? Are we speaking the truth in love to ourselves, to each other, to power more today than we did yesterday? Are we yearning for and seeking God—the reality of love. Are we letting love rule us—even if it means letting go of control, letting go of rightness, letting go of hatred—are we willing to let love break us and build us up?

“One heart. One mind. one body and one Spirit, one God of all who is above all and through all in all...”

This is who you are, child of God. As you go about your life this week, even when you feel like you don’t understand what is happening around us, know that there are people around you who are hurting and lost in ways you’d never imagine. They are looking for light, for hope. With humility and gentleness and boldness—let’s show our hurting world what love can do.

⁴ Paul Marshall, *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*, eds. Barbara Brown Taylor and David L. Bartlett, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville) 2009, 304.