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Ephesians 2:11-14
No Longer Strangers
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Whenever the Apostle Paul entered a new city he typically began to preach in a synagogue. Then he typically got kicked out of the synagogue. Then he preached wherever he could, and Gentiles as well as Jews would hear God's Word.

According to 19th chapter of Acts, this is exactly what happened in Ephesus. Paul's ministry in the synagogue there only lasted three months before he got the boot for talking about Jesus as the Christ. Then the question was where in town would he go next to continue his ministry? The only other religious houses in town were the temples of the pagan mystery cults and the great temple to Artemis. But Paul certainly wasn't going to preach at either of these places because as a Jew he wasn't even allowed in them. So after being expelled from the synagogue, Paul rented a lecture hall, where the church at Ephesus met for the next two years with both Jews and Greeks hearing about Jesus Christ.

It is significant that the church wasn't meeting in the great temple of Artemis or the temples of the mystery cults because the Jews among them weren't welcome, and it wasn't meeting in the synagogue because the Greeks weren't welcome there. So they are not *in* the temple and they are not *in* the synagogue. Thus, it's not that surprising that Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by reminding them that they are *in* Jesus Christ. That's pretty much the theme of Ephesians.

In our text today, Paul claims that in Christ we have all been made members of the one household of God, which consists of Jews and Greeks, people like you, and people who are different. Then he says that in Christ we have become a dwelling place for God. That's what the church is — a dwelling place of God because Christ is here. In this dwelling place, he then states, there are no dividing walls that separate people and create strangers.

I don't know a lot about construction but I do understand the concept of dividing and load bearing walls. The load bearing walls hold up the roof and keep the structure from falling in. But the problem with a load bearing wall is that whenever you want to do a little remodeling it's always the load bearing wall that's in the way. "You can't move that," the contractor says. This means that load bearing walls are usually dividing walls.

What Paul is telling us is that the church is a rather unique structure that has no dividing walls. Jesus Christ alone bears the load, and he has broken down all the dividing walls that separate people in his church. We may throw up a few walls so we can feel more comfortable in church. These are the walls that will separate the races, the political parties, economic classes, or the walls that divide the liberals from the conservatives, the righteous from the sinners, the people like you from the strangers. But those walls do not hold up the church of Jesus Christ. They can

come down any time we are ready to repent of our sin of dividing the Body of Christ. Jesus didn't build the church with those internal walls, and for the church to be *in* Christ authentically, it can have no strangers.

Religious institutions do not intend on creating strangers. They do it accidentally when they try to protect what they believe to be holy. The Greek temple to Artemis had internal walls that protected its holy altar. So did the great Jewish temple in Jerusalem -- it had a wall that kept out Gentiles, a wall that divided men from women, a wall that separated the inner court from the outer courts, and a great curtain that guarded the Holy of Holies from a profaned world. It may have been the intent of all these walls to guard holiness, but the effect of the walls was to create strangers. Greeks were strangers to the worship conducted by Jews. Jews were strangers to the worship conducted by Greeks. And all of us were made strangers to holiness. But God would not allow us to remain estranged from his holy communion, and that is pretty central to the mission of Jesus Christ.

In the death of Jesus Christ the veil that divided the Holy of Holies from the world was ripped from top to bottom, allowing the holiness of God to rush out into every corner of the world - even every corner of your heart. In Jesus Christ it is all made holy again.

We live in a society that has always been anxious about strangers. But the stranger we worry about the most is the part of our own lives that we have labeled as profane and unholy. Most of us find it hard to live a perfectly integrated life. So we build a dividing wall in our own hearts that separates the part of us that is right, compassionate, and giving from the part that is wrong, fearful, and even dangerous. We know that we are not all bad, but we cannot say that we are all good either. Like the world around us we are each a mix of good and bad, sacred and profane. We are even a mix of familiar and stranger.

Have you ever said something that is just mean to somebody you care about and been horrified to hear your own words? You wonder where that came from. It came from the other side of the dividing wall in your heart - the side that is not in Christ. It came from the stranger you created within your own life the day you divided life between holy and profane. This stranger is like an alien living within you, that grows and grows until it bursts out and consumes you and those around you. So do not think that the compartments of your heart can contain the evil within you.

We try to compartmentalize the guilt of our sin from the profession of our faith, the person we know ourselves to be from the one others expect us to be, or the pain of our past from the relationships of today. We think that with these interior walls we'll be able to contain the profane stranger within us and protect the part of us that is holy. But until you allow Jesus Christ to break down the dividing wall in your own heart, saving the part of your life that is an unwanted stranger, you will always be afraid of this dark alien side of you.

Then you'll just keep projecting the part of your own life that makes you afraid onto the person who is different than you. What you are really worried about in others is the evil in your own heart. That is the real reason the church and the whole world is divided. It is because we are

afraid of our own divided hearts. Until you make peace with the stranger within, you will never make peace with the strangers around you. So for the sake of the divided world and the divided church you have to know what it means to live fully in Christ, the Savior.

God does not just love the part of you that is holy. Jesus does not just save the part of you that is already righteous. The loving salvation of God in Christ embraces all of you - the good and the bad, the holy and the profane. But the hardest thing to do is to give Jesus the part of your life that you are afraid to confess even to yourself.

You are never going to redeem the stranger in your heart by keeping him in a compartment. You have to break down the dividing wall and let the Savior carry the load for the part of your life that makes you most ashamed. And Christ will transform all of your life into his own image, because that is who you really are.

This is why Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, and the church in Pittsburgh, is a constant invitation to live in Christ. We have a hard time understanding this phrase, "living in Christ." That is because we have been nurtured in individualistic values for a long time. We consider it a right, if not a responsibility, to live our own lives. But in ancient society people attempted to live the life of someone who had gone before them. This is what the Gentiles were doing in the temple of Artemis and with their many mystery cults. It is also what the Jews were accustomed to doing in their synagogues. They were living vicariously. So when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they responded by saying, "Some say Elijah, or John, or Jeremiah." The people knew these prophets were dead, but they thought Jesus was trying to follow the old practice of living one of their great lives. Paul is appealing to this common religious agenda by calling us to live the life of Jesus Christ.

"Your life," Paul would tell us, "has already been lived." Your decisions have already been made. Your calling has already been given. Your morality has already been determined, and your identity has already been established.

You are no longer stranger or alien, Gentile or Jew. You are now a member of the household of God. To be clear, Paul is not telling us to imitate Jesus Christ. He is telling us that through the Holy Spirit we can participate in the life of Christ. That is because the Holy Spirit has adopted you into the Son's relationship with the Father. You are now the Beloved of the Father, and he loves all of you. Not just the good parts. Jesus Christ has embraced and redeemed it all. The full load.

Now, with the apostle you can say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Benediction: *Nothing is as heavy as the human heart, unless Christ is bearing the full load. Amen.*