

For the next few weeks we will not be able to worship together at Valley Forge United Methodist Church. The government has limited us to groups no larger than ten and would wish we did not meet at all until this season of pandemic eases up. Pray for healing, wash your hands with soap and water while saying the Lord's Prayer, stay at home as much as possible and look out for those around you. If you need me, call me at 410-340-6439. I will also place a video of my sermon on the church's group facebook page.

Ephesians 2:14-16

For *Christ* is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing walls, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law, with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in the place of two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Let us pray:

We believe in the power of the cross and realize that one the cross you gave your life to end all hostility and division within the family of God. Yet too often we demand more. We have decided to add to the division within the body of Christ and make Him suffer more.

Forgive us, help us take up our own cross and join with you in making a sacrifice to end our hostility and heal the division we find among us. Amen.

“Making A Way”

When Paul was writing this letter the church was divided. There were those who followed the Torah as they always had. It was the word of God for his people. So they believed that only they were truly following God and these new people were not. In fact they were seeking to lead them astray like the Moabites had done so long ago. They were determined that they were not going to deny the true Biblical faith but would follow Christ.

The other group were new Christians who were gentiles. They did not have scriptural back up that said that they too were followers of the one true God. All they had was their own experience, when they accepted the word of the Apostle Paul who told them that Jesus died for their sins and gave them the gift of eternal life, with the Holy Spirit as the proof. They felt that those who denied their relationship with Christ were not true Christians at all.

So Paul says that they are one, because Christ died on the cross for the purpose of bringing both of these groups together. For Paul, for them to deny their unity was to reject the cross of Christ.

The cross abolished “the law, with its commandments and ordinances.” The cross was God doing a new thing, never done before, and it changed the lived reality of the Church. The law, the commandments, the ordinances, which were the essence of the Torah was no longer primary. God's guidance for the children of Israel to keep them separate from gentiles was no longer necessary. God may have started in Jerusalem and Judea, but was now including Samaria and the uttermost reaches of the world.

What was used to separate people was no longer relevant in the same way. God was now seeking to bring people together. The church had been working only within the one basic cultural group, those of Jewish heritage. They were all fairly similar, and their basic squabbles had been differences between the Biblical interpretations of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The assimilation of the Samaritans was not too bad because they already used the same Scriptures, with the biggest difference being that the Samaritans only accepted the first five books as Holy. They also spoke Aramaic like the Jewish Christians did.

They also had some trouble with the “Greek Speaking Jews”. But by selecting all “Greek speaking Jews” as deacons, they were able to keep the unity of the faith, but gentiles was just going too far. It went against the scriptures. This is why they felt they needed to keep the law: the commandments of God and the ordinances that were proscribed by God for the people of God.

But Paul said: “No! The cross of Christ has broken down the walls that had divided us.” That wall was

the law: the commandments and the ordinances of the Bible. Christ was now going to work across cultures, across languages, across ethnic groups, across nationalities. And this scared the traditional church to death. How do we live without the law? How can we live holy lives without the Holy Scriptures?

Paul knew that the Christ who had taught him in the desert, would teach and guide the church in new ways. Paul also knew that the hostility that they had against each other was not according to the will of God.

Jesus died and had paid the price for whatever one side had against the other. Paul understood both sides really well. Paul had worked to silence Christians whom he believed were leading Israel away from the One true God. The resurrected Christ showed him how wrong he had been.

I love lent, because this is one of the few times in the year that churches from diverse denominations come together to worship their one Lord. This year we only were able to share in two services during this season due to the virus. The first was hosted by the Roman Catholic Church, with an African American Baptist preaching. There was a time when that could never have happened. The next week we were at a Lutheran Church with a female pastor, who had a United Methodist preaching. There was a time when that could not have happened either. We have our differences, yet we recognize that the cross of Christ has torn down the walls that separate us, at least for the season of lent.

Whenever we divide it is over something we believe is important. Methodists have split over race, slavery, the place of the laity, and the speaking of English. Every time we believed that Jesus is on our side of the great divide, but the truth is that we only crucify Christ again and turn our backs on the peace Christ died to provide.

We have worked hard to be more united as Christ desires. We have united as a world council of churches, national councils of churches, in groups like Churches of Christ Uniting, as Pan Methodists, and as a World Methodist Council. God smiles when we find our unity amidst our diversity.

At this time the United Methodist Church is in full communion with the Lutheran Church, the Moravian Church, and soon the Episcopal Church. The walls are coming down, some that have been up for centuries. During healthier seasons The Methodist Episcopal Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Protestant Church tore down their walls and formed the Methodist Church. The United Brethren in Christ, and the Evangelical Church tore down their walls and formed the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church tore down their walls and formed the United Methodist Church.

As many know, there are those who are choosing to build new walls to divide the church over differing beliefs about human sexuality. Some believe that the Bible is clear in its condemnation of homosexuality, the other side believes that the Bible is not so clear on homosexuality, but is very clear about grace found in Jesus Christ and a need to care for the least in our society. Just like in the past, both sides feel that God is on their side and their interpretation of scripture brings honor to Christ.

Paul says, "Christ is our peace. Through his flesh Christ made both groups one. Through his flesh Christ broke down the hostility that separates us. Through his flesh Christ has abolished the law: the commandments and the ordinances. Through his flesh Christ has created for himself one new humanity. Through his flesh Christ has reconciled both groups. Christ on the cross has put to death our hostility." We all believe it, we just struggle to live this truth.

If this is our Christian faith how then shall we live? Shall we make null the work of Christ, by saying his sacrifice was not enough? Can we in the name of Christ rebuild the walls that Jesus died to tear down? Can we substitute our hostility for the Peace Jesus bought on the cross?

How about in our own lives? In our relationships? Christ has died to end our hostility and give us peace. It is not easy, because everyone feels justified to crucify Christ again and again. What we do to others we do to Christ, this is why he said to Paul, "Paul, Paul why are you persecuting me?" Paul said who me? I am fighting for righteousness sake. Jesus said, please stop, I am the one you are hurting.

Jesus says that if you come to church and you know that someone is estranged from you. We are to drop everything and first repair the broken relationship and then return to worship. To Jesus peace is paramount. To Jesus reconciliation is the reason for the cross.

During this lent and always, Jesus wants us to find the peace he died on the cross to deliver to all people. A fulfillment of what was promised at Christmas, Good news for all people, not just for the ones who are like us, but even those we do not fully understand.

Give the Cross of Christ a chance.

Let us pray:

Jesus, forgive us for the hostility we feel for those who are not like us. Work in their lives, just as you are working in ours. Forgive their sins, just as you are forgiving ours. Help us learn to live in peace with all, as we follow the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.