

## **Olympic Peace**

### **Ephesians 2:11-22**

<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, are you involved? The corona virus delayed Summer Olympic Games began this past Friday in Tokyo. Have you watched? I probably won't. I might check the medal count occasionally in the newspaper but somehow that seems wrong, like sinful pride poking its way into the purpose of the games. The Olympics are supposed to promote mutual understanding and peace by bringing everyone together. The medal count seems divisive to me.

Peace has been a part of the Olympics from the very beginning. The first Olympic Games in 776 BC brought athletes together from across the Greek city-states. Essential to the success of the Games was a sacred truce, or "ekecheria," which literally means, "a holding of hands, a cessation of hostilities, armistice." The Greek city-states, often at odds with each other, mutually agreed to permit each other's athletes and other participants safe passage to the games.

Beginning in 1993, the General Assembly of the United Nations has passed successive resolutions urging nations to support the ideal of truce during the period of time when the games are being played. The International Olympic Truce Center, an arm of the International Olympic Committee, promotes this tradition in modern times. In preparation for the 2012 London Olympics, the British government succeeded in getting all 193 member states of the United Nations to sign onto the resolution calling for the Olympic truce. I do not know if there has been a similar declaration this year also, but I would not be surprised.

Sometimes the ideal works. China has been a leading trading partner for the United States, although relations have been touchy the past couple of years. However, not so very long ago, during the regime of Mao Zedong, the two countries were barely on speaking terms. A friendship between two athletes, described in the press as "Ping-Pong Diplomacy," had a major role in initiating the thaw.

During the 31<sup>st</sup> World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, in 1971, American player Glenn Cowan missed the bus from the athletes' training area back to the athletes' housing. A Chinese player waived him to board the Chinese team's bus. The Chinese star Zhuang Zedong moved from his back seat and went forward to sit with the American. Rejecting curios like a pin picturing Chairman Mao, he offered Cowan a silkscreened picture of the famous Huangshan Mountains.

Rummaging through his athletic bag, all Cowan could offer in return was a comb. "I can't give a comb," he apologized, through an interpreter. "I wish I could give you something, but I can't." (Cowan later bought a T-shirt with a red, white and blue peace emblem flag and the words "Let It Be," which he presented to Zedong a few days later at another chance meeting.)

Disembarking from the bus, the athletes were met by photographers and reporters who were astonished at the sight of an American and Communist Chinese athlete together in apparent friendship. When a journalist asked Cowan if he would like to visit China, he replied that he would.

Although the Chinese foreign officer later overruled a suggestion that an invitation be extended to the US Table Tennis Team to visit China, the decision was reversed by Chairman Mao himself, who had heard the report of the two athletes' friendship. Chairman Mao reportedly said, "This Zhuang Zedong not only plays table tennis well, but is good at foreign affairs, and he has a mind for politics."

On April 11-17, 1971, nine American players, four officials, and two spouses toured China, an event that heralded a thaw in relations between the United States and China; too bad it hasn't held.

Ahh! If only peaceful relationships were so easy – in the world and in the church, the body of Christ. This ushers us to the front door of our text for this morning, Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. Many scholars believe this was a circular letter meant not only for Ephesus, but also Laodecia and other churches in Asia Minor. The purpose of the letter is apparently to counter a heresy that afflicted the church at Colossi. This heresy threatened to spread and engulf the churches of Asia Minor. Paul decided that the best defense against heresy was a good offense, that is getting the truth out first. Reading the first two chapters of Ephesians it appears that the heresy revolved around relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul

stresses, we are all one in Christ. God demolished all barriers in Christ and grace applies equally to everyone. It applies to us today just as powerfully and fully as it applied in the first century. So, let's label it an "Olympic Peace."

This background provides context for Paul's letter, which is written to Ephesian Christians living among the rich and proud residents of a major port city on the great sea. The people of this city have power and influence, like many of the people who would have gathered in Tokyo this week except for the corona virus. Paul reminds the Christians, often poor and beleaguered, that worldly success leaves one feeling empty, without a sense of inner peace. Sure, they have the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but what has the goddess Artemis done for them lately? And the Roman Emperor himself is considered a god, but he is better at demanding taxes than giving assistance. Some of the Ephesians have heard of a powerful God worshiped by the Jews but they know the Jews practice circumcision and this is a powerful deterrent to conversion. At its worst, it separates two peoples -- the circumcised and the uncircumcised, the Goyim.

Paul knows this about the Ephesians, so he writes to the Christians living there, "Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called the "uncircumcision" by those who were called the "circumcision" – a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (2:11-12).

As cosmopolitan people, the Ephesians are comfortable in international gatherings such as the Olympic games. But even though they had money, power, and influence, they feel cut off from a relationship with God. Paul reminds his readers that at one time they were without Christ, aliens and strangers to the covenant of promise, without hope and without God in the world. I wonder if the circumcision group considered the uncircumcised group, illegal aliens trying to secure the benefits for themselves.

Think about it: If you are without hope and without God, not even landing a ticket for the men's final 100 meter dash, the finals of the gymnastics competition, or ticket to the basketball finals would make you feel any better for long. Okay, maybe a little better but the feeling would not last, especially if your team lost. Nothing of a material nature can bring lasting peace and joy to the soul – it does not work that way. You need, we need, a single ticket – Jesus the Christ.

This is the solution Paul offers the Ephesians: "But now in Christ you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (verses 13-14). Paul knew about that dividing wall, for when he violated it he was arrested and appealed to Caesar for fear of the Jews (Acts 21:27-29).

When people come together in Tokyo from different countries, races, and cultures peace is not going to be found in a spectacular opening ceremony. When people of differing ages, sexes, educational beliefs, socioeconomic categories, and politics gather in a church sanctuary, unity is not created by a well-planned worship service or a rousing, well-planned sermon.

Real peace requires Jesus, according to Paul. In His flesh He makes different groups into one, and breaks down the dividing wall that is between them. He brings two groups together and unites them. Listen to Paul's glorious logic – there was a problem but God had a solution. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off (*the problem*), have been brought near by the blood of Christ (*the solution*). For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by... abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making [Olympic-sized] peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing hostility" (2:13-15). The cross is the meeting place, the saving place, the uniting place, the victory place, and the peace place.

Gaining the peace of Christ is not a human achievement, like qualifying for the Olympics. It is Christ's accomplishment, not ours. Our challenge is not to earn or deserve Him like a cherished gold medal, but to receive Him as an unmerited gift from God.

An unmerited gift is a hard concept for us because we are an achievement-oriented nation. We honor our Olympic heroes for their great efforts, dogged determination, "can-do" attitude, and self-sacrifice. But the prize of peace is based on Christ's work, Christ's sacrifice, Christ's perseverance, and Christ's dedication, not ours. Olympic Peace comes through an Olympic Savior. When we put our faith in Him, God invites us to join Him on the top of the medal platform. There are no medals in salvation for second or third place. Second place is just the first loser!

Just what did Christ do in His record-shattering performance?

First, He abolished an old way of life, one that was filled with hostility and self-righteousness. He reconciled the world to God, saving everyone by grace. Now, when we stand as a diverse group of people at the foot of the cross, we look up together as one body, grateful for the sacrifice that was made by Christ with His one body.

Second, Jesus opened the door for us, giving us access to God. Paul says, "... for through him we both of us have access to the Father by one Spirit " (verses 17-18). We have received wonderful news; we now all have access to the highest of powers, Almighty God!

Third, Christ made us a part of a structure far more glorious than the Temple of Artemis or the 25,000 seat amphitheater where the Ephesians watched physical spectacles. Paul says that

we are "members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (verses 19-21). So, go ahead, take last week's plumb line from the prophet Amos and measure this new creation. You won't find a crooked line or off-angle because it is God's sanctuary in Christ. Each one of us is a building block in this sacred Temple, "living stones" made out of people of every race, culture and nationality. With Christ as our cornerstone, we stand strong as "a dwelling place for God" (verse 22).

Jesus gives us Olympic Peace, and Him alone! Let's give Jesus the gold – our hearts and souls. Amen.

May the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*Soli Dei Gloria!*

