

Sunday, March 19, 2017

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*Being Church*

Ephesians 2:13-22 *The Message (MSG)*

#### INTRODUCTION:

Generally, when I read from one of the Apostle Paul's letters, the guy seems pretty cranky. He's always correcting or scolding this church here or that community there. Truth be told, Paul's writings can feel quite judgmental.

That's what makes his letter to the Ephesian church really stand out...he does not rebuke them for heresy or try to rectify their errant ways. It appears that Paul is writing to a highly functioning, healthy church. He explains God's great goals for the church and outlines steps toward fulfilling God's dream for the church as a living example of dramatic reconciliation and unity. Before Christ there were serious religious, social and political divisions among them, but now, the teachings of Jesus have dismantled all walls of separation and have transformed this new church into one cohesive unit. It's kind of like that classic football film starring Danzel Washington, *Remember the Titans*. So listen now to "Coach" Paul's motivational speech to the church in Ephesus, chapter 2, verses 13 through 22...

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Don't take any of this remarkable story for granted. It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this. You didn't know the first thing about the way God works. You hadn't the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God's covenants and promises in Israel, hadn't a clue about what God was doing in the world at large. Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are now in on everything.

The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.

Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to our God.

That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

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*Remember the Titans* now that is a classic. If you've never seen it then put it on your "must see" movie list. The story is about a newly integrated high school football team in a small Southern town. The conflict that propels the plot is the racial division between black and white students who suddenly find that they must learn to play on the same team. If the movie had been made in biblical times, chances are that the dividing line would have been between the Jews and the gentiles.

In the metropolitan city of Ephesus, a newly formed church had emerged as a stunning and curious scandal. They weren't known as the *Titans*. They called themselves Christians, followers of Jesus Christ and they were comprised of Jews and gentiles who somehow put their age-old differences aside and were loving and caring for each other as if they had always been family. It was a noticeable cultural transformation. Long-standing and widely accepted divisions among Jews and gentiles somehow evaporated, as members of this church community began to understand the remarkable message and lesson of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Jesus offered redemption, reconciliation and relationship for *all* people with the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. People in the Ephesian church began to identify themselves only as followers of Christ. All other cultural, religious or social identities were secondary or not even relevant. Paul reminds them that the only way this radical evolution, from division into a unified people, could have ever happen in the first place was because Jesus showed us a better way to live. Ideally, the Christian community is inclusive, open, forgiving, and service oriented; not only to one another but also to all people.

The Christian church exists to practice and live out a reflection of the Trinitarian God. A God, whose very being exists in a 3 in 1 perfect circle of relationship. It's like this fountain that is continually filling up and emptying out in perpetual motion.

To actually be the church has nothing what so ever to do with a static building used for worship. *Being* church understands the word church as a verb, a community in perpetual motion, filling up with Spirit, grace and forgiveness, and then pouring all that goodness out with wild abandon. *Being* Church has everything to do with relationship. It's relationship with God, relationship with one another and relationship that engages the world beyond these walls. *Being* Church is belonging and being part of something bigger than you. A place where you are valued not by the pretentiousness of status, wealth or power but rather as a fellow pilgrim in need of healing, craving grace and hungry for spiritual fulfillment. What divides and segregates people outside of church can never stand within a community that seeks to follow Christ.

Lord knows that every church is a flawed institution, including this one, just as every person falls short of perfection, including you and me. *Being* church is boldly admitting to these flaws and imperfections and recognizing that it is actually our brokenness that is the common denominator that binds us together, not our alleged holiness or thinking the we are the standard bearers of virtue. It is grace alone that unifies us. *Being* church is physically acting out the story of God's grace over and over again. It is enthusiastically accepting the stranger, it is rejoicing and celebrating, in community, another's good news as if it was our own and standing in support of another's hardship or suffering as if we were also suffering. *Being* church is knowing that you belong, you are not alone, you matter in this place and when you aren't here, we are diminished by your absence. Your distinctive and unique part is critical to the whole.

Our sacraments and rituals are meant to recall this communal unity. In baptism we begin. We are individually washed clean with life giving water. In baptism God claims you and sets you apart as wholly acceptable, entirely redeemable, and fiercely beloved of God. At the communion table we gather to share a meal together. At Christ's table we literally ingest the grace of God and swallow, into our very bodies, the cup of forgiveness. In receiving new members, who desire to join us along this dangerous journey of being church, we throw wide the doors of acceptance and inclusion saying, "yes, come in, you are welcome here!"

Today we have hit the trifecta. This is how we at TriCon Church are *being* church. We baptize young and mature, we receive all who would stand with us, and we cap it off today by celebrating together with a holy feast that proclaims God's presence and goodness to all who accept the invitation.

So let us continue acting out the story together by receiving those who desire to officially join this community of faith and strengthen us through their commitment.