

Sermon Title: Citizens in the Household  
Text: Ephesians 2:1-12

July 30, 2006  
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton WI  
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One of the things some time off allows, between paintbrushes and carpet cleaning and yard work, is an opportunity to catch up on reading. I can't say that I've made a huge dent in the pile of books that call to me from the corner of my desk, but at least I've had a chance to nibble. If you come to all Things Considered on Thursday mornings, you might know that one of the things I try to read carefully is the *New York Review of Books*, which in spite of its title is about quite a bit more than books, and certainly not devoted to fiction. It's the place I turn to for careful consideration of political issues, as well, and in particular the current turmoil in the Middle East, from Gaza all the way to Iran and Pakistan. I've appreciated the opportunity over the past couple of weeks to do some "catch up", but I have to say that at the end of it all, I've wondered how much better off we might be if we could simply exorcise two words from our English language: "Us" and "them".

It's not that they're not helpful words, used in moderation. When at a stoplight it's helpful to be able to say, "it's *their* turn to go, but when the light turns green *we* will have our turn." Some of us like jazz, while those who made their way to Oshkosh earlier this summer like Country. But as I read article after article on Israel and Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the role of our own country in the mix, I was struck by how often the core issue swirls around "us and them." Palestinian or Jew, Shiite or Sunni, terrorist or freedom fighter, Republican or Democrat, each it seems playing a zero sum game in which, if *they* get anything at all, then *we* lose. At what point, I wonder, will we realize that it doesn't matter who detonates the bomb, it's a living, breathing human being who is killed?

And the sad truth is that it's the "us's" and "them's" that lie closest to the core of my life that seem to be the most destructive. The competition between Kimberly Clark and Procter & Gamble can get pretty heated, I'm sure, but I seldom read of terrorist attacks on competing paper mills or research facilities. Affinity versus ThedaCare can leave you with some good stories, but few bodies. Every bank and savings and loan in the community knows they're better than the other guy, but they don't seem to need body armor to protect themselves from each other. But when it comes to *my* life's work, it seems there's not a sneeze of disagreement that doesn't resonate with dire consequence. The sad truth is that Pascal's famous aphorism is as true today as ever, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."<sup>1</sup> And that evil, more often than not, is predicated on a firm conviction that *we* are right, and *they* are wrong. Us, and them. Whether it's Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or Christians and Muslims in Sudan, or Muslims and Sikhs in India, there's something about *religious* disagreement that seems, almost effortlessly, to turn to terror.

It *could* lead to despair, or at least the conclusion that maybe it's not "us and them" that needs to be taken out of the dictionary, but "God", or at least "religion." But you know, as well, that my Summer has been tempered by a close journey through Ephesians, and especially this morning, the second chapter of that letter which we read together this morning. That reading should remind us of two things. First of all, there is nothing particularly *new* about the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (New York: Penguin Books, 1966). No. 894. (Originally published posthumously in 1669).

questions of religion can stir passionate divisions within a common people. But perhaps more important than that we should be reminded that from Paul's point of view, it's not supposed to be that way.

It's significant because we are edging our way into an election year, and the peculiarity of American politics being what it is, you can bet that the bible, and Paul in particular, are going to be trotted out as evidence for everything from the relative rights of Israel and Palestine, to what constitutes a legitimate domestic relationship, to ethics surrounding the beginning and ending of life and research using stem cells. The most important thing I can urge in the midst of all this is that before we use the bible as the hammer by which we might enforce our particular prejudice it might be a good idea to *read* what the book has to say.

Our reading for this morning is a case in point. You see, it's a certain kind of Biblicist theology that looks out at the world as a Christian "us" and a heathen "them", and sees it as our task to convert all the "thems" to *us* by whatever means necessary. They'll pull out quotes, and probably be able to give you a chapter and a verse to boot...Acts 4:12, "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Or maybe Philippians 2:10, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth." Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:27, or maybe 2 Corinthians 6:17. You can look those up on your own time. If you're looking at the bible with shades that are itching for a fight you'll find more than enough ammunition. But if you're looking at the bible to understand God's will for God's people I think the chapter we read this morning could be a fine place to begin.

Paul knew as well as anyone else that divisions in the human family are as natural as the color of our hair, or whether we're right handed or left. And that's due in no small part to the fact that we are, pretty much, the stories we tell about ourselves. Last Sunday morning I was at the festival grounds in Milwaukee, one of probably a couple thousand congregants for the annual Mass that is celebrated as a part of Festa Italiana. You know there's not an Italian bone in my body, nor, for that matter, any obvious traces of Roman Catholic formation before a certain Italian girl became an important part of my life. But there I was as the community celebrated its identity, and I, by virtue of marrying well, found myself claiming at least some of it as my own.

The first words of the priest who presided at the mass were, "Did anyone tell you I'm *Polish*?" But he began with an invitation to all who were present to come together in a oneness that was far more important than the many ways in which we could otherwise divide ourselves, and in his casual, inviting way, I think he got precisely what the letter to the Ephesians had in mind. We're all here as guests of the One who invites us, not because we are worthy but because God wills it. Wouldn't it then be pure and simply bad manners to suggest that one or another of the guests has no business being there?

God's will for this world, at least as far as I can tell from the second chapter of Ephesians, is not to draw lines between people, marking those who are in and those who are out, those who will be saved and those who will be left behind, those who are chosen and those to be forsaken. *God's* will for this world is that where in our broken humanity we can see only divisions, at least a few begin to see the gift God intended when life first came forth from that watery chaos, "no longer

strangers and aliens” but in a word that appears only here in all the New Testament, fellow citizens of the Saints, and members of the household of God.

I suspect there’s an entire sermon to be preached just those seven words in the Greek text: that the vocabulary is so self-consciously political; that this citizenship is “of the saints”, who in Ephesians are always assumed, but never quite known; that the result is that if a census were ever taken of this world we now inhabit we wouldn’t be found out back in the stable, or in the servant’s quarters, but right there at the table. But it would all boil down to this: if God’s plan and vision for this world is that the divisions of sin might be overcome, then how, in the name of God, can we imagine that it is our task to determine those who, because they are not sufficiently like us, don’t *belong*?

Another stop in the last two weeks was at the Fox Valley Islamic Society’s mosque in Neenah, for a meal and reception for a group of folk dancers who were in the area through the sponsorship of the Lutheran Church. They were a dozen or so young people, fourteen to eighteen years old. They were Christians and Muslims who go to school together at the Evangelical Lutheran School of Hope in Ramallah. They were asked about their journey to this country, and one of the young women told of how, though their home was not twenty minutes from the international airport in Jerusalem, they had to endure a day’s journey to Amman Jordan, stopped at check points, searched, intimidated, because not all of them held Israeli passports.

Asked about the challenges of living in the refugee camps that have housed the Palestinian people for over forty years, another young woman spoke of the women who, encountering problems in child birth could not get through those checkpoints in their ambulances, and so gave birth right there. It strained my ability to believe, so I checked it out, and the American Friends Service Committee, a pretty reputable humanitarian organization, reports that as of October, 2003 52 Palestinian women have given birth at Israeli checkpoints, and a third of the infants had died.<sup>2</sup> For no other reason than that they were “thems” and not “us’s”.

I can’t imagine what is in store for those young people as they return home at a time when the violence has reached a fevered pitch. All I could think, with the letter to the Ephesians mulling in my head, is that his cannot possibly be what God has in mind. God’s will, shown to us in Jesus, is not that we take up arms, and build fences and walls, and keep *them* out, whoever *they* might be. God’s will, at least as I understand it in this letter to the Ephesians, is that we begin to see this world *without* borders, fences, or walls, but the way God first breathed life into it: one household, built on the foundation of the saints and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the cornerstone.

This is all a rant, I suppose, and I doubt that there’s much of anything you or I, or all of us together can do to untie the jumbled mess of the Middle East because we’ve heard this part of the New Testament this morning, but I suppose awareness and perspective matter. Maybe *all* of us need to listen and learn a little more about what those folk on the other sides of the fences *we’ve* built in our own lives are about. I found myself, as I drove away from that meeting at the Mosque, wanting desperately for the conversation to continue, both with Muslim sisters and brothers right here in Appleton, and those in Ramallah, too. I wanted to climb over the barriers

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.afsc.org/israel-palestine/learn/health.htm>.

of culture and language and learn a little more about the growing Spanish-speaking community in Appleton; to sit on a porch and have a soda with someone who's spent his life working on a paper machine, or maybe a greater challenge for me, to grab a cup of coffee with someone whose life has been transformed by evangelical Christianity and try to understand just how that faith moves in their life.

In short, I found myself longing to see this world as God must see it: broken, divided, pained, but still and most passionately beloved, driven not by suspicion but by compassion; bound, not as those who march inexorably toward death, but as those who dance their way into life. I found myself wanting—longing—for precisely what Ephesians promises: that *all* the us's and all the thems might be gathered together as citizens with the saints in the household of God. And then my eye strayed back up the page—verse eight if you're following along. “For by grace you have been saved through faith”. Not “will be saved” or even “are being saved”. This verb is in the perfect passive tense. It's over and done with. “and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God!”

The world for which we long is already there for the taking. That's what the letter to the Ephesians insists. It's bought and paid for by God in Christ. The question, I suppose, is whether we have the courage to imaginatively embrace the reality God extends, building “Peace not Walls”, as the slogan of the program that brought those youth from Palestine into our midst proclaims. Might it even be that this is precisely the church God is calling *us* to be in *this* time, and in *this* place?

Let us pray.