

You know—NO ONE is more surprised than I am when I choose to preach on Paul. No one.

Paul sometimes writes amazing, mind-bending prose this is never forgotten—“if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation!” “We walk by faith, not by sight” “All things are lawful but not all things are helpful.” Great stuff. Important stuff. Short stuff.

Then there’s the Paul we dread reading: were the sentence goes on and on for fifteen lines and by the end we can’t remember where it all began. That Paul.

But every now and then I’m reading a scripture I’ve read a million times and I suddenly hear something new. This week was one of those weeks.

I was sitting there on Wednesday, listening to these very same scriptures and I was all set to talk about Samuel when I heard Ephesians start, and I heard it:

*Jesus 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.*

Did you hear it? It was one word that just stuck out at me. Hostility. Paul just said that often what divides us is hostility. I’d never noticed that before.

Now—there had been a lot of talk in Paul’s time about the different customs that the Jews practiced, customs that weren’t practiced by anyone else. Instead of just talking to each other about it-- trying to understand why each side held such strong opinions, and perhaps learning something about each other, each side felt they had to demean each other by using smack talk, “Uncircumcised!” “Circumcised!” Like these were bad things, instead of just different customs.

And Paul says:

Jesus has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the 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.

Why is it that our differences can cause so much hostility between us?

Differences, after all, are what make you “you” and me “me”. If this world were all like me or all like you, my goodness that would be boring, wouldn’t it? We just have to look around and we’ll see that God’s world is diverse and complicated, and full of differences.

When did “difference” become a bad thing? Probably a very long time ago.

Jesus understood that we human beings battle with our strong desire to exclude those who aren’t like us, and Jesus certainly saw this self-righteousness and arrogance, when we did it throughout his life on earth.

Jesus saw that it was far too easy for us to “other” those who either don’t look like us, don’t act like us, or don’t believe the same things as we do.

It’s almost as if we place *loyalty to our individual tribes*—whatever they may be-- over compassion and human connection. We begin to see differences as threatening. And the result? Self-imposed isolation from others, rigidity of thinking—due to no opposing input, and finally: hostility to each other.

This is a huge loss to us. Jesus taught that each person we meet, whether we like them or don't like them, whether we think they are right or wrong—each person is made in the image of God. *Imago Dei*.

Jesus showed us example after example of how we should treat each other. He treated everyone he met with respect. With dignity. He asked everyone their stories—even those who were very different from him: the rich, women, the religious leaders, the hated Samaritans. He was curious about them all and had conversations—even when the disciples couldn't understand why he did it.

And he did it not to convert them, but to understand them.

I wonder what would happen if we treated people this way? What if everyone we met, saw, talked with, or even read about became an image of God to us. Would we treat them any differently?

Abraham Lincoln spoke about this in a speech where we was trying to describe the meaning of the Declaration of Independence. This is what he said: "*Nothing stamped with the Divine Image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and [brutalized] by its fellows.*"

And who is stamped with the Divine Image? Everyone.

What if God made us different so that we could learn from each other?

What if instead of rushing to judge someone, we were instead to get to know them—ask about their life, their thoughts, their ideas.

And I'm not suggesting that we talk with people so we can convince them that we are right and they are wrong. Not at all. But how will we ever knock down these walls of hostility between us until we try and find common ground?

Jesus clearly believed that the outcasts of his time had plenty to teach his disciples, and the privileged and the powerful of his time—or he wouldn't have spent so much time listening to them, encouraging them, blessing them.

Perhaps those who are outcast in our society today can teach us all—if we are willing to listen to them. And who are those outcasts?

That's easy- they are the same people they were in Jesus' time: those deemed sick or different or poor by those of us who don't think we are any of those things.

I'll bet the poor, the sick, and the different can teach us all a thing or two about love, forgiveness, and mercy.

Understanding all people's stories and struggles requires much more time and effort than judging or condemning them, but it just might enlarge our souls.

We are all made in the image of God—we are all a part of God's world-wide diversity. Being able to listen to each other may just open our hearts, and allow Jesus – in Paul's words: to "*create in himself one new humanity... thus making peace, and ... putting to death hostility*" between us. *Amen*.