

I. Advanced Organizer

A. Watch *The Sneetches* by Dr. Seuss (approximately 5 minutes)

B. **In a series on how we do life together, called “Celebrate Together”**. But as we looked at last week, life in groups can often end up like the Sneetches, we form in-groups that define themselves in relation to other groups, and tend to view their particular groups as superior to others.

C. Jesus seems really into overcoming this group on group dynamic. He seems to be counter to McBean who encourages and exploits it. Last week, we looked at the Easter story afresh, noting some of the groundwork Jesus was laying for the gathering of people he was calling around himself; **a movement of humanity that he called “ekklesia”**. The word meant ‘assembly’. It was often used prior to Jesus’ time in social political contexts. A governing body in the city center was the *ekklesia*. But here, Jesus was calling an *ekklesia* unto himself. A new alternative assembly of people embodying his presence and mission to bring connection and redemption to all creation. **We translate this word *ekklesia* into the word “church”**.

D. In her book, *Divided By Christ*, Christina Cleveland, the author, social psychologist, and Jesus follower I mentioned last week tackles **the reality that the church itself is challenged by these seemingly innate very human group-on-group dynamics**. Despite whatever Jesus might have hoped, **we struggle both in our local communities as well as in our understanding of the global church, not to break into sub groups that define themselves against other groups**. She starts out her book talking about the various perspectives that many Christians seem to have on who are the “good Christians”, the ones we’d happily associate with and claim as our own, and who are the “bad Christians”, the ones we feel the need to distance ourselves from as much as possible, sometimes quite loudly. Sadly, it’s not that different from the Sneetches.

1. In the case of the church, **the stars on our bellies may be more theological or they may be more stylistic but these various cultural identities can have weight in how we value whatever group we’re a part of, or whatever group we don’t perceive ourselves as being part of**. Often these dynamics are more subtle than a public statement on a hot button issue or a denominational split; though those things happen too. But the internal church division can be just as powerful when someone feels iced out in their local community because their perspective doesn’t fit the majority view in that particular group. It may not be an intentional slight not to include their view, but it can feel like a slight, nonetheless. **Overtime, those slights can build up and ultimately communicate unwelcome**.

2. But **Christina Cleveland is convinced that the church is called to do better**. To work towards more acceptance and unity, within itself, even with a hugely diverse set of opinions, beliefs and expressions that this assembly unto Jesus is composed of. She sensed that this diverse unity would be a witness to the rest of the world. And in this understanding, she seems to be in alignment with the earliest leaders of the *ekklesia*.

E. **One of the people in the era of the early church who was most convinced that the church was not meant to be just another group to set against others, or a community that preferences certain identities and not others**, was an intense, passionate, law abiding Jew named **Saul**. History would remember him as the **Apostle Paul**.

1. In Paul’s era, the biggest **group on group angst** was over the question of what the Spirit was doing in the wake of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, to **bring Gentiles, or non Jewish people, into the community of God**.

2. This was a huge question with really important implications for the culture of the young *ekklesia*. **Those who believed fervently that God may be welcoming gentiles, but part of**

that welcome included adopting certain core Jewish practices got to that place quite **logically and faithfully**. It wasn't just that they were overly scrupulous or intentionally racist. It's that for hundreds of years the story of their faith had been that God had called out a people unto himself and marked them as unique and different than the other peoples around them. **God had given them a group identity that distinguished them as the people of Yahweh**; the people who lived unto the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.

3. There were **three particularly powerful and visible distinctives** that set the Jewish people apart from their non-Jewish neighbors and marked them as the children of Abraham - (1) **they were circumcised** when most men in the ancient world were not, (2) **they kept kosher**, not eating certain foods that others ate, and (3) **they quite seriously kept the Sabbath**, developing practices around how they rested as a community unto Yahweh. For those like Paul who had been raised Jewish, these practices were equal to worship and obedience to God. So of course some believed if Gentiles were now being welcomed into the community of God, it would still come with these expectations: that they two were circumcised, that they kept kosher, that they practice the Sabbath the way orthodox Jews practice it.
 4. **But the question became: are those really non-negotiables.** Let's be honest: *baptism becomes a harder sell when a knife and a private part are involved*. And anyone who's tried to do a major lifestyle change in regards to their *diet*, knows what a challenge that can be. And its one thing to take the day off from work when your whole city shuts down from commerce. *It's another when that choice in community could come with financial costs or even religious persecution.*
 5. Peter, Paul, and others ended up leading the young church to take a stance that **made space for Jewish followers of Jesus to remain solidly Jewish in their practice of faith, while non-Jewish followers of Jesus could be included and worship him without adopting these cultural norms**. This debate is the context for the writing of Paul we're gonna look at today.
 6. Disclaimer, **we're not talking about Jews and non-Jews now**. Focus is 1st century Judaism.
- II. Against all that backdrop, Paul gives us this: (Ephesians 2:11-22)
- A. 11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 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. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 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. 15 He 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, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.**

B. Three Invitations Paul is extending the church in Ephesus, (and also us).

1. Move from either/or thinking to both/and thinking.

- a) **Paul is intentionally calling both Jews and Gentiles not to be bound by those binary classifications** - two choices - Jew or Gentile. Circumcision or non-circumcision.
- b) Ultimately, those are human categories. Circumcision a task performed by humans. Not universal or divine, even if the human activity has divine origins, that are useful for connection with God.
- c) **This is for those who are near, and those who God is drawing near.**
 - (1) Language of drawing near is intentional, and likely a play off of Ancient Hebrew. In Hebrew, *korban* is the word for “sacrifice” - the ancient worship practice practiced in Israel of sacrificing an animal to Yahweh. The literal meaning of that word *korban*: “come near” or “close”. In a sense, Paul is drawing on this imagery to say that Israel was already near to Yahweh, they’ve been practicing worship to draw them to Yahweh for generations, but now, Jesus had made a new way for others to come near. He was a new sacrifice for non-Jews. Bringing those who once were outside the bounds of God’s family in.
- d) We get a sense that Paul understands what’s happening in Jesus work not as a replacement to what God was doing in Israel. **Rather it’s a development.** In Jesus there is both a **fulfillment of what had long been expected in the hope of a Messiah, and an *extension***, an invitation to more cultures to come in to the family of God through Jesus.
 - (1) As I mentioned earlier. Paul himself came to Jesus as a fervent practicing Jew. He says it himself this way in his letter to the church in Phillippi, ***“I was circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I lived according to the law as a Pharisee.... According to the righteousness stipulated in the law I was blameless.”***
 - (2) Further, there is much reason, looking at his writings and his actions in the book of Acts, to believe that **he did not abandon his Judaism, even as he believed that Jesus was the Messiah that fulfilled it.** He continued to keep kosher. He continued to keep the Sabbath as a faithful Jew. He had his mentee, Timothy, circumcised. Even as a Jesus-follower who believed his ultimate hope was totally centered in Jesus, he maintained his cultural practices as an observant Jew his whole life. But **He could also imagine a faith community in which Jews lived as full observant Jews and non-Jews came with their own distinct cultural practices and they together were one humanity, united in Jesus.**
 - (3) To be sure, **this wasn’t easy.** Much of the conflict we see in the New Testament between the early Jesus-followers is rooted in the complexity of working this out. What are the essentials? What are the non-essentials? How do we know?
 - (4) I wonder if part of the tension was in part due to **the real tension between the new and the old. The tradition and the development.** Many of us who are Gentile, may just accept that God has brought us in, and never take the time to think about **what it might have been like for sincere Jewish Jesus-followers** when the stories were just starting to eek out that the Spirit was coming on Gentiles like Cornelius too. When they hear that Peter and Paul are defending these uncircumcised ones keeping their foreskins in tact, they might wonder what place they, as **good circumcised Jewish followers of Rabbi Yeshua have in this new thing.** They’ve simply been faithful all along. They don’t see themselves as necessarily a part of the

new thing that God is doing amongst the Gentiles. Maybe they feel left behind.

Wonder, “Am I still apart of this too”?

(a) **Perhaps this is some of what Jesus was communicating in his story of the older brother and the Prodigal Son.** Remember the story: one brother cashes in his inheritance from his father and then blows it all. When he returns with his head hung low, ready to beg his dad’s forgiveness and return as his servant, Dad welcomes him back with a feast. **But the older brother doesn’t want to be at that party. He resents it. “I’ve been here all along. Where’s my party?” Maybe some of us can relate to this.**

(5) As God is opening up issues of marginalization in the church and challenging us on growing in inclusion - **is it just for the marginalized? Or is church as much still a space for majority culture folks too?** Like the Father to the two sons, God may be saying, “you’ve always had my heart and my resources too.” It’s not an either/or. It’s a both/and.

e) **Reality is, we need a plurality of voices to best hear Jesus....Gay and Straight.** Female and Male. Liturgical and evangelical. Social justice oriented and Holy Spirit oriented. People of Asian descent, African descent, Pacific Islander descent, Latina descent and European descent. Never Either/or. More and more degrees of Both/and.

2. Identify our own dividing walls of hostility and submit them to the cross.

a) Paul is clear that Jesus is initiating a new way of relating. A way not bound by what he calls dividing walls of hostility, but centered in the opposite of hostility - peace in Jesus.

(1) “He is our peace,” Paul said. This was a counter cultural statement.

(2) **In contrast to Pax Romana - “Peace In Strength”/“Peace in Victory”.** The motto written on their coins. Peace through the application of violence. We make peace by killing the opposition.

(a) **Jesus was doing something different.** He surrendered himself to the violence in order to abolish system of oppressing others through violence to “keep the peace”. **His peace is rooted ultimately in his self-giving love for us and the self-giving love he invites us into for one another.** Self-sacrificial love of the cross.

(3) For Paul, this meant that Jews and Gentiles could no longer use their metrics of measuring foreskin, or diet, or days off to justify division and hostility. That division and hostility was submitted to the work of Jesus on the cross. And **that submission applies today as much as it did then.**

b) **What are our dividing walls of hostility?** Don’t have to be the big identity markers talked about in our secular, political conversations: race, orientation, gender identity, though it can be.

(1) More about theological emphasis - is the gospel about personal salvation or social justice?

(2) Faith practice, style of worship: guitars or orgs? hymns or gospel songs?

c) **We all have them. And this is an area where the need to confess our judgments, and seek forgiveness and reconciliation is key.** The word we translate “sin” means literally, “missing the mark”. Not hitting what God intends. Any time we devalue other members of Jesus’ family, what Paul calls the Body of Christ, we’re missing the mark. **We are in a sense in some way sinning against Jesus’ body, which we purport to be a part of.**

d) Name these areas of hostility we carry, so we can be free of the power of them. Remember the Sneetches. McBean is like the enemy, sowing accusation and division,

profiting off of it, while playing us for fools. But **Jesus is saying there is something bigger**. Something more powerful to get caught up in, and the pathway is through laying down the parts of us that hold so tightly to being right and someone else being wrong. **a continue path of self awareness, confession, healing and growth.**

(1) **Think about Blue Ocean** - distinctive of being ecumenical, drawing from the best of all the quadrants of Christian faith, circling center. But it can be a fine line between celebrating that and looking down at others who aren't there. We've now somehow got the corner on Christian faith, Ours is the best way to be.

(a) Fine line between celebrating the part of the body you are, and looking down on another part of the body.

(2) **Have to remember the Both/and**. If we didn't have all the churches doing what they're doing, we wouldn't have anything to draw on. We can have sincere disagreements, passionate and sincere, and we should, and **still value those we disagree with as brothers and sisters, a part of our same family**.

(a) often the way we disagree seems to forget that we are family; or chooses to disbelieve that we are family.

i) Vicky Beeching

3. **Take our place in building the Temple of Community.**

a) **Paul ends with the image of God building a temple out of Jesus-centered community**. This is an image that would have had real power for both Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus.

(1) **For the Jews - temple in Jerusalem. Place where God dwells on earth**. You go there to worship, to draw near to God. Impressive structure. But also can be torn down and destroyed, as all buildings can. It had been before, and it would be again.

(2) **For the Gentiles - temple of Artemis in Ephesus**.

b) **This is a different kind of temple**. No longer is it a brick and mortar majestic building but a community of people that inhabit the presence of God. God present in any location. All that is needed is Jesus-entered community. I've experienced that audit's changed my life.

(1) **praying for one another**; hearing from God as we pray and listen to Jesus communally

(2) **moments in worship** when all of a sudden it's like the veil between heaven and earth has become thin, sense God's presence in the midst

(3) less spiritual: **folks showing up to clean someone's house; help them move**

(4) **friend has a financial need**: group bands together to help; meeting practical needs and showing our friends they're not alone

(5) And Jesus is also in those moments of scales falling from our eyes, of **us lovingly having hard conversations that push us to understand another more and honor Jesus at work amongst us**. Sometimes this is painful work. I've had more hard conversations in the last year than any other time in my life. Having to hear ways I've hurt others. Ways I've let others down. Requires us to notice logs in our eyes and remove them. But **when we do, we find afresh the power of mercy and grace**. And hope for freedom. On the other side of those hard conversations, there is real collective identity in Jesus.

c) Christina Cleveland - **the hope for division in the church is when we submit our sub-group identities to the bigger identity of the Body of Christ**. You and Me becomes we.

(1) Much research done by social psychologists, when we can move from “us” and “them” to “we”, there’s a power. We see others with more generosity, openness, care. Whatever our differences, we’re a we.

d) In the moment of being separated from one group within the church and grieving it. Image of the big, beautiful, bloody body of Christ. A body filled with self-inflicted wounds, but a body that was being redeemed and would rise again, perfected.

C. As we close, invite Jesus to do these things in each of us, as well as our community, and our connection to the rest of the church.

1. Help us move from either/or to both/and thinking.
2. Help us confess our dividing walls of hostility and submit them to the cross, entering into the same self-sacrificial love Jesus demonstrated for us and all of our brothers and sisters.
3. Allow our community to be part of the temple of God. May this Haven participate in the havens God has been inhabiting for millennia and will continue to inhabit.