

## **UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED, WE FALL**

### **Genesis 3:8-19**

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

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

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

## MESSAGE:

Several years ago Karen and I took a trip to Gettysburg where we went on a guided tour of the battlefield and listened to several lectures about the battle itself. It was a fascinating experience, but it did bring home to us the terrible ravages of war: one two-day battle resulted in almost 60,000 casualties. We learned about some of the military leaders of the Civil War: Lee, Meade, Grant, Stonewall Jackson, Sherman, Jeb Stuart. We listened to Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address and were moved by its power and eloquence.

We also listened to a speech of Lincoln which has always fascinated me even more than his Gettysburg Address, and that is his 2<sup>nd</sup> inaugural address. The war was still raging when he gave that speech and he committed the Union to win the war—whatever the cost. The speech contains a number of quotations from the Bible, probably the most famous of which is his citing of Jesus' words: "*A house divided against itself cannot stand.*" Now while Lincoln was applying those words to our nation, which was divided by war, they could easily be applied to all of human history because war has been dividing the nations of the world ever since the tower of Babel. And wars still go on—and on.

The Palestinians and the Israelis are in continual tension. There is tension between America and China and between North and South Korea. In Africa, hatred between tribes periodically erupts into violence: the genocidal war between Hutus and the Tutsis several years ago claimed nearly a million lives. THIS WORLD is a house divided against itself. Ever since Cain murdered Abel, the spirits of conquest, war, economic chaos and death have ridden roughshod over the earth.

There are divisions in the religious world as well—not only divisions *between* religious bodies but *within* religious bodies. Within Islam, Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds hate each other almost as much as they collectively hate Jews and Christians. The Episcopal Church is divided between those who accept the Bible's position on homosexuality and those who reject it. The rift is so great that there is a very real possibility that the fourth largest Christian denomination in the world will be torn apart. The same issue threatens the unity of the Methodists, the Presbyterians and our Lutheran brothers and sisters in the ELCA. Even within our own Synod battles are sometimes fought over worship styles and communion practices. No group—Jew, Gentile, black, white, poor, rich, believer, unbeliever is immune to powerful forces that produce division.

Divisiveness creeps into our personal lives as well. Husbands and wives fight over what should spent on what and who should discipline the children. Parents fight with their children over grades and clothing and curfews. In the business world, management and labor quarrel over wages and benefits and job security. We fight with retailers and manufacturers over products we buy that don't work, with insurance companies that won't pay claims, and with schools over what they are teaching our children.

It seems like we're fighting with someone all of the time. Then, in order to relax, we like to watch people fight with each other in sports and blow each other up in movies. We may hate having conflict in our lives, but that doesn't stop us from seeking it out as entertainment.

Once there was harmony. Harmony between man and God, harmony between man and woman, harmony between man and creation, harmony within man himself. But sin destroyed these harmonies and replaced them with discord and divisiveness. Fellowship between man and God was replaced by rebellion on man's part and judgment on God's part. Man's original desire to love and serve his neighbor was replaced by a desire to exalt himself over his neighbor. The desire to *win* seized humanity by the throat.

Harmony between husband and wife devolved into a power struggle over who was in control of the marriage. Man's desire to work and tend the earth was replaced by a desire to exploit it, and the earth responded by producing thorns and weeds. Man's inner harmony and peace gave way to shame and guilt and anxiety.

A perfectly harmonious creation was transformed into a world which seems to be moving steadily toward chaos. As the Irish poet William Butler Yeats put it: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

Once there was a man who had lost his grown daughter to suicide. He went out to Colorado to attend her funeral. He tried to comprehend what had led her to destroy herself. She had graduated from college with honors, earned a law degree, secured an excellent job and had good friends. Then she killed herself. As he drove along the western slope of the Rockies, looking at the breathtaking beauty of snowcapped mountains under a clear blue sky, he wondered: *"How could someone who lived in the middle of so much beauty and had so much going for herself fall into such despair that she was driven to suicide?"*

A hymn came to mind: *"Our own land's fairest breezes, bear sounds of steeple bells; All nature's beauty pleases, yet man builds countless hells."* Then he remembered something Henry David Thoreau had written: *"Most people live lives of quiet desperation."*

In this fallen world, where sin touches everything and ruins everything it touches, where the image of God has been all but erased from creation and our own hearts, there is much hell to pay. How in the world can we find harmony again? How in the world can we find peace? The short and simple answer is: there is nowhere in this world where we can find peace.

The only place we can find peace is in a relationship with God, through His Son, Jesus Christ. And that is the subject of our Epistle lesson for today, taken from Paul's letter to the members of the church at Ephesus: how and where we can find peace. This is one of the more difficult passages in Paul's letters and it challenges our powers of understanding. Even Peter wrote about Paul that, *"He writes some things that are difficult to understand."* Paul had received heavenly visions and revelations from the Lord, "inexpressible things" as he called them, and sometimes he struggled to convey the heavenly knowledge he'd received in terms of human language.

But it's worth the effort to understand him, so let's have a go at it: *"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision"...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise,*

*without hope and without God in the world.*” Paul, a Jew, is addressing the Gentiles (those outside the Jewish faith), reminding them that they were not originally God’s people.

In the Old Testament, God chose the Israelites to be His people and promised to protect and to bless them—but he did not extend the same blessing to the Gentiles. In Paul’s own words, Gentiles were *“...excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”* *“But now,” Paul writes, “in Christ Jesus you [Gentiles] who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”*

The words “far away” and “near” have great significance in the Old Testament. Gentiles were commonly referred to as those who were “far away” from God, while the Israelites were said to be “near” to God. This was not a matter of where one stood physically on the face of the earth but of where one stood in relation to God. One was either “far away from God” or “near to God” and “near to God” was a better place to be. And now, Paul says, the Gentiles who had always been “far away” have been brought “near” by the blood of Christ.

By his sacrifice on the cross, Christ had removed all the sins of both Jews AND Gentiles, making them ALL his chosen people. Because of this divine sacrifice, nothing now divides man and God because the House of God is never divided against itself. Man can now be at peace with his Creator. The original, basic harmony—harmony between man and God—has been restored. God and man are no longer at odds; God has received us back into perfect fellowship. As people who have been accepted into God’s family; we are His children and as children we are heirs of all that God has made. God is no longer our judge but our advocate; no longer our master but our loving Father.

And now the most important part of what Paul is trying to tell us: *“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.”* What Paul calls “the dividing wall of hostility” referred specifically to the wall that stood in the temple precincts in Jerusalem, preventing Gentiles from proceeding from the outer court (the “court of the Gentiles” as it was called) into the inner courts. There were signs posted on this wall in Greek and Latin which warned Gentiles that if they proceeded further, they did so on pain of death. But in a broader sense, “the dividing wall of hostility” referred to the social and psychological barriers that existed between Jews and Gentiles.

The Jews’ sense of superiority over the Gentiles and the Gentiles’ resentment and jealousy toward the Jews had fostered hostility between the two groups since the time of Abraham. But Jesus, Paul says, has destroyed this barrier. By reconciling both Jews and Gentiles to God he has reconciled them to each other.

Once the harmony between man and God has been restored, other harmonies naturally follow. Man can now have peace with his fellow man by practicing the forgiveness that he has received from God through Jesus Christ. By forgiving each other’s sins, we can have peace with each other. Husbands and wives can have peace in the Lord. Children and parents can have peace in the Lord. Perhaps most important of all, man can finally

have peace with *himself*, inner peace in the Lord. By understanding that all of his sins have been forgiven he can be rid of all his shame and guilt and anxiety.

But, this peace is available only in Christ. Jesus did not come to *proclaim* peace, or to *promise* peace: He came to BE our peace. And that means that only when we are members of His covenant community, His family, His body of believers—His communion of saints—do we experience this peace.

This is Good News of course, but it has harsh implications for those who are not part of the brotherhood of believers, the communion of saints. If peace, true and lasting peace, can be found only in Christ, then it is futile to look for it outside of Christ. This means, unfortunately, exactly what history clearly shows: that peace outside of Christ is a vain wish in a fallen world.

Where there is no forgiveness, there can be no peace, because the power to forgive comes only from Spirit of the One who IS our peace: Christ the Lord. In Christ we stand united; without Him we are divided and we fall.

Amen.