Heart Problem

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 2:11-22

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The mass shooting in Las Vegas has been heavy on our hearts this week. Everybody is searching for a motive. What would provoke someone to open fire into a crowd of concert-goers? While I welcome the opportunity to debate gun control, this problem goes deeper than Second Amendment rights and gun laws.

Jesus said, “Out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander” (Matthew 15:19). External laws will not solve the problems of the human heart. The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

Paul addresses the heart problem head-on in today’s Scripture lesson. The controversy centers on Jew-Gentile relationships. There were two classes of people in Paul’s day: Jew and Gentile.

The Jews were the chosen people of God. God chose the Jews for a mission of sharing God’s good intentions with Gentiles, non-Jews, heathens in need of God’s covenantal love.

There was bad blood between Jews and Gentiles back in the day. Solomon built an extravagant temple to the Lord in the 10th century. The Babylonians proceeded to level it but King Herod had the Jerusalem temple rebuilt prior to the time of Christ. Gentiles had access to the outer courtyard yet were prohibited from entering the inner court of the temple. A stone unearthed in 1871 in Jerusalem dates back to the second temple era. It served as a warning to Gentiles, “No foreigner (Gentile) may enter within the
balustrade (fence) around the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his death, which will follow.”

Gentiles predominate in the Ephesus church. This explains why Paul addresses them by name in verse 11: “Therefore, remember that you who are Gentiles by birth [the word “remember” is key] remember that you were excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenant of promise” (2:11). Paul wants his Gentile readers to show respect for salvation history that comes through the Jews. In verse 12, he reminds them, “You were without hope and without God” (atheos is the Greek word where we derive our English word atheist).

“But now in Christ Jesus you who have been far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). Everything turns on the conjunction but and the words that follow it, “But now in Christ….” We saw the same pattern in last Sunday’s text, “We were dead in transgressions but God…made us alive together with Christ” (2:4-5).

The prepositional phrase “in Christ” is a common way for Paul to express our relationship with Christ. It appears a hundred times in Paul’s writings. The preposition in portrays location. Believers are in Christ. We live in Christ just as he lives in us.
“He is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14). Christ brokers peace between two warring factions. He breaks the barriers down. He has dismantled the wall of the temple and abolished the law’s ceremonial customs. He has made two groups into one group.

“He came and preached peace to you who were far away [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (2:17-18). In verse 18, Paul references all three members of the Trinity—through Christ, we have access to the Father by means of the Holy Spirit. Access refers to someone who has been given an audience with a high-ranking king or emperor.

A Kentucky delegation came to Washington to seek an audience with President Lincoln but were unsuccessful. In truth, Lincoln was avoiding them. He knew their request was something he could not possibly fulfill. Tad, the president’s son, happened to be playing outside at the White House. He overheard this Kentucky delegation voicing their disappointment over not having access to “Old Abe.” Tad decided to
do something about it. He went up the back staircase of the White House and said to his father, “Papa, may I introduce some friends to you?” He proceeded to usher into the Oval Office the same men Lincoln had been avoiding all week. Tad had access to the president just as Jesus Christ gives us access to God the Father.

“So then” marks a decided shift in our passage. “So then” is Paul’s way of concluding this passage. “So then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (2:19-20).

Paul utilizes three different metaphors in this closing section. First, he calls his readers “fellow citizens.” They share a common citizenship in the kingdom of God. Second, he calls them, “members of God’s household.” They share the same family as brothers and sisters in the faith. Third, he shifts to a building metaphor by describing them as built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone. The cornerstone was the first stone in a masonry building. It had to be square and vertical so every other stone could be set in relationship to this cornerstone.

“In him [notice the same prepositional phrase] the whole building joins together to become a living temple where God lives by his Spirit. God will no longer live in a building
made with hands. Christ will live in this Jew and Gentile community as a sort of third way—a new humanity.

So what does this sermon have to do with my life? This passage has been rolling around in my head all week as I have thought about race relations in America. I thought, rather naively, until recently that race relations had improved in our country, after advances in the civil rights era. What was I thinking?

Take the National Football League. Quarterback Colin Kaepernick refused to stand for the national anthem in a preseason game last year. His act of kneeling was a protest against police force against black people. President Trump upped the ante when he called on NFL owners to suspend players who refused to stand for the anthem. The backlash has been furious—players in previous Sundays who have taken a knee or a seat during the playing of our national anthem.

In the summer of 2016, there was a series of fatal shootings of young black males by police officers in Louisiana and Minnesota. This led to racially motivated retaliatory measures against police officers in Dallas.

I called Vernon Walton, pastor at First Baptist, an African-American church not far from here. I asked him how he was doing in the aftermath of the shootings. We talked about our two churches. He asked me how our church addressed this issue in worship the previous Sunday. I had
to come clean with him—we did not say much of anything. His church on the other hand, showed a video in worship about how to get home safely—what to do if the police stop you.

Vernon and I had a long phone conversation that day, and we met for lunch later that same week. We talked about Black Lives Matter and racism in black and white cultures. At the end of our conversation, it dawned on us, why don’t we have this same conversation with our two churches? Two weeks later, in the dead of August, 400 people joined us for a conversation on race.

This experience taught me two things. One, Vernon has to deal with these issues all the time. He deals with them every Sunday as a member of a minority race in America. I, on the other hand, do not have to address it in quite the same way. There are certain privileges that come with being a card-carrying member of the predominant race and culture.

Second thing, race relations will only improve as we move toward each other and establish intentional relationships with each other. Laws only count for so much. Relationships matter big-time if we are going to become the new humanity that Jesus intends for us.

The picture on your screen is my favorite of this gathering. I love the racial mix. It thrills me that everyone is singing, I mean, really singing. The picture of the two children—one black and one white—warms my heart.
I do not mean to suggest by this example that race in America is only a black/white issue. Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans—the list goes on, have much to contribute if we are going to become the new humanity Jesus intends for us.

Let’s come back to what is core about the gospel. Jesus inaugurates the way into this new humanity. We are fellow citizens with each other, members of the same family, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the chief cornerstone. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians words that could pass as the Magna Carta of Christian theology: “We are neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Our allegiance to Jesus Christ supersedes every other human allegiance. Race, economic status and political party affinity take a back seat to our loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Racism in any form is unqualified evil. Any ideology that seeks to erect barriers that Christ has broken down between people is anathema to the gospel.

What can you do? Read Ephesians this week in view of racial issues in our day. Lean into this new humanity in Christ. Pray that our church would become committed to this third way. Move into relationship with someone who does not resemble you. Have a frank conversation about race with this passage in mind. Join us in our local mission related to our Ignite initiative. We seek to share the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed with speakers of other languages and recent immigrants. We are discovering that it is all about relationships.