

Sermon
29 June 2014
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

Our reading this morning was initially addressed to Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus came to earth to save everybody – to spread the message of the love of God to as many people as possible. But before that happened, it was only the Jews who believed in God.

That posed a problem later, when Christianity started to become institutionalised, because the Jews who came to faith in Jesus, were obviously still Jews, and they just made Jesus a part of their existing faith – which meant that they still obeyed all the rules and regulations they did previously.

The Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus, on the other hand, didn't have any rules and regulations to obey; faith was something completely new to them.

This resulted in some Jews wanting the Gentiles to now adhere to all their rules too – like getting circumcised in order to become a member of the family of God. But the apostle Paul tried to explain to them that *that*

wasn't necessary. If you wanted to become a member of the family of God, he said, *all* you needed was faith. Nothing else.

Because – Jesus took all the barriers between people away. All the believers, no matter who they were, what they did, or what their lives looked like before, were now one in Christ.

For *us*, this is easy to understand, because it is part and parcel of who we are as Christians today. But for the people who lived in Paul's time, this was a BIG thing.

Before Jesus came to earth, Jews and Gentiles were not allowed to mix with one another. The Jews had to exclude Gentiles from their lives completely – by law. If a Jew, for instance, came across a Gentile woman struggling in child birth, he was not allowed to help her, because that would result in bringing another Gentile into the world. If a Jew married a Gentile, the actual *funeral* of that Jew was carried out straight away, because he would be dead to his own people from that day onwards.

That's how big the divide between Jews and Gentiles were. So it's easy to understand why it took some getting used to that in Jesus God showed that he loved *all* of them.

For the Jews, history was always going *somewhere*. No matter what your present was like, your future would always be glorious. The Gentiles didn't have that same expectation, but now all of them were on their way to God together.

The metaphor used in Ephesians to explain this to them, is that of *foreigners* (or *aliens*), as opposed to *citizens* of the kingdom of heaven (or *members* of the family of God).

Where the Gentiles were previously foreigners, through Jesus, they were now citizens. They were no longer excluded from the community of God.

Now *this* is a metaphor I understand very well! Just about a month ago, my family and I became British citizens. Probably all of you here are citizens of this country, because you were born here. But because we were born in South Africa – although we decided to come live in Scotland, that didn't automatically make us citizens. We had to *earn* our citizenship. There were lots of criteria we had to meet. We needed to have lived here for a certain amount of years, without going out of the country more than a certain amount of days each year. We had to pay lots of money for visas – because without the right paperwork you can be exported in a flash. And then we also had to write exams to prove that we can speak and understand the language and have knowledge of the history of the United Kingdom and understand the workings of society here. So for 6 long years we did everything the government expected us to do, and when all the boxes were ticked, we were invited to a citizenship ceremony, where we officially became *members* of society.

Now to us, that was a BIG thing! Because where we were previously excluded from many things, we are now treated just like every other Scot! We now have all the same rights and responsibilities you have.

And that's amazing! It's only a piece of paper, but it makes life so much easier!

And that's exactly the way the Gentiles must have felt all those many years ago – not excluded anymore, part of the family of God. With the one exception, that they didn't have to earn their citizenship, they were *given* it by the grace of God. For free! How amazing!

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And that, of course, applies to all of us too – God has given us the privilege of being citizens of his kingdom, members of his family – and we don't have to do anything to deserve it.

But every person who realizes what *that* means, who realizes what a BIG thing that is, how very fortunate we are to have been given this free pass to a life with God, cannot help but to react in thankfulness. To show kindness to other just like God showed kindness to us.

No matter who we are, what we've done, where we came from – God's grace is for *all* of us. But citizenship of God's kingdom also implies certain rights and responsibilities, just like earthly citizenship does. God doesn't exclude anybody, and we shouldn't do that either. God's grace is for everybody, and therefore we have no right to exclude anybody from our church just because they think different, look different, sound different, or look at life from a different angle than we do.

God loves all of us, and therefore we should love each other in return. We shouldn't ever let anybody feel left out – because that is the exact opposite of what Jesus would do.

Have you ever been a visitor to a strange place all by yourself? And then went for a walk down the street at dusk and saw families spending time together around the dinner table, longing for what they have? And then, because it was getting dark, had the curtains drawn in your face – excluding you completely? Nobody wants to ever feel like that. It's lonely on the outside.

So let's go out of our way to include every single person we meet, to make sure that we are never the ones to draw the curtains shut in anybody else's face.

My family and I have experienced so much Scottish hospitality over the past 6 years. Nobody ever asked to see a British passport before they invited us for dinner or bought the boys a wee Christmas present. We were welcomed in this country with open arms by the people in our churches. Scottish people have a reputation for being warm, friendly and hospitable. So let's make sure that we are always like that on a spiritual level too.

I want to conclude with a story I heard a wee while ago, a story of something that happened during the war: In France some soldiers with their sergeant brought the body of a dead comrade to a French cemetery to have him buried. The priest told them gently that he was bound to ask if their comrade had been a baptized adherent of the Roman Catholic Church. They said that they did not know. The priest said that he was very sorry but in that case he could not permit burial in his churchyard. So the soldiers took their comrade sadly and buried him just outside the fence.

The next day they came back to see if the grave was all right and to their astonishment they could not find it. Search as they might they could find no trace of the freshly dug soil. As they were about to leave in bewilderment the priest came up. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow their dead comrade to be buried in the churchyard; so, early in the morning, he had risen from his bed and with his own hands *had moved the fence* to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

He had moved the fence to include the soldier. That is what love can do. The rules and the regulations put up the fence; but love moved it. Jesus removed the fences between people, because he brought us a religion founded in love.

So let's be proud and responsible citizens of the kingdom of God here on earth, people who love and people who don't exclude, so one day we can be proud and responsible citizens of the kingdom of God in heaven too.

Amen