

07.05.06 sermon
James W. Miller

The Church Book
Eph. 2:19-22

This is now the fourth in a series of sermons on the book of Ephesians. Ephesians might rightly be called the church book, because here is the Apostle Paul, at the end of his life, writing a letter to reflect on all that the church means to him. This is just a couple of years before Emperor Nero would have him killed, and he is now writing from a prison in Rome.

It's kind of like a Pastor's retirement sermon. He's thinking back over all that his life has meant, and what matters most to him is the church. Unlike Paul's 12 other letters in the New Testament, where he always seems to be responding to some crisis or question, here Paul writes out of his deepest feelings, and they are of love for the church.

And there's one thing that stands out most to Paul about the church. It's the thing that shocked him most in the course of his lifetime. It's the thing that he most fought against as a younger man. It's the thing that most amazes him as an older man. I'll tell you what it was in a minute.

But first, I want to say a little more about the author of this letter we've been studying and then about the recipients of this letter.

Paul was in the Jewish tradition. The highlight of all of Jewish history was when King David sat on the throne in Jerusalem. Good king, high walls, a place to worship God.

His son, King Solomon, trusted his diplomacy more than his faithfulness and made political arrangements with all of the foreign kingdoms to keep the peace. You know, marry a princess here, build an altar to a foreign god there, marry another princess here, start a trade route there, marry another princess for good measure. As a result of all of his diplomatic idolatry, God decided to let the kingdom fall apart, and it was never so good again. They always looked back longingly at King David and angrily at King Solomon (Neh. 13:26).

Towards the end of the Old Testament, there are movements of renewal, people who said, "We will NEVER mess things up like Solomon again. We will never accept foreigners into our midst again."

You have to get a real feel for what this was like. Picture a young, idealistic college student home for the first summer vacation, like some who are here today, and you know, after your freshman year, you're really on your way to knowing everything. You college students, answer me this: do you or do you not now know more than your parents? Of course you do.

Picture this college student at the dinner table, explaining to his parents how their politics are wrong, and their religion is archaic, and how the previous generations missed the boat on caring for the environment. Because, listen college students, you know for sure that everyone over the age of 30 has already sold out, don't you? Of course you do. That unflinching idealism characterized movements in Judaism at the end of the Old Testament.

They said, "We will not intermarry with foreign cultures the way King Solomon did. We will not worship other gods. We will remain separate from other cultures. We will be pure. Only then will God restore the kingdom we once had, the good old days."

Some of them even began to call themselves Parushim, "the separated ones," known in the gospels as Pharisees.

The Apostle Paul calls himself a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5). He was one of these young idealists who was not going to let his people and his religion get polluted by foreigners again the way King Solomon had let it get polluted.

When the Pharisee Paul, this young idealist, heard about a Jewish sect that were worshipping a man who had claimed to be the Messiah, someone named Jesus, he saw them as polluting the Jewish faith. They were now outsiders destroying the true faith. And when they captured one named Stephen, and he preached this false new faith called Christianity, they killed him by hurling stones at him, and this passionate young man Paul looked on. No impurity allowed.

That's our author today.

Now here's who the letter is written to. I want to show you some slides of Ephesus, because Ephesus is one of the best-preserved cities of the Bible.

[SCREEN COMES DOWN]

Ephesus was a lot like Honolulu. It was a major metropolitan area, a sea port, in modern day Turkey. And the traders from the West and East,

as far as England to India, would trade goods back and forth to one another through Ephesus. In that way, it was like Honolulu, a center of culture.

[SLIDE OF THE AGORA]

Here's the Agora, the shopping area, that looked like one of the huge street markets you see in Southeast Asian countries today, where vendors lined the streets. Ephesus was the world capital of slave trade. It had hot and cold public baths. It had a brothel, which we know from some of the statues found in the brothel, which I will not show you. It had the first known advertisement.

[SLIDE OF ADVERTISEMENT]

The foot on the ground was a direction marker telling men to turn there if they were looking for the brothel. And of course, like all modern cities, Ephesus had the first men's restroom.

[SLIDE OF TOILETS]

Ephesus had a theater that sat 25,000 people.

[SLIDE OF THEATER]

In Ephesus, like Honolulu, there were a blend of races and religions, a blend of politics and personalities. There was a temple to the goddess Artemis at Ephesus which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple was described by an observer:

"I have seen the walls and Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon, the statue of Olympian Zeus, the Colossus of Rhodes, the mighty work of the high Pyramids and the tomb of Mausolus. But when I saw the temple at Ephesus rising to the clouds, all these other wonders were put in the shade." (Philo of Byzantium)

And the Artemis business brought a lot of money to Ephesus. There were more silver statues of Artemis for sale in the Ephesus markets than there are shell leis at the Aloha Stadium markets in the morning.

Paul, this angry purist, passed through Ephesus preaching a new faith, a faith that he had adopted after persecuting its followers, a faith called Christianity.

And when he did, the followers of Artemis rounded Paul and his buddies up in this theater, and one of them made a speech that went,

“Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

And they shouted for two hours, MEGAS, ARTEMIS, EPHEBUS!
“Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Paul escaped with his life. (Acts 19)

So understand what it’s like for this author and this audience to come together. You have a strict purist, who will not deal with foreigners, because their false gods had corrupted his entire people and made them lose their kingdom. And that young idealist settles down to live for three years in Ephesus, the center of false gods and foreigners, brothels and bad influences. He stands in this theater so that his faith can square off with the faiths of the world.

What in the world is Paul doing here?

[RAISE THE SCREEN]

Understand, this is like your Grandma hanging out in the night clubs in Waikiki. And given that Paul had previously gone around killing people for messing up the Jewish faith, this was a pretty angry Grandma.

Now we can get back to that one thing I told you at the beginning most fascinated Paul about the church. Something had happened to this intense young man that brought him to be this powerful Christian preacher. He went from being Christianity’s muzzle to being its megaphone.

What amazed Paul about the church was that people of different races, families, and traditions could have such powerful unity when they knew Jesus. He fought against it as a young man. He was enthralled with it at the end of his life.

Listen to today's text again:

19Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Paul found Jesus. As Paul began to discover the world of Jesus, he found something he had never found before.

This God of Paul's DID want him to be pure. But he wasn't going to be pure by keeping foreigners out. He was going to be pure by letting outsiders in. Only within the Christian faith could impure hearts be healed and made pure.

It's like this. Imagine you decide to form a club in which you will let in only the most trustworthy, loyal, and friendly of people. First you decide you'll only let in Christians, because hey, they should be trustworthy. But then you realize that there are a lot of people in the world who go to church who don't really mean it, so you decide to make the circle smaller. So you decide to only let into your club people from your own local church. But then you think, well there are a couple of people at church that I try not to sit too close to. So then you make the club only for people in your row. Look down your row right now. Come to think of it, some of the people in your row look a little corrupt, don't they? In the end, you are the only one left who qualifies to join the club. But even then, are you sure the people in the club are always trustworthy?

That was Paul's mindset before he became a Christian. He wanted to be part of a club of only the most pure of people. He was willing to kill off any threats to it. In the end, though, his heart was unsatisfied.

Now let's change your club a little bit. Instead of cutting out the impure, the goal of your club is to bring in people who are not yet trustworthy, loyal and friendly, but one at a time, you're going to teach them to be those things. You've kind of stopped being a club, and started being a school. But before long, you may let back in a few of those people in your row right now. Then again, maybe they will decide to let you in.

This is what the good news of Jesus Christ did to Paul. He never lost his passion for purity, he just came to believe that the church wasn't

as likely to be corrupted by the world as the world was to be corrected by the church.

A century after Paul preached there, Ephesus was around 90% Christian.

This is a message for the church in America today. The Christian church is not about finding a safe circle of shared values and circling the wagons. It's about values are so strong that you can't keep them in.

Now look down your row. Is it filled with people who have the same kind of job as you or different? Did they grow up in the same kind of family? Did they used to be a part of the same religious worldview? Have they been in prison the same number of times as you? First Prez. has a habit and a history of gathering within the faith of Jesus a wide mix of people. That's the faith that took Ephesus.

The church that could take Ephesus can take Honolulu.

Christianity isn't a gathering of the pure trying to keep everyone else out. Christianity is a gathering of the lost who have been welcomed in together.

You, today, may be someone who feels like you have been kept far from God. You may feel like the church is the last place you belong. You may feel like if people knew who you really were, you wouldn't be welcomed here. Not this church. This is the church that took Ephesus. This is the church that will take Honolulu. You are welcome here.

You may be someone who wishes the world were more pure than it is, safer for your kids. It won't happen by Christians circling the wagons to keep others out. It will happen by sitting in the middle of a city of Artemis worshippers and brothel-goers, and preaching a message that is stronger than the messages of this world. Don't hide from Ephesus. Take it.

In just a minute we celebrate the meal that Jesus taught his disciples to share. In it, we remember that Jesus died for those who were far from God. As Ephesians 2 says, we are brought near through the blood of Jesus.

In this meal, we are one, insiders and outsiders, those who newly believe, and those who were practically born believing, those who have lived well, and those who have failed in every way. No one is too pure or too impure that they cannot be brought together by the forgiving love of Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross. So believe, and come to the table.

07.04 sermon
Jim Miller

Ephesians: 1st sermon

One in Christ

11Therefore, remember that formerly you who are **Gentiles by birth** and called "**uncircumcised**" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)— 12remember 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. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been **brought near through the blood of Christ.**

14For he himself is our peace, who has **made the two one** and has **destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,** 15by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to **create in himself one new man out of the two,** thus making peace, 16and in this one body to **reconcile both of them to God through the cross,** by which he put to death their hostility. 17He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18For **through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.**

19Consequently, you are **no longer foreigners and aliens,** but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.