

Ephesians 2:11-22

The New Humanity

I wonder if this is a time to stop and take a walk around the lake and see who we are and how we are with each other. We used to focus on the quality of our relationships before we took communion in the past in my experience. Pausing and looking over our life and our church life and what it has become is a good practice.

After church today, you probably take the same route home, right? Or to a restaurant, maybe? We could probably drive it with our eyes closed. Don't try that. We might park in the same spot. I parked in a different spot, a block away from Salina Menn. Church the other Sunday and as I walked to the church I noticed things I had missed just driving by and parking beside the church. Notice I didn't mention how we sit in church. When we do or think the same thing over and over again our neuropathways actually become like those dirt or sand roads around here that after a rain become deeply rutted and you stay exactly in the rut because that's what you do.

That's why it can be helpful to take a walk around the lake and see from a new view. Pick a lake you have been to or one you imagine and start walking. As we walk, we hold the question, I wonder what Jesus really had in mind when he came to this earth and showed us how to live? Did he come to promote infighting in the church?

As I walk around the lake, (I'm imagining Lake Harriet in Minneapolis where Robert and I walked a lot) I look back at where I came from and I wonder if what is going on in the church today is what Jesus had in mind. Jessica Grose recently wrote a series about the religiously unaffiliated. The *New York Times* writer invited responses from people who had left organized religion, asking them questions including what now took the place of religious practice in their lives. In the more than 7,000 responses she received, the most common answers were meditation and enjoying the outdoors.¹

Some people avoid using the word church and how it has become an institution at times.

The ekklesia or church is referring to a reconciled community, not an institution, a community that co-belong. We are different than a business in that we are a people in covenant with each other. In many faith communities, they pass the peace with each other. At the end of meetings we care if we are at peace with each other. The church is to have something that is countercultural. Maybe it is hard for people to see this.

¹<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/my-childhood-congregation-was-progressive-christian-dream-come-true>

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Paul spent a lot of his time in communities that were bringing two cultures together to live as followers of Jesus. Paul tells the believers in Ephesus that Christ came to be the peace that makes two hostile communities- one new humanity. Peace has already been made in Christ. If we are followers of Jesus, there is only one way-the way of peace. There is no us and them.

This letter to the Ephesians is about life within the faith communities and how we are to see each other and relate to each other..

There is no from here and not from here. There is no room for this is my church and not yours. There is no us and them even across the wide body of Christ.

There is no putting on the clothes of Christ and spreading a message of hate and saying someone has less value than another.

Keep walking on your circle around the lake. Notice the sky, feel the breeze, see the sailboats, the fish are jumping.

Remember back in Genesis in 1:26 that human beings are made in the image of God. We are all valued as beloved people of God.

Ephesians 2:14 says:“He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance.”

Can you see across the lake to where you started? Do you see any walls back there?

Walls can be used to keep people in and walls can be used to keep people out. The Great Wall of China is 13,000 miles long. It took more than 1000 years to build to keep out invaders from the North.

Germany had a wall in the 60's to keep people in mostly. That wall came down about 20 years later.

The Gentiles had to stay in the outer court of the Temple in the Court of the Gentiles. If they stepped into the inner court they could be put to death immediately so that the temple would be kept pure. They had rules they followed.

Christ came to break down barriers and the outer wall so that the Gentiles and Jews could become one new humanity.

It is time to remember.

We, as a church, as a reconciled community are to be a people of Good News, a people who knows without Christ we would not be able to see past ourselves. We sometimes fall into ruts of rules and regulations and *we forget to see the people.*

Jesus saw the people. Jesus saw those who had been dehumanized and those who were making the decisions that caused harm. In Christ, they were to become one and be made new.

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We can take a walk sometimes and look back and see if we have become so institutionalized that we have stifled creativity in the church. Have we, the church in general, become a community of covenanting together or a community of walls and rules? As a reconciled community we are to create a culture where ministry can happen easily and gifts are free to be used.

Sometimes it takes leaving what we have known to see something new.

It is still a mystery to me how I was able to finally see so many things I couldn't see when we moved from central Ohio to Hesston, Kansas when I was 35. The endless horizon, the vastness of the sky, the people I had never seen before in my life, who welcomed me and my family with open arms, all opened up a part of my soul that had been dormant, waiting for release. I left behind a lot of rules that had stifled me and I didn't know I was being stifled except for what my body was telling me.

What freedom I felt to be loved by people who weren't related to me in this new land. I have found this in so many congregations in the plains and across the country.

I'm still walking around Lake Harriet and I'm on the last mile (a lot of the Minneapolis lakes are around 3 miles) and I can see the little snack shop and the amphitheater, where there is live music on summer nights and people sit on the lawn to listen and I remember the congregations I have known that were practicing the new humanity in Christ.. They saw the people first.

This peace that Jesus brings to break down barriers reveals a new kingdom and it shows itself sometimes in surprising ways in being the new humanity. I have a story of one of those times.

STORY

Robert and I were in a transitional pastorate together one time where it was our first experience living at a high altitude and driving many mountainous inclines. On a trip to get groceries the temperature could change 20 degrees. The people at the church told us later when they saw us drive in with our little green Prius, they knew it wouldn't be good. The Prius battery died a few months in. It was getting low to begin with and we then had the opportunity to have a friend's old Suburban they didn't want. That's important. They didn't want it.

Robert barely was able to drive the Suburban back home from a few states away and right away it needed work. The exhaust manifold, the U joint on the steering column was coming apart, the rear brake caliper seized up on a drive we took and was smoking out of the wheel well, the front wheel bearing went bad and the half shaft was bad, the four wheel drive switch went out and that was why we bought it to drive in

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the mountains and then the starter locked up. We were in the church office looking out the window and there went our Suburban down Main street being towed into the shop again by the local mechanic.

This free vehicle had become quite expensive and the mechanic became quite familiar. One time when he called Robert to see if they should go ahead with the latest repair and Robert said yes and said let me get my credit card, the shop owner said, "Don't bother, I know your card number by heart."

A couple months before, we had noticed a gaudy (meaning flashy and showy, not god-like) bright red Cadillac, 2008 model maybe, the long-boat looking kind, for sale out on the lawn at the mechanic shop and it had bumper stickers on the back promoting political agenda and a Jesus Saves sticker beside that. Our Suburban wasn't getting any better and the Prius didn't have a new battery and a few people from the church stepped in and said, "We want to make a deal with you. We want you to have something reliable and not eat up all your money and there is a widow who is trying to get rid of a second car and can't seem to sell it and we are going to buy it and sell it to you for \$1000 and you can do whatever you want with it. You can drive it for a while and then sell it. No strings attached." "But," the kind church people said, "on one condition-you have to take the Suburban to the mechanic shop and leave it there."

So what car do you think it was that they offered us?

Yes, the red Cadillac. And did I mention it had a black and gold pinstripe down the sides because the owner was a huge Pittsburgh Steelers fan?

So there we were driving around the community, sailing up and down the mountain roads in the bright red Cadillac that we had kind of made fun of, driving to the church office, the retirement community. The former owner and the car had been loved by the community so we got quite a few smiles and waves.

And we swallowed our arrogance of thinking we could never ride in that thing and be like that and we decided to share the love and made a red car sign-up sheet for anyone in the church to sign up to take rides with us. As many as 4 people at a time could sign up and when they showed up on that day or evening, they could tell us where to take them and we would take them anywhere.

We had so much fun. We had so much fun with the people on those rides. We went to a lavender farm and back to a beautiful meal at their house. One ride was to three meaningful places from someone's childhood and ended up at an Amish family's home. Another ride was to the local ice cream shop and we talked for hours over ice cream. Another ride was to a restaurant by a lake and then to a scenic overlook to take in the sunset together.

That generous gift transformed us, humbled us and there were no walls to climb over to get to each other. We had had a rough beginning with that faith community. We came from different cultures and we weren't able to do the work we thought we were to do there because of conflict within the church. We were able

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to walk with them where they were and they were able to work out their conflict with each other and do some pretty creative discernment together in that year and we all learned about belonging to each other in a new way.

The peace that Jesus offers us and has already made with the world is one where we take a hard look at ourselves and we can do this together- stepping back and seeing if we have built any walls of hostility, seeing if we have looked past someone. Have we given people what they need to be creative? Have we given what they need to feel they belong and be secure?

In the first part of chapter 2 in Ephesians it says, “You let the world, which doesn’t know the first thing about living tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It’s a wonder God didn’t lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us.” And then we hear, “For it is by grace we all have been saved.” It is a gift.

In verse 15 it says again, “God created a new kind of human being because of Christ, a fresh start for everybody.”

I’ve wondered what I am to do to show a different way in this time. The way of Christ. The way of peace. Peace isn’t always passive. I wouldn’t call Jesus passive or I don’t think being a doormat describes Jesus either.

Sometimes we have to get involved. When we stand idly by when someone is being harassed or dehumanized we are building a wall too. I think it will take some courage to show that we are a reconciling community to each other and to those we meet, meaning we will stand up to injustice.

Jesus showed us so many times of seeing people that were not part of the privileged circles and by standing with them he made a powerful statement of “I see you and you are valued.”

And we are told so many times in the New Testament to “stay awake.” Wake up from your slumber! We need to stay awake and watch for opportunities to show the new kind of humanity Christ showed us and cost him his life.

And I didn’t know how to end this message because everything feels kind of hard right now. To me it is troubling and hard times. I remembered words from the meditation I gave for my mom’s funeral.

I have been missing her. She died just over a year ago at almost 98 years old. Psalm 121 was the scripture for the meditation and I reminded those of us there that it was used as a travel blessing for people on their way to the festivals in Jerusalem. As they were on a pilgrimage together they sang the words, “I lift up my

eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth... you probably know it.

And this is a little piece from the meditation from my mom's service last July. I hope the words will give encouragement to you today:

"The pilgrimage had an ending place. The people who memorized this psalm of ascent would one day make it to Jerusalem and the journey would be done.

Our journeys too will one day be over.

Know that God will sustain us in the coming and going, when we take our first breath and when we take our last.

A pilgrimage to Jerusalem was taken together. We need each other to give us glimpses of the God who is watching over us. We need people who will reach out when our foot is about to slip, when we don't feel like facing another day, when our identity is all wrapped up in our work, when we feel misunderstood and alienated, and when we can't find a safe place to call home.

We need a community who gently turns us to safe shelter, who encourages us and sometimes protects us when our lives get too intense and we need some shade. They remind us that God is leading us to a place where there will be no more harm. The community we have around us can remind us to look to the hills and get our bearings again and we remember why we are here.

Because of the great love that God has and always gives to us, the humanity who God delights in, because of that great love, we are so, so grateful.

Gratefulness is a necessity to take on our journey.

*It will lighten the load."*²

I encourage you to take a walk around the lake together and remember who we are to be in these times.

We will be stronger together.

May you be people of peace

² "Travel Blessing," Meditation for Mom's service, July 8, 2023.