

Hostility or Hospitality?

Sunday, July 19, 2015, 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Ephesians 2:11-22

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As Doug mentioned last week, most critical scholars conclude that Paul's Letter to the Ephesians was written by someone other than Paul. The letter mimics and copies parts of the Letter to the Colossians, which most scholars also believe to be written by someone other than Paul. Both Colossians and Ephesians contain major differences in language, writing style, and theology from the collection of letters for which there is a great deal of evidence to support the claim that they were written by the actual Apostle Paul aka Saul of Tarsus. These "undisputed" letters, Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1st Thessalonians, and Philemon, are generally recognized as originating by the mind and pen of Paul. And so we find that within the one collection of Paul's letters in the New Testament, there are many voices.

I'm not saying this to make a point that we should not consider Ephesians or Colossians or any of the other letters with Paul's name affixed to them but were probably not actually written by him to be worthless forgeries. They have been recognized as sacred literature for us for many centuries, informing the theology and practices of our religious tradition. I am saying, however, that we should recognize that the New Testament, like the Hebrew Bible that we also hold as sacred literature, expresses many different—and at times differing—perspectives, and that having many different expressions of faith coexisting under the umbrella of what we call Christianity is an essential element of our own tradition.

The coexistence of different ways of thinking and being within the church, however, has not always been peaceful. As we heard in today's reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, the Christian churches of the first century needed guidance concerning how they

should think and be as diverse members of one body. In the case of the Ephesians, the major issue causing division within their body was the issue of religious and ethnic diversity. For the church in Ephesus was dealing with the same challenge facing other Christian communities in the first century: How to be united communities of Jesus-followers while being diverse as Jews and Gentiles.

At the first church council in Jerusalem, held in 49 or 50 CE, it was determined that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish to be part of the movement of Jesus-followers. Gentile Christians could hold onto their identity and traditions just as Jewish Christians held onto their identity and traditions, such as the practice of circumcision. According to Acts 15, the council determined that Gentile males did not need to become circumcised and that Gentiles should “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood (Acts 15:20).” And so, from that time, there have been multiple ways of being under the one broad tent of Christianity. There have also been centuries of push-back and even rejection of the council’s decision as Christians have done a much better job of encouraging uniformity of thought and action than encouraging diversity. And we have not allowed the good message of Ephesians, that there should be no hostility within the one body of Christ, to sink in and become our way of being.

Sadly, our history is filled with accounts of hostility that Christians have shown to one another and the world around them. Councils have produced creeds and other statements of faith in order to define the beliefs of the church and promote unity, but also to other the others, to determine who belongs on the outside and who needs to be cast out of or subdued by the Church.

But we believe that the forgiveness of God is greater than our sins as individuals and communities, and that each new day provides us

with opportunities to allow God's presence to transform us into what God has called us to be. The formation and continuation of our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is a demonstration of people taking seriously our calling to demonstrate hospitality and not hostility towards others who are different than we are. And the UCC's partnership with other denominations in sharing mission efforts and clergy is another example of the church honoring its calling to celebrate both unity and diversity, as is our own congregation's mission work with other faith communities in the town of Wilton and Fairfield County. But how diverse are we gathered here willing to be?

For the last several weeks, I've been working at Norwalk Hospital as a chaplain intern. It is very interesting to see the different reactions that people have when seeing someone with a badge with big, bold letters saying CHAPLAIN enters their room. Some people dread my arrival as they think that I am bringing them some terrible news about their medical condition or the status of their loved one. Others appreciate a visit and a prayer. I've been amazed at how many people see the chaplain's visit as an opportunity to engage in theological debate. And a topic that has been brought up many times is gay marriage. It is understandable that this important issue is on people's minds right now in light of the many societal and legal changes that have recently taken place. Many individuals, churches, and denominations have struggled with this issue as they have tried to understand God's calling for them to be hospitable and welcoming of all of God's children while honoring their long-held traditions. Unfortunately, many other individuals, churches, and denominations have not engaged in such soul-searching and discussion and have closed their minds and fixed their gaze in one direction or another.

While I'm not going to use the pulpit to offer my opinion on the matter this morning, I will say that the issue is a modern struggle that is much like the ancient struggle of the Christian Jews and

Gentiles as they tried to find unity and common ground in the midst of their diverse ways of being and living. Will *we* celebrate diversity of thought and action here? Are *all* of the members of this congregation really welcome and welcomed? Do we look at some of God's sheep as being too different, odd, or offensive to really belong to our little flock? Or can we pitch a broad tent, under which we all may find a spiritual home? My prayer for us is that we can be hospitable towards one another, and not hostile; loving and understanding, and not closed-minded and intolerant; many and one. May the God of all people be honored by our love and kindness for one another this morning. Amen.