

Lectionary 16 B
Who We Are

July 21, 2024
Ephesians 2:11-22

Who are we? At the beginning of Ephesians chapter 2, Paul tells us: “We were dead through the trespasses and sins in which we once lived.”¹ We were dead people. Dead people can do nothing for themselves. Dead people are all alike. Regardless of their race, creed, national origin, sexual orientation, political party, economic status, etc.; they are all the same – dead.

“**But** God,” Paul goes on to write. God does something for us dead people. God “made us alive together with Christ,”² Paul writes.

Later he expresses this more fully:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For **we are** what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.³

We are people who were dead. We are now people raised by God to a new lives. Raised people are all alike. Regardless of our race, creed, national origin, sexual orientation, political party, economic status, etc.; we are all people God has made alive together with Christ. It was not something we did for ourselves.

“So then ...” Those are the words that begin our Second Reading. Once we recognize that we were dead because of our sins and made alive by God’s grace, this is what comes next for us.

We are all in the same boat.

Before Jesus, there were two boats: one for God’s chosen people – the promised offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and everyone else. The people who worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and everyone else. God’s people were given special laws, like don’t work on the seventh day, and rituals, like circumcision, to separate them from everyone else, who are called “Gentiles.” Gentiles could work on the seventh day, eat pork, and avoid a delicate operation. Gentiles had different ancestors. They worshiped different gods. There were these two categories of people: those far away from God and those near to God.

“**But** now,” Paul writes, “in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”⁴ When we were helpless to do anything for ourselves before God; Jesus did everything that was necessary.

Jesus not only changes our relationship with God, but also with other people. Paul goes on to write:

For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the

¹ Ephesians 2:1

² Ephesians 2:5

³ Ephesians 2:8-10

⁴ Ephesians 2:13

law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.⁵

Christ has created one new boat. The laws that divided people is abolished so that the grace that forgives all sinners might be the force that unites us.

As Jeremiah in our First Reading points out, bad shepherds scatter the sheep. Bad shepherds cause divisions among sheep. The Good Shepherd, Jesus, seeks to unite all people. Jesus, through his death on the cross, has united all people. We are all sinners. We all are in need of salvation by God's grace given on the cross. We all are in the same boat.

Jesus destroys whatever reasons we had to separating ourselves from each other. Every one of us is sinful. There isn't a sinner group and a saint group. All are sinners. We can no longer judge other people as being greater sinners than us, because we are all sinful.

Every one of us is saved by God's grace. We can no longer think of ourselves as more saintly than anyone else because of all our good works. Salvation is totally and completely a gift from God for sinners. It is not something we have earned by our good deeds or by our church attendance or Bible reading. To repeat what Paul wrote: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and **this is not your own doing**; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast."⁶

We confess in the Nicene Creed that there is one holy catholic and apostolic church. There is only one body of Christ. We who have saved by grace, raised up to new life with Christ are in this one church – even when we gather together under different names like Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Reformed.

I see these different denominations as being like children of the same parents. They are part of one family, but each child has his or her own individual gifts and strengths and personalities. Good parents encourage both their differences; and, at the same time, insist that their children get along with each other. When there are family reunions, whatever differences might divide the families are put aside for the sake of the unity that comes from having common parents.

I don't believe that God wants all of his children to be exactly alike. God certainly did not create us to all look exactly alike. God likes differences. Even with all of our individual differences: height, weight, hair color, amount of hair, eye color, skin colors, likes and dislikes, and so on; we all are sinful humans. We all are people who are saved by God's grace and raised to new life with Christ. We are all in the same boat.

We, in the church, have differences. We differ about who can be ordained. Some say only men. Some also ordain women. A few will ordain people in same-sex marriages. Believers have different opinions about contraceptives, abortion, gun rights, the affordable health care act, immigration reform, homosexual relationships, political parties, and many, many other issues; but regardless of what your opinion is about such issues: we are all sinners who are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ and brought together as one people of God. That's who we are now. We are to see ourselves as being in the same boat with

⁵ Ephesians 2:14-16

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

all the other believers.

Every congregation, to use Paul's words, is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Every congregation is being built together in Christ to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

When we start judging and dividing other Christians by rules and regulations and differences of opinions, we are falling back into the former way of life. We are letting our old sinful selves come back to life and rule us rather than living the new life given to us by God.

Who we are now is part of a huge body of Christ, unified by God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ. Even though we meet in different groups, in different building, under different church names, and have different practices; we are the people of God. Even though we have different shapes and colors and interests and likes and personalities, we are the people of God because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.