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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Summer of Love: *Home is Where the Heart Is*
John 3: 11-17; Ephesians 2:11-22

When we accepted the call to move to Birmingham and come to First Presbyterian, we knew there would be a bit of culture shock. But since I grew up in Louisiana and we'd lived in Atlanta, I thought – eh, how different could it be? I mean, people like football in those places, too.

Then, I was invited to the Women's Christmas Tea, and was introduced to a new game. I know this game as a White Elephant gift swap, but here it's called Dirty Santa. Playing this game with the lovely women of First Presbyterian, I opened a gift that was a houndstooth scarf. Nice scarf, I thought. As it was stolen and swapped, then stolen and swapped again, I thought – wow, these ladies really like scarves!

I had no idea.

I'd never heard of someone named "bear." I still don't understand how a tide can be a mascot. It took me two years to "get" why Patti Winter always complimented my orange shawl. Even now I wonder – what even is a war eagle?

You people, luckily, are a loving and gracious bunch. You've allowed me and others like me to claim blessed neutrality and even ignorance in the face of the fierce tribal loyalty that fractures our state. And Dary and I learned from Lou Ann Webster to do our grocery shopping on Saturday afternoons in the fall.

All of this to say, we Alabamians know a little something about divisions. And not just division 1. I mean the division Paul is talking about. He writes to the Ephesians about the hostility and division between Jews and Gentiles, but really, it could be the Tide and the Tigers: two groups with different customs, different cultures, with distinct identifying markers, with strict traditions and laws. The rivalry is strong, the gulf between the opposing sides is wide. It's amazing, really, that we're able to find common ground.

I'm joking, of course. Mostly because this passage hits close to home these days. We are a divided people. We don't have to look far or hard before we run into any number of other opposing binaries that divide us. Chocolate or vanilla. Pepsi or Coke. Male or female. Republican or Democrat. Black or white. In-town or over the mountain. Cis or trans-gender. Gay or straight. Citizen or undocumented. Rich or poor. I'm sure you can name others, because they are all around us. Granted, these opposing either-or combinations are a simplified way to view our complex world. They ignore the truth that much of life exists along a spectrum. Regardless, we are divided.

That's one reason why Paul's vision of the household of God is so beautiful. Why it is so compelling, why it still gives us hope. We could use some reconciliation. Our nation has been at war for at least the past 15 years, by some accounts for most of its history.¹ God knows we long for peace. The words Paul uses to describe the Gentiles – strangers and foreigners, those far off, cut off, without hope in the world, aliens in the land – those words resonate. Whether it brings to mind migrant workers or Ellis Island, tender age detention centers or the facility out in Etowah County, Dreamers or even Doctoral students at UAB – the quagmire around immigration these days is overwhelming. Wherever you stand, there doesn't seem to be a workable solution – at least not one that's politically possible. And that's just in our country – according to the international aid organization Mercy Corps, “we are witnessing a massive shift in humanity unlike any seen before...more than 86 million people are displaced” in the world today.² From Canada to Greece to Bangladesh, countries have been wracked by how best to respond to the crisis – to welcome migrants or to shut them out.

In the expansion of the Roman empire across Europe and Asia Minor, the question of belonging was an important one. Citizenship was highly valued, and strangers and foreigners were marginalized. Paul uses those terms in his letter to the church in Ephesus because they're having a hard time deciding who is in and who is out. Jewish Christ-believers are not used to welcoming non-Jews. In fact, there really was a dividing wall in the temple, a wall that kept Jewish worship separate and sacred, by keeping the Gentiles

¹ Savell, Stephanie, “We Have Spent \$32 Million Per Hour on War Since 2001,” <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2018/03/21/we-have-spent-32-million-hour-war-2001>, 3/21/18.

² Mercy Corps, “The world's 5 biggest refugee crises” <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/worlds-5-biggest-refugee-crises>.

out. Now that they followed Christ, were they supposed to welcome the Gentiles? The outsiders didn't keep Jewish law and didn't know their customs. They lived very differently. Could they – should they be welcomed now, too?

I first remember studying this passage on the US-Mexico border, and I'm sure you can guess why. Standing in the shadow of the massive wall that runs as far as the eye can see out into the desert in either direction, the image of Christ tearing down the dividing wall is a powerful one. To read Paul's words today invites the question – what then are we to do about the very real walls that divide us? What about the invisible walls of wealth, power, and privilege that divide our cities and churches, schools and government? What about the differences in ideology or identity, culture or religion that grow up like walls between us?

We are at the end of our Summer of Love sermon series. The idea to focus on *love* this summer grew out of Catherine doing and experiencing random acts of kindness this spring: buying groceries for a stranger, grace given and received during communion at First Light. Reflecting on those, we thought – the world is so broken and divided; people are hurting so much right now – we could use a little more love. What would happen, we wondered, if we embraced random acts of kindness as a spiritual practice this summer? What would happen if we learned and meditated on all the different aspects of love portrayed in scripture? Could we generate a ripple effect of compassion that would be evident in the people around us? From our corner here at Richard Arrington and Fourth Avenue N, from all of our homes in neighborhoods across the city, from our camps and conference rooms and offices-- could we make the world a better place? What would happen if we tried? Would our hearts get bigger? What about our relationships with one another and with God? Would those grow and deepen and get richer and better, too?

Jesus taught that for God, the most important law is to *love*: *love* God and *love* our neighbors. God came to us in Christ out of *love* for the *world*. Not just one group or another-- The world! For you and for me, for the insiders and outsiders, for rich and poor, for everybody on every side of that gosh-darn mountain.

As part of our summer of love, we built a picnic table – actually, Randy, Declan, Atticus, and Maslan Girouard built a picnic table. During Vacation Bible School, our children and youth painted it bright turquoise so it

couldn't be missed. We put it on the front lawn of the church. Kandi started to put out ice water and cups for folks who needed it. We started to gather around it before worship each Sunday. A few people scratched their heads and thought, what are they doing? But far more said, thank you – thank you for your hospitality. The table has become one way for us to reach out to our neighbors to say – no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, we're glad you're our neighbor.

More ways to build bridges across the differences that divide us are bubbling up. In September, we're breaching the walls of the church and breaking out of our tradition of Sunday morning worship. We'll Gather at the Table for a simple, outdoor communion service with whoever shows up at 5:15 on Wednesdays. We'll try a new time for our contemplative worship service, at 7 in the evening on Friday September 7th, to provide sacred space through silence, scripture, and song for those who may want to start their weekend in that way. The session tonight will hear a motion calling for a task force to explore a move to become a More Light Congregation, to explicitly welcome and advocate for the rights and inclusion of LGBTQ+ people. There's a small group planning a series of dinners this winter to build relationships with those who see the world differently than we do. And another group looking at how we might intentionally practice radical urban hospitality by opening our chapel for prayer and spiritual counsel one day a week.

It's a lot! I think it's safe to say that in this time of transition, God is doing a new thing here at First Presbyterian, a home in the heart of the city where we speak up, reach out, and build bridges.

The new community of disciples in Ephesus is trying to work out who can belong. Paul tells them – forget the old rules, the old life, the old ways of being. In Christ we are a new creation, one new family – the household of God. We follow a man who was not just marginalized, he was crucified by the state. Why? Because he welcomed sinners and ate with them; he crossed over, under, and around every wall the powers and principalities could put up to divide people.

In our divided communities, with our divisive political discourse, where even the fun of football is fraught with fierce allegiances and families are fractured by differences of opinion - how can we ever hope to be one household, and citizens with the saints? If we listen closely to this passage,

can we hear Paul saying to us, encouraging us, that when we reach out – across or around the walls that divide us – we are helping to build the kingdom. When we open our hearts to one another, when we act in a spirit of love – God’s Spirit is at work in us, building us into a dwelling place for God. Maybe God’s home is where the heart is.