

*“Jesus Is Our Peace”*

There is something a bit strange or mysterious about our Lectionary New Testament Epistle Reading. It seems to be celebrating a very important victory but I suspect most folks would have a hard time perceiving the subject matter and its value. After all, isn't the claim Jesus made Jews and non-Jews one people obviously wrong and hardly worth discussing?

The common societal understanding is non-Jews, such as, Christians, and Jews are clearly not the same religious group! So, why would anyone claim and put in writing, as in our Reading, that Jesus united non-Jews – Gentiles and Jews into one people? Perhaps, some of us are even wondering why this Scripture is being used as the basis for a sermon. Well, there is a good reason for preaching on this Reading. **In fact, some among this group of worshipers may even be able to share a brief one or two sentence answer to the question of why the situation addressed in this Text was or is important for Christians – both then and now.** Anyone willing to share such a brief explanation about the situation addressed in today's Scripture?

In the early years of the life of the gathered community of Christians – the Body of Christ – the Church, most believers were Jewish Christians, who expected new believers from among the Gentile – non-Jewish peoples to become Jews as part of their conversion experience. There was significant conflict in the early Church over whether or not a Gentile could become a Christian without also becoming a Jew. Indeed, some Jews demanded Gentile converts become Jews as a requirement of membership in the Church.

**The importance of the issue of Jewish requirements being forced on Gentile – non-Jewish converts to Christianity was especially important to the Apostle Paul, who came to see himself as having been appointed by the Risen Jesus Christ to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.** If Paul had been unsuccessful at attracting Gentiles – non-Jews into the faith of the Christian Church, then it is very likely there would be few, if any Christians today. I say that because, although the earliest – the Jerusalem Mother Church was almost exclusively composed of persons, who had been born as Jews, the number of Jewish Christians experienced significant declines before 100 A.D. Two activities were responsible for the reduction of Jewish Christians. **First, Jewish Christians were persecuted by the Jewish religious authorities for supporting and spreading the false sect and teachings of the dead Jesus.** Jewish Christians attempted to continue their Jewish religious practices, in addition to worshipping separately to celebrate and follow Jesus as the Crucified and Risen Jewish Messiah, the Son of their God. The dual track of Jewish Christians became very dangerous because the Jewish Religious Authorities decided to prosecute Jewish Christians.

**Indeed, at first, the Jewish Christian Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, came into interaction with Jewish Christians by persecuting them!** As a young Pharisee of the Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus, he quickly became a leader of the persecutors of Jewish Christians. He even held the cloaks of many of the crowd, so they could throw stones – stone to death Stephen, a Deacon of the Jerusalem Christian Church!

**Later, he was given the authority to hunt down Jewish Christians in foreign lands, capture them, and bring them back to Jerusalem for trial before the Jewish Religious Leaders.** In fact, it was while he was on his way to Damascus to hunt down Jewish Christians that Saul had his confrontation with the Risen Jesus Christ and was converted into a Jewish Christian Believer and an Apostle to the Gentiles – Paul!

**The other reason Jewish Christians decreased dramatically during the last half of the First Century came about as a result of the Romans punishing the supposed rebellious Jews by destroying Jerusalem and the Temple around 70 A.D.** The surviving Jews escaped and were disbursed throughout the Roman Empire. Basically, the Christian Church continued to thrive and grow among local churches in that Empire, which were primarily Gentile, although the Romans sought to also persecute the Christians, thinking them to be a Jewish Sect. The churches started or influenced by the Apostle Paul, especially kept alive the Christian Faith and the Christian Church.

Although the Apostle Paul argued boldly for the inclusion of Gentiles – non-Jews in the Christian Church, he faced great conflict and hardship from Jewish Christians. This situation even gave rise to a major disagreement between Paul and the Apostle Peter, with Paul denouncing Peter for his mistreatment of Gentile Christians, while he visited

Paul and some of his Gentile converts. **The Jewish Christian Community only welcomed Gentile Christians, without requiring them to become Jews, following Peter’s revelation of his Vision from the Risen Christ, which he interpreted to mean Christians were no longer required to follow the Jewish Laws.**

Our Scripture was part of Paul’s sharing his historical – theological understanding and celebration of the Unity, which came about in the Christian Community – the Church, with the welcoming of the Gentiles – non-Jews into the Body of Christ along with those Jewish Christians, who had been among the original disciples and followers of Jesus. Instead of Paul explaining to the Ephesian Church the history of the animosity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, such as his attempts to convince the other Apostles and the Leaders of the Jerusalem Church to welcome Gentiles into the Church – the Body of Christ, without requiring them to become Jews or to follow the Jewish Law, as well as, Peter’s late revelation of his Vision from Christ, instead of giving the Ephesians that history, Paul disclosed the underlying activity of the Divine Parent through the Son of God, Jesus Christ, which resulted in the revelation of our Reconciliation – Unity with God, with one another in the Body of Christ, and with Creation!

**So the Apostle to the Gentiles wrote in verses 12-13 of our Reading, “At that time you were apart from Christ. You were foreigners and did not belong to God’s Chosen People. You had no part in the covenants, which were based on God’s Promises to His people, and you lived in this world without hope and without God. But now, in union with Christ Jesus you, who used to be far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”**

Paul went on to elaborate in verse 14, **“For Christ himself has brought us Peace by making Jews and Gentiles one people.”** The Apostle revealed how Jesus accomplished this bringing of Peace, **“With his own body he broke down the wall that separated them and kept them enemies.”** Giving more detail, he wrote the Ephesians in verse 15, **“He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races one new people in union with himself, in this way making Peace.”** Wait a moment, “He abolished the Jewish Law with its commandments and rules”? The Christian literalist must have skipped that verse! All the rules and laws we human beings have used to divide ourselves with others – in order to claim superiority over one another are no longer valid. So, Jesus enables us to accept one another because we can no longer claim Divine authority makes us worthy, instead of others. Our Unity with one another in the Body of Christ – the Church is accomplished as we are “united” with Christ!

**In verse 17, Paul specified, “By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back to God.”** It is the very act of “his death on the cross” which brought Peace between the Jewish Christians and the non-Jews, while also bringing them all back to God! Further enlarging the scope of the Peace we have in our unity with Jesus Christ, the Apostle stated, **“So Christ came and preached the Good News of Peace to all - to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to Him.”** Please note my underlining of the words, “Good News of Peace to all”. This invitation is not just for those already in the Church – the Body of Christ but for everyone – as Jesus demonstrated – even for those called “sinners” by the Jewish legalists, such as the Pharisees.

Combining this theological explanation with the manifestation of how all people in the Body of Christ are brought to God, the Apostle wrote in verse 18, **“It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father.”** It is through the Gift of the Holy Spirit that we are brought into the “presence of the Father” – our Divine Parent! Since we are at Peace with one another in our Unity with Christ and one another, Paul declared in verses 19-21, **“So then, you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers any longer; you are now citizens together with God’s people and members of the family of God. You, too, are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. He is the one who holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple dedicated to the Lord.”**

So, how will you and I – all who are United in Christ, demonstrate Jesus is our Peace and we are United together in our Unity in Christ? We too, are called to share Jesus’ “Good News of Peace to all”! We are to let go of our prejudices and animosity toward others, those things which have been encouraged or drilled into us as God’s Commandments and Rules, in order for us to justify excluding others. Indeed, let’s welcome Jesus Christ and his Peace, so we will be reconciled with God, one another, Creation, and with all people! **Remember, instead of with a spirit of superiority or disdain, let us “come in the one Spirit into the presence of” God and be open to Jesus’ Peace in our Unity in our Diversity.** Amen.