

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he 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 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. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

---

Gallatin County, Montana, is a sacred place for my family. That’s where my grandpa Jack and my great-uncle Paul taught me the rituals and practices of my family’s first religion, which was, of course, fly-fishing. The ability to read a river is what separates fly-fishing from any persuasion focused only on catching fish. And no where does that distinction come into play more evidently than on the rivers of Gallatin County.

There is a point about 25 miles east of where my family lived where three rivers join to form the headwaters of the largest river in the United States: the birthplace of the Missouri River.

The largest and farthest west of the three, the Jefferson, drops down out of the Rocky Mountains through the Tobacco Root mountains and then slows to a wandering crawl. Water levels are unreliable and by the time the Jeff reaches Gallatin County, the river is warm and wide, surrounded by open space and farmlands that make it suitable for drift float fishing in search of trophy-sized brown trout.

The central river, the Madison, comes north from Wyoming. Two upstream dams regulate waterflows and because the Madison is one of the most productive trout rivers in the country, people fill the river looking for trophy rainbows and browns. Just before joining the Jefferson, the Madison’s lower reach meanders through wide-open

spaces with all kinds of access points. By summer, the river is a splash-and-giggle festival.

We never stuck so much as a boot in the Jeff and only occasionally waded a stretch of the Madison. Our mecca was the easternmost of the three rivers, the Gallatin. From Yellowstone National Park, the river flows through spectacular alpine country where Robert Redford shot the fishing scenes for the film “A River Runs Through It.”

The Gallatin is the smallest and most intimate of the three and it runs crystal clear cold water. Parts of it are near impossible to get to without walking into it and so fishing it requires a great deal of attention. The breath-taking beauty of this river – that’s what made it a sacred place where my great-uncles and I could commune and be in awe of God’s creation. And maybe, *maybe*, catch a trout or two for dinner. I’m won’t even try to hide my preference.

Now, just before emptying into the headwaters of the Missouri, the Gallatin becomes much more like the Jefferson and the Madison. And all three change as they merge to become one enormous river. The wide, warm and slow-moving Jefferson meets the playground antics of the more diverse Madison and then they are joined by the smaller, more ethereal Gallatin and together they become the mighty Missouri.

Three bodies of living water become one. That was the image that came to me in the letter to the Ephesians. I couldn’t help but wonder what the people must have imagined when they heard that, in his flesh, Christ shattered a partition and made one humanity out of many.

I wonder if they worried about losing their identities.

Like tributaries running to the great Missouri River, streams of people converge on Christ from many places: Pharisees, like St. Paul, and Jews from other branches; Gentiles from Philippi, Cyrene, Rome and Ephesus. Each with character-defining histories, cultures and resources. They all come together as companions of the holy saints and members of God’s household.

The author of the letter to the Ephesians is writing to a Gentile audience – those who have been without the Anointed – to address the divide between Jews and Gentiles. Through grace in Christ, the author observes, God forms a new humanity – one people reconciled and united in Christ in God’s creating of a new world of peace.

Gentiles and Jews have become one by flowing together in the Anointed One. And as that river flows on, it bears the name of Christ,

*in addition to* the hope of the covenants made with our Jewish forebears.

Those who were once far away have come to be near. The peace of Christ is not the peace of the Roman Emperor. Aliens and sojourners are now citizens. This passage resolves several dualities but speaks of *only one* destruction: the death of the hostility that separates God's people from each other.

One of the letter's more striking statements can sound like a reference to another destruction as it declares that "having abolished the law consisting in commandments in ordinances, that in himself, *in himself*, [Christ Jesus] might fashion the two into a new human being, making peace."

The *Risen Christ* is the new humanity. Being united in the new humanity of Christ not about uniformity but about reconciliation that *includes* our differences.

The Anointed One is not against the law. Instead, the Risen Christ makes it possible for trusting Gentiles to join their Jewish cousins in serving God's purposes for all creation. God's covenant with the Jews is not abolished in Christ. What makes Jews distinct from other faith traditions and from each other is still in place, just as your distinctiveness and mine are still there.

In writing to his daughter, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks said: "It remains difficult to fully comprehend the vision at the heart of [scripture], namely that religious truth is not universal, nor relative, but covenantal. God reaches out to each people, faith and culture, asking it to be true to itself while recognizing that it is not the exclusive possessor of the truth."

Different cultures are not rejected in favor of some universalist, one-size-fits-all faith. Peace is not achieved by the Christian church converting every individual in the world to be *one kind* of Christian. We aren't here to force uniformity on the world.

We are here to invite people into restored unity with God and with each other; the One God manifesting in each person as God created each of us to be. The church is here to become reconciled communities of people from every clan, every race, every gender identity and sexual orientation, every income bracket, every language.

These differences will always exist, but they are not *true* barriers to living in unity in Christ.

We break down walls based on hostility by serving the one gracious God. Each reconciling community can be true to itself and

continue to teach and trust the practices that nurture them. The church is not just what *we* make of *it*, but what *God* makes of *us*. To be true to *ourselves* is to honor and live out the apostolic foundations that guide our life together as Christians.

The more we remember that our truth is *covenantal* in essence, the more God can manifest the barrier-free world that God yearns for. The more we remember that our truth is *partial at best*, the more we live into the One Truth that is God. The peace fostered through Christian communities comes not because of who we are, but because of who Christ is in us.

That doesn't mean peace comes without us.

In the waters of baptism, the presence of Christ becomes active within each one of us uniquely. In those same waters, we die and are reborn into the new humanity that is the Risen Christ. We don't lose our identities. Rather our deepest identities are engaged and brought to the surface in a new humanity; a new home.

This new household of God is not some purely spiritual experience that we share with a select group of insiders on Sunday mornings. The new Temple is also not just some otherworldly afterlife. What the author of the letter to the Ephesians is getting at with this torrent of poetic language is that, through the cross of Christ, the living God is pouring out boundary-breaking power for all people right here in this place.

We come together to learn how to trust this power, to let that power crumble every hostile wall we have set up until we are "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." God is not building new dwelling places with stone and pillars and arches, do you see? But with human hearts, minds and bodies.

The new Holy Temple is not this or any building. The *people* God gathers here – *we* are the place where God seeks residence. We are flowing in a river at the same time that river is flowing in us. In a sense, God has become the sojourner seeking a dwelling place in God's own creation.

The challenge before us is not to protect our one way of expressing the love of God. If God is to find a home where heaven and earth meet in us, our challenge is to break down walls of fear or resentment within ourselves. We need to discover and overcome cultural or racial or religious differences that we have *allowed* to become artificial barriers that create insiders and outsiders.

God's promise, God's *covenant*, with us is this: As we do our work faithfully, the living God will do God's work. And beautiful new

Temples will come together in countless ways that each honor the One God of all creation in their own expressions.

---

Works cited or consulted:

- Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan. *A Letter in the Scroll: Understanding Our Jewish Identity and Exploring the Legacy of the World's Oldest Religion*. New York: Free Press, 2009.
- Wright, N. T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*. London: SPCK, 2004.