

Sunday Sermon
July 22, 2018
Ephesians 2:13-22
“The Crowd at the Nativity Scene”

Introduction

At this Christmas in July celebration, I am going to venture a guess that most of us here have not been members of the Jewish faith and do not have Jewish ancestry in our family lineage, except of course for our family of faith. Most of us are Gentiles, non-Jews.

These words we just heard from the letter to the Ephesians are written for just such people—we outsiders who were, as the letter says, “aliens to the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise.” But now, the letter says, through Christ we outsiders have been adopted as members of God’s family. We who were non-citizens belong.

I

Many years ago when my husband and I got married, my mother-in-law gave us a nativity set. It is beautiful. It is from Italy, made from fine wood, hand-carved and hand-painted. We cherish it. But in the rush of getting married and moving to seminary, we did not look at it closely when we received it. We just packed it up to store.

The next December when we unpacked it, we found an interesting thing. There was quite a crowd of people in that set. We found the expected Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in a manger. We found an angel for the top of the stable and some shepherds, 3 wise men with gifts, a cow, a camel, and four sheep.

But there were some other people who to us did not seem to belong. One was a boy playing bagpipes. Another was a man in a fancy gold-trimmed robe. Another was a man with yet different dress, dark skin, and a special headdress. And one was a woman carrying a pitcher in one hand and a bowl in the other.

I asked my husband if he knew of any Italian traditions that told of such persons visiting the nativity. He laughed and said that the pieces are priced individually, and to continue sales they develop more characters for the story and the scene. Some zealous salesperson must have put extra characters into our set, perhaps ones that would not sell in South Carolina.

But when you think about it, those extra characters in our nativity set are not any more out of place at the birth of a king than the shepherds. The wise men fit in. They are dressed suitably, and they were bearing gifts fit for a king. But shepherds, they were the despised of the day, at least by good orthodox people. Respectable society outcast shepherds because they were so crude. Their integrity was so

questionable that they were not allowed to testify in a court of law.

And our scripture says we were like the shepherds, “aliens,” “non-citizens,” “strangers,” outcasts separated from God. We had nothing to warrant a place in God’s family. But we belong because Christ reached out to us, paid a price for us, knocked down the door separating us from God.

II

We have kept those interesting characters in our nativity set through all these years. When our children were young and we would put out the set, they would ask, “Who is this?” or “What is she doing here?” And we would say, “Maybe he is the innkeeper, and he has come to check on Mary and Joseph and the baby.” Or “Maybe she works at the inn, and she has brought water and bread for them.”

Then our children started bringing their additions to the scene. First there was a Lego man, then Super Mario, then a Beanie Baby I and My Little Pony. I said, “Take these back to the playroom; they do not belong here.” But then I thought, why not?

Because who does belong at the birth of the Lord? In fact, if I could make more characters to put in that scene, I would. I would make a successful-looking business person in a suit. I would make a person in a wheelchair. I would make an older person stooped with white hair and wrinkled hands. I would make a homeless woman with a shopping cart. I would make a family with a husband and a wife and a child or two. Then I would make a family without a husband or without a wife or without children. I would make a refugee family seeking asylum. I would make someone reaching with empty arms. I would make someone with a bitter face looking like life had been cruel. I would make a soldier, laying down his weapon. And I would make Santa, kneeling in adoration. According to this letter, we are all in the family of God; we all welcome the Christ child.

III

This letter says when Christ reconciles us, makes us one with God and with each other, we become “the household of God,” a “holy temple,” built into “a dwelling place for God.” Do you know what that means? That means if others in the world are going to see any hope of overcoming their painful divisions, any prayer for peace and unity, they need to see it in us.

My husband used to start his articles in his church newsletter with “Dear Friends.” Then one day a member asked, “Why do you call us friends? You should not call us that.”

“What should I call you?” Bill asked.

“You should call us brothers and sisters,” the man said. “You get to pick your friends. But brothers and sisters come with your family, and you have to learn to love and live with them. That is how it is in the church,” he said. “We do not pick each

other like friends. God puts us together as brothers and sisters, and we to learn to be family.” So Bill changed his greeting to “Dear Brothers and Sisters.”

Church development specialists say to build a church you should pick a particular segment of the population to target for your membership, a particular social class, a particular age group. Because people want to gather at church with others who are like them. But the Presbyterian Church says no, that is not what the Gospel teaches. We come as strangers from all kinds of backgrounds, all kinds of brokenness, and here we are bound together into one family in Christ.

Conclusion

One church where I served years ago had a ceramic nativity set. It was old, and over time it had become rather brittle. One year during practice for the children’s Christmas program, the donkey in the scene lost one of his ears. The church educator, Sung Hee Chang, tried all kinds of adhesives until she found one that would reattach a donkey’s ceramic ear.

The next year, during the children’s practice, a wise man lost a hand. Sung Hee and her superglue performed reattachment surgery. The third year following practice, I found Sung Hee sitting at her desk, superglue in hand. “What did we lose this year?” I asked. She held up the legs to baby Jesus and the head to one of the wise men.

To me there were two surprising things about that story. One, that Sung Hee and her superglue were so good. You had to look hard to find the break lines in the pieces. And two, that it took us three years to figure out that before the children’s program we needed to move the nativity set.

Someone said, “Maybe we should change the set for one that is non-breakable.” But I said, “No, let’s keep this one. The characters in it are like us, broken and put back together.”

I tried out this sermon last night on my grandson. He needed something to help him go to sleep. When I had finished, he said, “You know it is important not to give so much attention to the holy family and everyone else at the nativity that we miss the message Jesus brought. He came to hold us accountable for how we treat others. He came to teach us to treat everyone with justice and equality.”

We are the crazy, mixed up, broken and put back together household of God. We are the tangible, visible evidence that God through Christ has come into the world to reconcile the world. Emmanuel: God dwelling with us; God teaching us how to dwell with each other. Let’s make sure others know they belong.