

“The Ins and Outs” – Ephesians 2:11-22 – Pastor Jeff Childs

Today, I am playing catch up. This was the message I was going to preach on July 21st as the second part of this series, but that was the day we left early for the youth mission trip to Puerto Rico, so I postponed it to here to wrap up the series. It seems fitting as we prepare to welcome children, youth, families, and old friends back to worship in a couple weeks for the start of Sunday school and the fall season.

I want us to get in touch with our own stories, for I suspect we each have more than one. When have you ever been on “the inside” or included in the “in crowd?” And when have you ever felt left out or on “the outside” like an outsider? How did it make you feel? Being welcomed in feels good, doesn’t it? You might feel accepted, honored, or respected. Getting kicked out has a very different feel. Perhaps it is anger or resentment, maybe even depressing or deflating. Just being on the outside might cause you to feel hurt, inferior, or even worthless. But being on the inside might include feeling peer pressure to conform in order to maintain that status. Given all of that I want us to get in touch with how it feels as we read and look at this lesson from the second chapter of Ephesians today.

Often when we think of “us and them” we place ourselves in the “us” side of the equation, because we are us! But have you ever been one of “them?” Or the terminology I took from the reading today was “ins and outs.” As we look today at what was written to the church at Ephesus, I want you to get in touch with the feeling of being left out!

Let me tell you that it is a challenge to preach this message as we experience political divisions in our country with maps showing red states and blue states – us and them now have colors! It has happened before with the blue and grey states during the Civil War. Rather than being the United States we seem at times to be made up of divided states. It is my hope that we will find ways to be reunited after the dust up of the campaigning and election are over. In the same way I have experienced the United Methodist Church recently being more of the Divided Methodist Church as congregations, pastors, and bishops have left to become independent churches or join another denomination. (I had another colleague in NY leave this past week and know of a few others who would if they could find a church to go and serve.) It is likewise my hope and prayer for the larger church that, when the dust settles, we will find ways to continue to be in ministry and relationship with one another as we move into the future. I invite us all to pray for one another, the church, and church leaders through the coming months.

The writer of this letter wanted the readers, who felt left out by the Jews and some Jewish Christians, to know that they were welcomed and brought into the faith by none other than Jesus. What did it say here? *But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us,* (Ephesians 2:13-14) At that time the world was made up by two groups, the Jews and everybody who was not Jewish. By the time of this letter being written the others were known as “the Gentiles” or “the uncircumcision.” To the church in Galatia Paul wrote: *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28) This is a powerful

statement that it is not about “us and them” but about all of us as we are all united and one in Christ, not two (or more).

Do you know that some churches have focused not on themselves but on their neighbors? They often have a clear welcoming statement on their sign and printed in the bulletin each week. It is a statement specifically stating a heartfelt welcome to the wider community. I have not found that there is a welcoming statement for the Mt Carmel church. Perhaps that is something we can develop this year as we look to inviting and welcoming people into a relationship with Christ and Christ’s church.

How and where is Christ working on you and building you up? Here in the letter, it says, *Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.* (Ephesians 2:22) Do you know that God’s Holy Spirit lives in and flows through you? God’s Spirit flows through us! And I believe God’s Spirit also flows through “them!” I don’t know about you, but I want to be a part of a church that is not just for us but is also for them! For Paul and John and Peter the “thems” they were welcoming in were the Gentiles – “those people!” Who are the “thems” for us today? And how can we pray for them and invite them in on behalf of a loving, generous, and forgiving God? Let’s fully welcome them in! The writer envisions a church where Christ is the cornerstone, and we are the other stones or building blocks that build up the church.

An ironic story actually comes from other stones – cemetery grave markers! There was a time when certain people could not be buried in the cemetery because of the way they lived or died. Then decades later as the original cemetery spaces filled up, the cemetery expanded and those outside the fence were then right in the middle! Sometimes it takes decades for those on the outside to feel welcomed in! As we move into the future we are once again asked how open and welcoming are we? In the name of Jesus, who made the ultimate sacrifice to welcome the “outsiders” in, be open and welcoming. Alleluia and Amen.

There Are Those Times

Jeffrey B. Childs 8/19/2024

There are those times we find that we're,
Confronted at the gate.
We’re challenged by what we hold dear,
And must evaluate.

We’re challenged by what we've believed,
With all our fears and doubts,
For in life, we have all perceived,
There are both ins and outs.

But what if doors were opened wide,
To let all people in?
If prejudice we lay aside,
A new world will begin.

Let “us and them” be in the past.
Release that old world view.
That all might enter in at last,
For Christ makes all things new.