

Text: Ephesians 2: 11-22

Title: Groucho was Right

Date: July 19,2009

There is a classic line attributed to Groucho Marx, that he would never join an club that would have him as a member. I love it- for it points out one of the absurdities of the human condition: our tendency to organize into groups, not only for self definition and support; but also to exclude others. Groucho was taking a shot at those groups that are formed for the specific purpose of excluding others- if I am cool, then you are not. Think high school drama and you get it. If I have to prove myself to you- I'd rather not.

You would think that we outgrow that sort of high school garbage- but you would be surprised where it sometimes pops up,- Even in church! Last week the Rev Katherine Jefferts Schori, who is the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church put her foot in it when she gave the opening address to their national convention. Granted, she has a number of challenges, last month 700 congregations broke away and formed their own denomination- the Anglican Church in North America. Now if they were Presbyterians we would say no big deal, for we assume that Christians in good conscience can disagree. But Episcopalians see themselves as part of a worldwide denomination- the Anglican Communion – and they only allow 1 denomination per country. I am not going to go into Anglican politics- denominational politics by and large are a waste of time anyway- but this is what she said:

*The crisis of this moment has several parts, and like Episcopalians, particularly the ones in Mississippi, they're all related. The overarching connection in all of these crises has to do with the great Western heresy – that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us alone can be in right relationship with God. It's caricatured in some quarters by insisting that salvation depends on reciting a specific verbal formula about Jesus. That individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of being. That heresy is one reason for the theme of this Convention.*

Catch that? In her pique over the upstart Anglicans- she condemns as heresy the central core statement of the Gospel! I think what we are seeing here is what happens when humans put their wanting to control who to belongs to a group over the

truly amazing core of the Gospel- God's overwhelming grace. If I can be the gatekeeper, then I have power. The fact that grace overwhelms this attitude is what our passage is all about.

Ephesians starts by reminding the gentiles (and us!) where they come from. - that before the Gospel, they were alienated; without God, ineligible for the covenants of promise. They were on the outside looking in (by the First Century, Judaism was no longer a proselytizing religion- Gentiles were welcome if they came knocking, but only after they ritually converted, including getting circumcised. As Gentiles they had no hope- and therefore they had no future.

To be honest with you, we really have no idea who wrote Ephesians, the theology is Paul's, but the style, vocabulary and the fact that this is not written to a specific problem in a particular church makes us wonder. Whoever he was, he starts by doing something really smart- he invokes the language of Isaiah 57:18-19: *18 I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will lead them and repay them with comfort, creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips. 19 Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them.* Keeping this in mind- take another look at verse 13: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.* This is slick for the writer of Ephesians is doing 2 things here. **First** he is equating the Law and all of its manmade regulations with their former sinful state **AND** he is pointing out that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Prophecy in Isaiah 57. In one fell swoop the Law is made obsolete. And without the need for ritual Law the doors are opened to grace.

But there are still divisions, the people of God are still acting like every other human group- equating acceptance with access- you are in or you are out. That kind of thinking simply does not stand up in the face of God's grace. In fact God's grace overwhelms that kind of thinking and throws it out with the Law and circumcision. So starting in verse 14, the writer of Ephesians stops talking about YOU gentiles and starts referring to WE, the people of God.

As a result of the centuries long division between Jew and Gentile there is hostility between Jews and Gentiles. Interestingly, the solution to this Enmity is not Unity-Unity seeks to find common denominators while Gods grace destroys those

barriers we erect to separate ourselves from one another. The first barrier to go is this whole notion of ethnic access to God. There is no longer Jew and Gentile, there is no commonwealth of Israel- there is only the Cross and those redeemed by Christ's blood. Out the door goes the Law and its commandments and ordinances that served as an outward indicator of who is in and who is out- now in place of the old Jews/Gentiles classification, we have a new humanity- those reconciled to God through the cross. The enmity that existed was not just between Jew and Gentile, but also between God and humanity. The solution God came up for those divisions is again the cross. By removing the barriers between himself and humanity, by proclaiming peace to those who were far off and to those who were near (there is Isaiah 57 again!) God creates a new humanity.

Now all of us have access to the Father, through the Holy Spirit. In Christ we now have peace. The greatest by product of God's grace is that now access to God by one group does not mean exclusion to God for another.

So here we are. The writer of Ephesians takes us to the next step. If we are all united in Christ, then we are no longer aliens. The word he uses here for alien is *xenoi*. *Xenoi* referred to those people who lived in a place that was not their homeland. All through the Roman Empire there were those who had citizenship rights; and those who didn't. Citizens enjoyed the protection of Rome and there were able to participate in the political life of the colony. Those who did not have citizenship rights were at the mercy of the Governors or military authorities. The readers of Ephesians would have been very aware of this- so the promise that we have full citizenship rights in the Kingdom of God is good news. Not citizenship rights in the Commonwealth of Israel- still working under the old Jew/Gentile division, but being full members of God's family as a result of what Christ did. This is all God's doing, this is all God's initiative, we did not earn it at all.

Finally he compares the Kingdom of God with a temple. The foundation is laid by the prophets and the apostles- again, this is slick- he is equating the prophets and the apostles. Jesus is the cornerstone, the One that holds it all together. Now we are able live with God and God makes his presence known among us.

It seems so simple, doesn't it? Yet, as we said before, all too often we fail to live up to the promises that are already ours. We are so used to thinking in terms of US vs THEM, who is IN and who is OUT that we bring those attitudes with us as we live our

Christian lives. It's not really fair to pick on the Episcopalians - it is just that because their tradition is so very different than ours than it is easier to see what is happening there, while noting that similar things are happening to us. While they fight over how many Anglican groups that there be in the United States- we have at least 6, the PCUSA, the PCA, the OPC, the EPC and the RPC. I'd like to say we are all live and let live- but there is real rancor in some quarters. One of the benefits of the ecumenical movement is that it fostered understanding amid denominations- but we still don't do much with our fellow Christians- no matter what the sign on the door of their church may say. As we move forward into the community, we will be forging partnerships with other churches.

In fact the only defense we have, the only way we can avoid falling back into the US and THEM trap is to live as citizens in the Kingdom of God. To live the Gospel is to experience firsthand all the benefits of the Gospel. Jesus made us into a new people, the old has fallen away. Instead of division- we have family; instead of Law- we have grace- instead of being on the outside looking in- we have hope. Hope opens doors, and grace kicks them wide open. As citizens in the Family of God, that life is ours for the living.

Groucho said that he would never join a club that would have him as a member. That if I have to prove my value in order to be considered IN, I'd much rather not, thank you. Thanks to Jesus Christ we don't have to. God's grace is truly amazing. As we sing that favorite of so many let's allowed ourselves to be bowled over yet again by the wideness of Gods grace so that we can live lives of gratitude and love.