

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Heaven on Earth_ Ephesians 2

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No, I am your father. I was six years old in the movie theater and I was stunned. I thought he was lying. But I was hooked from that moment, not only in the epic saga of the Skywalker family, but in the literary device of the plot twist itself.

When I was in middle school, I began to devour O. Henry writings, the Gift of the Magi, "The Cop and the Anthem", "The Ransom of Red Chief". I love plot twist movies. Rosebud, 'I see dead people'. You know, I think one of the reasons that I love this book so much, I mean, along with it being the Word of God, and it has life changing impact on me. But because it's a work of literature, it's genius and it's full of plot twists. It's the ram that's caught in a thicket. It's the Hebrew baby that is raised in the house of Pharaoh who then defies Pharaoh and leads his people to freedom. It's the Jewish girl that becomes the Persian queen. It's the guy named Haman, who was hanged on the very gallows that he had built for Mordecai. It is Jesus coming to creation as a baby. And it's Jesus walking out of a grave.

We're in a series on the book of Ephesians right now, about one of God's great plot twists, that we were saved not so much to give us an escape hatch to heaven, but rather so that we might become ambassadors to bring heaven to earth. And so we're gonna pick it up this weekend, where we left off Ephesians two, verse 11.

"Therefore" You know, when I was younger, one of my teachers told me that whenever you see it, therefore, in Scripture, you need to figure out what it's there for. It's also a conjunctive adverb, and in this whole passage, from here to the end of the chapter, we see conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs that connect two different thoughts. And they're worth paying attention to in this passage. So I've circled some of those, just to draw some attention to them. Also, as you are exploring the texts of Scripture, I want to give you a resource that might be helpful, - blueletterbible.org. If you want to dive into scripture more deeply, you want to uncover the original language, the original syntax, the original grammar, it's a free online resources, it's a great place to start.

Therefore, what is it there for? Well, if we go back to what Pastor Joel talked about last weekend, in verses one to 10, of this passage, we see Paul talking about the grace of God, the work of Christ on the cross, that we have been resurrected, we have been redeemed, we have been regenerated, we've been made whole, we are becoming the people that we are destined to be. Therefore, it's taken us this long, just get through one word.

¹¹ *"Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—*¹²

remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

What is God up to? It's another plot twist. This is not just the merging of two worlds of heaven and earth; it is the merging of two peoples into a new community of Jews and Gentiles in the family of God together. If we go all the way back to the book of Genesis, we find that the descendants of Abraham were marked by God, chosen by God, blessed by God to carry out his purposes in the world. And so the very first followers of Jesus were Jewish. Jesus was a Jewish man living in a Jewish context with a very Jewish teaching and the Jewish fulfillment of promises of Messianic promises. But then there was this twist. There were Gentiles that were wanting to follow the message and the teachings in the way of Jesus. There were Gentiles that wanted in on the family of God. And one of the great questions facing the early church was, is that even possible?

Now it's really hard for us to put ourselves back in the ancient context of the story to understand what a big deal this was. But in the ancient world, Jewish people and Gentile people, Gentile people, all the people that weren't Jewish, they didn't get along with each other. There was a lot of animosity between them. In fact, Gentile people didn't like Jewish people for a number of reasons. One, they thought that Jewish people were lazy, because there was one day a week that they didn't work. They thought that Jewish people were atheist, because they only believed in one God and believe that that was the only God and they were just plain weird, because they practiced this brutal thing called circumcision. But then Gentiles were wanting to come into the family. And, in the beginning, its thought, 'Well, you can't follow Jesus unless you become Jewish. You have to be circumcised; you have to follow the law. You have to convert religiously to Judaism, if you're a Gentile and you want to follow Jesus.'

But the apostles in Acts 15 decided that they didn't have to do that, that the Gentiles only had to follow three things to be a part of the family.

One - they had to abstain from idolatry,

Two - they had to abstain from sexual immorality,

And three - they had to abstain from bloodshed.

Now that seems like a pretty low bar until we understand how integrated into the fabric of Roman civic life, pagan temple worship was. Idolatry and sexual practices were a part of everyday Roman business life. And the blood sport that was found in the Colosseum and the Circus Maximus was basically the equivalent of the golf course. It was almost impossible to be a Gentile follower of Jesus and a respected Roman businessman. But the early church faced tremendous external pressure from the culture and unbelievable tension internally, because of the clash of cultures. And the great question facing the early

church was, could they do it, could it survive? Would this great plot twist of two people coming together really work?

How are these two groups supposed to worship together when they have two different standards of holiness? How are they supposed to eat together when they have different dietary laws? How is the Jew supposed to go into a Gentile house without being unclean? And how is the Gentile supposed to be a follower of Jesus without losing their job? Would the way of Jesus be compelling enough to make them love one another? Would the message of Jesus be strong enough to make them look past their differences and would their commitment to Jesus be greater than any other loyalty, opinion, allegiance, or alliance that they would have?

You see, being invited into the family of God required absolutely no work on their part. It was grace alone. But living as the family of God, we take every ounce of energy they had. See, I think sometimes we get it backwards. We spend all this time trying to make ourselves right with God, and completely neglect any effort to be right with one another.

And so Paul says here, 'remember'. He says remember twice, in this section of verses. Remember, remember, it comes from the Greek word *mnemoneuo*. And it doesn't just mean recalling facts. It's not just about thinking back to recall something in the past. It's about accessing the memory, the feeling, the learning that came along with that moment. It's about meaningful and somber reflection. It's the same word that Jesus used when he said, "Remember Lot's wife". Now when Jesus said that he wasn't just saying, "Hey, remember that guy Lot he had a wife - remember that?" Because, you know, remember that moment. Remember something important, the learning of that moment.

Paul says remember my chains, remember the poor. It's about remembering something in such a way that it reshapes our view of the current moment. And so Paul says to the Gentile believers in Jesus, "Remember, remember", and then he starts swinging. He says, remember this, you were separate from Christ, you were excluded from the covenants of promise, you had no hope, and you were without God in the world. Tell us what you really think, Paul.

"Remember, remember", let it sink in. Yes, you've been brought into the promise you've been brought into the family, but it had nothing to do with you, and everything to do with the cross of Jesus. So don't be arrogant.

But at the same time that Paul is pummeling the Gentiles a little bit, he also throws in this little jab at the Jewish part of the church as well because we see Paul talking about you Gentiles, those who are called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision. And he has this little parenthetical commentary, "which is done by human hands". Now it's easy for us to miss this as we're just reading the text but "made by human hands" is the same phrase that is used to describe the process of making idols.

Now, circumcision was commanded by God, it was given by God, it was meant to be a mark, a seal of their chosenness, of their blessing, of their election to be a part of the purposes of God in the world. But what Paul is saying here is don't turn God's chosenness of you into an idol. Don't make your religious activity, an idol that keeps others at an arm's length. Don't be arrogant - remember. And then we come to verse 13.

"But now" - conjunctive adverb, "But now" - plot twist. ¹³ *But now in Christ you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*"

You're invited in to the family of God, you're included in the promise of God, and you were commissioned to be on mission with God, to bring heaven to earth - But now.

We keep reading. ¹⁴ *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*"

It says that Jesus destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, this isn't just metaphorical language. In the Second Temple period, there was literally a wall in the temple construct that separated the Jewish place of worship where the presence of God could be encountered with where the Gentiles could come. In fact, archaeologists have discovered what appears to be ancient, no trespassing signs. One of them is in the archaeological museum of Istanbul and it specifically says, 'Let no foreigner enter within the parapet and the partition which surrounds the temple precincts. Anyone caught will be held accountable for his ensuing death.' That wall ensured that Gentiles got in and Gentiles were kept out. And Jesus said that thing is dying on the cross. He removed the barrier; he removed the dividing wall of hostility.

And then Paul goes on to use the word peace four times. It's one of the highest concentrations of Paul's discussion of peace in any of his writings. It's this plot twist. It's the chosen people of God are expected to live in peace with these people who are not circumcised, who do not follow the law, that have the smell of pork on their breath, that do not observe the Sabbath. And Paul says, "Peace has been made in Christ." Jesus has preached peace to those who are near and those who are far.

And here's the problem today. We don't necessarily feel this challenge or this tension that Paul was dealing with of integrating the Jew and the Gentile into the family of God. But like Paul, we do live at a time when we have to be peacemakers and bridge builders across chasms - culturally, racially, politically, geographically. Will we commit to forging the new community?

NCCU has developed four principles of peacemaking that I think we all need to follow as a church. Now, let me say this, peace is not passivity, peace is not turning a blind eye to reality, peace is not about saying let's not talk about it, let's not rock the boat. Peace is about rolling up our sleeves and doing the hard work to committing the resolve to forming the new community that Jesus called us to. So ask anything. Bring your questions, your curiosities to the table.

Pastor John Tyson said, "Knowing others back stories releases compassion, and honors the journeys people have been on." Listen well; can we all lean in a little bit closer? Not so our voices and our opinions and our facts and our views can be heard more loudly, but so we can understand more clearly what the other is saying.

Number three, disagree freely. The point of peacemaking is not to get everybody to all agree, to have the same opinion, to have the same mindset. It's being willing to put Jesus at the center of the conversation and then to love regardless. Now look, love is not some kind of sappy, sentimental Kumbaya. My truth is my truth. Your truth is your truth. So we're all okay, let's just all get along. It's a self sacrificing love.

In 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. was giving a speech in Birmingham. When a 200 pound white protester stormed onto the stage and started swinging his fists. As Dr. King's aides ran to his defense he just wrapped his arms around his assailant. And as things calmed down, he introduced his attacker to the crowd, as though he were an invited guest. The man was a member of the American Nazi Party. Loving regardless does not mean agreeing with somebody else's opinion. Dr. King didn't agree with his opinion that day. It's not putting a stamp of approval on someone's behaviors or choices. Rather, it's doing what he did. It's doing what Jesus did on the cross, when you open your arms wide to embrace and protect even the one that seeks to harm you. This takes hard work. Peacemaking is not easy. It is hard and it will take every ounce of energy we have.

Eugene Peterson said, "Peace is always a process, never a finished product". The finished product is that Jesus destroyed the wall of division. He took all the excuses away. The product is that Jesus invited the Gentiles to the table. He removed the barriers to being a part of God's family. But just like the early church, living in that reality will take every ounce of energy that we've got.

In Revelation two we find a letter that the apostle John writes to this church in Ephesus, and in that he says, "You have fallen away from your first love, do the works that you did it first." Now we often immediately interpret that is that they have fallen away from their first love, Jesus. But I think given the context, it is also about them falling away from their first love for one another. Because it's so much easier to hide underneath hash tags, to retreat to our echo chambers and to love people that think like us. Do the hard work that you did at first.

I want to mention two places where this is happening. One - our Be the Bridge groups and our Racial Unity groups. Every week, they are coming together to ask anything, to listen well, to love regardless, to

disagree freely. I was involved with one of these groups this summer with some of our staff. And I'm telling you there were weeks I had to make a decision of the will. Am I going to retreat to my own comfort or am I going to have the resolve to be a part of forging new community?

Another place where this is happening is our Alpha groups. Look, Alpha is a place where you can come and you can ask anything. No question is too skeptical, cynical, off the table, you bring your questions, we will listen well. There will probably be moments when we disagree freely, but we are going to love regardless. And here's what's cool - because of the online Alpha groups that we are running right now we have participants in Kansas, California, Georgia, Texas, Brazil, and Hong Kong. We're seeing new community forged. Paul says, "Remember, it's about Jesus, it's not about you". He says reconcile, do the hard work because the destiny of heaven coming to earth is dependent upon the development of this new humanity, this new community.

And then Paul goes on to say, reflect the character of God to the world. We keep reading, he says...

Consequently - conjunctive adverb. Consequently - plot twist, we are citizens, we are family, and we are the new temple. It's about showing the character, the ways and the mission of God to the world.

19 "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

One more quick opportunity. I'm going to start a pop up group in a couple of weeks on October 7, called The Great Opportunity about how to bring heaven to earth, specifically in your workplace, reimagining work. Because every vocation reflects a dimension of whom God is. It reveals something about his character. And there is a unique way that we are able to bring heaven to earth in our unique workplace environments, walking in his character, his ways, his mission. And we'll learn from some NCC'ers that are doing that well.

So Paul says first you're citizens, you are citizens of a kingdom, the kingdom of God that is your first allegiance. You're invited into the family; you're invited around the table. We are brothers and sisters and we have access to the same Father. And then he says this really interesting thing that you're the temple you're built together, your rising to become the place where God's presence is felt in the world, where people engage and encounter the presence of God when they come into contact with our community.

I want to try to illustrate this with another of my favorite plot twists. One of my favorite musicals is Sunday in the Park with George. It explores the life and the work of the 19th century artists George

Seurat. George Seurat was primarily interested in color theory, and in pointillism, and then the emerging science technology of optics. And it's specifically about his painting Sunday afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte which hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago. In the first half of the musical, we find Seurat in his studio painting a wall size canvas dot after dot after dot after dot. The music of the score matches the intensity and the insanity of his work. Visitors come into his studio and think he has lost his mind because it's just this splattering of reds and yellows and greens. And then the plot twist happens. When the painting is complete, and the viewer stands back, where they can catch a view of this entire wall size canvas, they realize that this is not a random, disorganized splattering of dots. Rather, these dots come together to create something completely new. Each of those dots retains their original color, retains their original shape but as they come together, they form a brand new image. And not only that, but there are colors that pop on this painting that aren't physically on the canvas because the eye is optically mixing them as the human eye looks at it. I would suggest that this is what Jesus is trying to do with his family, with the citizens of his kingdom, with his church, with his temple.

It's back to verse 10 that we talked about last weekend that we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus, to do good works prepared for us in advance. It's where each person retains their individual uniqueness, where they retain their God given imprint and personality, and culture. And yet when they come together, they form a new image, the image of the body of Christ, the temple of the living God, the place where people find new color and new perspective and new vision for the world. It's we are brought together by God's Spirit, if we will remember that this is not about anything we have done, but only what Jesus has done, if we will commit to walking the hard path of reconciliation, if we will commit to coming to the table and staying in the conversation and playing the long game, if we will commit to being a reflection of God to the world around us.

Now, if you're watching this weekend, and you've never accepted the invitation that Jesus has offered to be a part of his promises to be a part of his family; if you have never encountered Jesus and his freedom at the cross, I want to invite you to do that today. I want to encourage you to do that today. If you're watching on our online campus, there's a raised hand button if you would just go on and push that. If you're watching on on Vimeo or on YouTube or one of our other platforms if you would follow the prompt that's on your screen [NCC.re/followJesus](https://ncc.re/followJesus) we would love to walk with you in your first steps of your spiritual journey.

Our Father who is in heaven, holy, holy, holy as your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.