

July 22, 2018

Ephesians 2: 11-22

Prayer: Dear Lord, Help us to understand your ancient word in relation to our world today. Help us to take seriously your commands to be one in the body of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

When the Stars Line Up

There are times when one subject repeatedly comes to our attention through different avenues, different media. We have phrases for it: *The stars are lining up. The universe is trying to tell me something.*

At a cookout at the beginning of this summer, a neighbor loaned me a book called *Someone Knows My Name*. Written by Lawrence Hill, it's a historical novel that follows a young girl who is kidnapped from her village in Africa by British slavers in 1745. She survives the Middle Passage and comes to an indigo plantation in South Carolina.

It was fascinating because most slave narratives I'd read were set 100 years later, during Civil War times. But this one was set during the Revolutionary War. Some slaves sided with the British upon the promise of freedom and land in Canada after the war.

As this young woman moved from slave to impoverished free woman, her first baby was taken from her and sold. Her second child was kidnapped by a couple who befriended her.

As an older woman, she returned to Africa and then moved finally to England to become a spokeswoman for abolition of the slave trade. Through her remarkable fictional life, Hill teaches a lot about the history of the early slave trade and its intertwining in Africa, the UK and the States.

Well, I was still reading this book when another friend asked if I'd seen the documentary *13th*. I hadn't, so I found it on Netflix. It traces the iterations that have virtually continued to enslave people after the legal end of slavery.

The title refers to the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in 1865. That's the amendment that outlaws slavery and involuntary servitude – *except as punishment for crime*.

That loophole allows our society to continue involuntary servitude through mass incarceration. Formal slavery essentially gave way to chain gangs and lynchings and the war on drugs. Now big businesses profit from private prisons and unpaid prison labor. The documentary explores all the ways in which we have managed to extend involuntary servitude under a new name.

The fallout, by the way, is something we face daily at Triune. For even when people are released from prison, their felonies follow them for decades, preventing employment, housing, any possibility of getting back on their feet. Many of them end up homeless.

So when Ken Christy stopped me in the art room two weeks ago to show me his quilt art – with one panel showing lynching and the next imprisonment – I knew exactly this “strange fruit” journey he was commenting on. Because while we Americans make up 5% of the world's population, we have 25 % of the world's prison population.

I said that to a friend two weeks ago, and he said, *Wait a minute, say that again.* So I will.

We Americans make 5% of the world's population, but we have 25 % of the world's prison population. You have to ask yourself, Are we Americans really that much more evil or violent or criminal than people in other countries? Or have we decided that imprisonment is a viable, even profitable, ancillary to our society?

Artist Ken Christy and Robert and Melody Gage and Nikki Day from our congregation visited Montgomery, Ala., last weekend to see the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. The name of the museum there kind of says it all: *From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.*

Sometimes the same subject comes at us from all different sides. Sometimes the stars line up. Sometimes the universe tries to tell us something.

Our Scripture passage today is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He talks about how Christians are to navigate this age-old issue – which basically comes down to one group's claim of superiority over another group.

Paul's letter to the Christians at Ephesus isn't like his other letters. In Corinthians and Galatians and Philippians, he's talking to people he knows. He's answering their questions. He's squelching insurrections. He's telling them "Do this!" and "Stop doing that!" He's acting as their long-distance pastor.

In Ephesians, he's writing to people he may not even know. He writes, "**I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.**" (1: 15-16).

He has heard about their faith, but we don't think he knew them personally.

We think this letter was read in the churches as a circular, as a theological statement. It's more impersonal, more liturgical, than his others. It is more like preaching than a personal conversation.

The division in those days was not racial so much as it was ethnic -- Jew and Gentile. We know from almost all the books of the New Testament that it was a bitter divide. Paul says here there was hostility between them. Hostility every bit as bitter as our racial divisions today.

So if you'd like to read along this morning, we are reading from **Ephesians 2: 11-22**.

So then, 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— ¹²remember 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.

¹³But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For 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.

¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Earlier this summer we read stories from the Old Testament book of Samuel. In that book, there came a point that King David wanted to build a temple for the Lord. He'd been roaming around in that tent long enough, David said.

But the Lord spoke to the prophet Nathan and told him he never asked for a house of cedar. Nor did he want one.

Instead, he made a two-fold promise to King David.

- 1) David's own son, not David himself, would build a temple – as indeed, Solomon, did.
- 2) And the Lord would establish the throne of David's kingdom forever. Here's how it is worded: **“The Lord declares to you that the Lord will make *you* a house.”** (II Samuel 7: 11)

Now Paul is taking this notion a step further. The Lord doesn't need a house because Christian believers *are* his house. *It is in Christian believers that God dwells.*

Dawn Hayes visited Triune for the first time this month. She wore a T-shirt that said, “The body is the temple! I'm not fat... I'm a mega-church.”

That's our modern take on Paul's words: **“In (Jesus) the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.”**

Paul is addressing the foremost split in New Testament Christianity – who was a former Jew and who was a former Gentile. Though both professed Christ, they were at each other's throats.

But Jesus came for both, Paul insists. He came that **“he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two...”** He came that he might **“reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility....”**

I know that Jew and Gentile doesn't resonate with us like it does in some parts of the world. But black and white does. Imprisoned and free does. Immigrant and citizen does.

In the flow of history, the divisions don't matter terribly. There is always, always, always going to be something to divide us. Native American and white settler. Lynching victim and lynching perpetrator. Those without legal resources and those with them. Immigrants fleeing violence and those who would build a wall.

But if we are Christians, we are commanded to join with each other to build **“a dwelling-place for God.”**

We are commanded to join with each other to build “a dwelling-place for God.”

God doesn't want that temple of cedar any more now than he did when King David had the idea to build it. What he wants is for us to be a dwelling place for God in our joining together. God lives within us when we join together.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

It is passages like this that make me wonder how someone can claim to be a follower of Christ and yet espouse hate toward entire groups of people.

How someone can claim to be a follower of Christ and say in the next breath that his group alone is entitled to God's love.

How someone can claim to be a follower of Christ and dismiss the humanity of another based on skin color or country of origin or sexual orientation.

Dow Barton, one of the Greenville travelers to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, said the most disturbing part of the experience was not coming face to face with our violent past – but coming face to face with our unjust present.

“People in jail,” he said. “Thousands of people in jail. I watched one video of a prison in Alabama that guarantees prisoners will be stabbed multiple times when they first arrive, and authorities cannot stop the stabbings. . . . This is a holocaust in my backyard, but I don’t smell the smoke. After an hour, I could not absorb any more injustice, sadness and pain.”

Ken Christy says the experience oddly had the opposite effect for him.

It “made me hopeful,” he said. “I hope that it will bring us, as a people, to a sense of repentance that has to come before we can have a corporate healing as a nation.”

Repentance. That is, a turning from the way we are headed to the opposite way. A turning away from prison as a solution for victimless crimes to a model based on allowing perpetrators to live into their repentance.

That’s what the ancient Hebrew prophets called upon an entire people to do. That’s what our modern prophets are asking of us.

One of the great things about pastoring in this place is meeting people I never would have otherwise met. One of them is Cary Sanders, a polite, clean-cut young man I met as a college student when I did funeral services for his grandparents.

To my great surprise, I learned that Cary had spent years in prison. He now works for JumpStart, which is a re-entry program that works inside and outside our state prisons. They

have been operating transition houses in Spartanburg, so I was thrilled to learn this week that they plan to build a new campus halfway between Greenville and Spartanburg. It will be out at the intersection of I-85 and Highway 29.

Their announcement told about a woman named Ruby Cromer, owner of a staffing company in Spartanburg. Ruby's stepson, Travis, was serving time at Perry Correctional. Conditions were so bad between them that she hadn't spoken to him in four years.

Then Travis' father told Ruby that Travis had become involved with JumpStart and had a parole hearing. Would she come?

She went, and said she hardly recognized Travis. He was attentive. He sat up straight, watched what was going on, smiled – all of which were completely out of character for him. But it was the result of the coach and mentor he had been assigned through JumpStart.

When the parole board called Travis's name, he delivered a well rehearsed speech and was the first inmate of the day to be granted parole. Except then he did a strange thing: He turned it down.

He wanted to stay inside Perry to finish the JumpStart program — something no other inmate had ever asked to do. The board granted his request and Travis stayed at Perry to complete the program.

Ruby was so blown away at the change in her stepson that she volunteered to take on JumpStart's payroll admin duties, which has saved the agency a great deal of money.

Eventually, Travis was released and moved into JumpStart's transitional housing. He got a job and learned to live within a budget. He re-committed his life to Christ and re-established relationships with other family members.

Sadly, he had an enlarged heart from a previously existing health condition and died six months after his release. Ruby continues to work with JumpStart and tell Travis's story of repentance and restoration.

Sometimes too many things cross our paths – or our desks -- for us to ignore.
Sometimes too many stars line up.

As vessels in which God literally dwells, we Christians are called to live in ways that reach out to the most broken and battered among us.

We are also called to dismantle the systems that lead to their brokenness and battering.

Amen.

WELCOME OF NEW MEMBER – BILL SHARPTON. Bill is a textile company retiree who has been attending Triune for 4 years. Comes on promise of his letter from a Baptist church in McCormick, SC.