

Wow! What an amazing experience this morning, as we walked in the Believe Walk! People from every tribe gathered to walk and to raise critical funds that support cancer-fighting organizations in this region. Through the generosity of sponsors and donors; the Believe Walk will directly impact lives, by providing funds to improve cancer care and support services for cancer patients and their families in the Inland Empire communities of Southern California. Team Presbyterian had 86 walkers registered, we had others who volunteered and we also had donors!

The energy was amazing and just about everything we humans tend to fight about with each other – the color of our skin, our political views, our sexual identity, our socioeconomic status, our need to be right, boundary lines, religious affiliation, and the list could on and on - just didn't matter this morning. What mattered was supporting cancer patients and their families in the Inland Empire through this effort.

We heard read this morning...Christ has broken down the dividing wall... do we believe this? Christ has broken down the hostility between us... really, what do our behaviors really convey? Christ has created one new humanity... but there seems to be so much division. We are all members of the household of God, said Apostle Paul. We are to be joined together... built together...into a dwelling place for God, but are we willing to be such a dwelling place?

The church in Ephesus had been torn apart. Divisions, rather than unity abounded. As Eugene Peterson writes, "What we know about God (our beliefs) and what we do for God (our behaviors) have a way of getting broken apart in our lives." We, believers, struggle to live out the full humanity for which we were created. We struggle to simply love others as God has loved us. We struggle to forgive others as we have been forgiven. We struggle to be people of mercy and grace, even though we have received God's abundant mercy and grace. Our behaviors, as followers of Christ, just do not always align with our beliefs.

This is why Peterson calls our attention to a metaphor in his introduction of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He asks us to imagine a skillful orthopedic surgeon setting a compound fracture, suggesting that our bones – our beliefs and our behaviors – are fractured and in need of setting and healing.

Michael Coffey is a little blunter than Peterson for he says in response to this text, "Hey church. We're failing. We're failing big time." We are failing to live into what God has formed – a new humanity, a united gathering of peoples, through the grace of Christ. We, that is you and I, are failing to participate in creating the new world God envisions, one of peace.

Coffey doesn't soft peddle the truth that fills our newspapers, our computer screens and our airwaves. Divisions abound and rhetoric these days seems to fuel it, even rhetoric that comes from the halls of political power and from hierarchies within religious institutions. The need to be right; the need to have things our way; the need to be better than someone else, seems to overshadow our call to peace.

Now if we look at this passage in context. The peace Apostle Paul is talking about is not a forced peace. It is not the forced peace of the Roman Empire, where the Ephesian Gentiles and Jews live and move and have their being. It's not peace that is enforced through military dominance or peace that is enforced by silencing those who speak up and speak out against injustices. Paul is saying something different. It is not the emperor or the empire who is the giver of peace. No, it is Christ alone. Christ is our peace declares Paul and this pronouncement would have bordered on treason in 1st century Palestine. The one, not with military might, but the one whom the empire crucified is our peace. Christ alone is our peace and the bringer of peace individually and communally.

As we gather in the full diversity of our church this day, I imagine we don't have to look very hard in order to recognize we are failing, as Michael Coffey says. Although we are diverse, we are yet far from being representative of the one new humanity God envisions. We too easily fracture into groups and even groups within groups. As Peterson says of God's people, "There is hardly a bone in our bodies that has escaped injury, hardly a relationship in the city or at our job, in local schools or this particular church, in our family or in this country, that isn't out of joint. We all too easily become disjointed and disconnected from one another.

You may have an actual relationship in your mind that is out of joint and in need of a skillful orthopedic surgeon, but if you don't, spend a moment or two asking God what fracture in your life needs healing. What bones of belief and behavior are out of joint for you?

As the psalmist reminds us, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" Yet, unity, I will remind you is not uniformity. The Believe Walk this morning had unity of purpose, but there certainly wasn't uniformity among the people who participated! People of all shapes and sizes participated. People with flamboyant as well as demur personalities participated. People from different religious backgrounds and every ethnicity participated. God's diverse handwork was on display this morning, yet there was unity!

We all know someone, if only remotely, that has been impacted by cancer. The “C” word first caught my attention personally when my dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I remember it being a very difficult year for my dad, because I learned that his dad, my grandfather had colon cancer years earlier. My grandfather died post op from surgery needed to treat his colon cancer. My dad imagined a similar fate for himself. But, “cancer” did not claim my dad’s life thanks to new procedures and treatments. Thanks to walks such as the one we participated in today to raise funds for research and support of those personally impacted by cancer.

Then the big “C” entered my own life, just as this church was saying “yes,” to calling me as your pastor. I remember struggling to wrap my brain around my diagnosis, as I listened to my surgeon explain the exact type of cancer I had and treatment options. And I remember how helpless my family felt in helping me digest my new reality. Thankfully, surgery and same day radiation eradicated cancer from my body. Yet, in that experience there was unity of purpose, as family and friends joined together to love and support me. My circle of support was built together into a dwelling place for God, enabling me to experience peace even though my circumstances were anything but peaceful.

It seems to me that we Christians are best able to align our beliefs and our behaviors when crises happen, whether it is the big “C” or Hurricane Harvey, Irma, and Jose, whether it is the death of a loved one or earthquakes that topple buildings, whether it’s responding to Charlottesville or raging wildfires. The dividing walls of hostility melt and we unify our spirits and respond with love and support. Yet, why do we wait for crises to command our attention? Why do we so easily forget that we are to be joined together across all our differences? Why do we fight being built together spiritually into a greater whole?

My shirt color – lavender – identifies me as a survivor of cancer. I had an immediate affinity with anyone, man or woman, who wore this color T-shirt. My heart opened and ached, especially for those who dared to share their story with me. Like a fellow walker who shared, “I beat cancer twice,” or another who woman who shared “I’m ten years out from cancer and still cancer free.” Like the woman whose breast cancer metastasized to her bones, for she shared with me right before the survivor photo, “I’ll be on chemo the rest of my life.” Today, I encountered a dwelling place for God and it was in the connections I made with others, whose life had been rudely interrupted by the big “C.”

Yet, listen again to Paul’s words to us today, “You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with saints and also members of the household of

God. Friends, we all have an affinity towards each other, for we are all created in the image of God. For in Genesis we read, "God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God he created them, male and female God created them." We don't need to wear a purple shirt to be drawn to each other. We all belong. We are not divided, we are one new humanity.

Yet, this will never happen unless we are intentional. This will never happen unless we brave engaging each other across all the beautiful diversity among us.

As I stand and look out at this congregation, I know in my heart our affinity for each other is through Christ alone. Yet, I see something obvious even among us today. All of our earthly or cultural identities often separate us.

Do you notice anything about the way we are sitting in this sanctuary? Do you notice who is sitting with whom? Do you notice that all of our Indonesian brothers and sisters are sitting together right over here? I wonder how many of us know each other across all of our diversity in this congregation, let alone outside the walls of this church.

Yes, we have a natural tendency to flock together with those who are like us, often even forming groups within groups. So, to become a dwelling place for God, where there are no strangers or aliens among us, will only happen if we are intentional.

And so, I have a challenge for all of us as a first step. As we gather at table to share a meal after worship on this World Communion Sunday, I challenge everyone to sit at table with someone you don't know. Let's mix it up across our diversity. Let's be intentional and get to know someone in this congregation you have not yet met. Listen to each other's story and imagine how the Spirit might be building us together to be a dwelling place for God.

We are to be a dwelling place for God where no one is considered a stranger. May it be so among us. Amen.