

## **Ephesians 3:14-21**

This morning we continue our look into Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. It is a letter written to a church that was struggling in a time of change and challenge. The church and the whole of Christian faith for that matter, found itself in a time of transition, a time in which no one knew for certain just what direction the church might go in and exactly what form it may take in the future and who might best lead them there. And as always it seems, differences of opinion were strongly held.

There were two major groups within the church at Ephesus, although there were almost certainly, subgroups even within these two.

There were the Jewish Christians, the traditionalists we might call them. They had a long and deep history of faith that went back multiple generations. They had a special place and relationship with God. They had their deeply loved traditions and their long-held beliefs. And they knew like no one else could, just how things were supposed to be done.

And then there were the Gentile Christians, the newcomers we might say. They came to faith and to the church as a result of more recent personal experience of the risen and living Christ. They brought energy and excitement to their faith and felt little desire or obligation to temper their enthusiasm by conforming to outdated forms of expression.

The Gentile Christians no doubt felt constrained and judged by the Jewish Christians even while they felt devalued and disrespected by these newcomers to the faith.

The overall message of Paul's letter to the church was one of unity and togetherness. He reminded them that they were all one family chosen by God, and that they all belong, to God and to one another. And that they ought to love and claim each other as brothers and sisters, as God loves and chooses each of them.

Paul begins chapter 3 by talking about the "mystery of Christ", that mystery being that "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

Later in the chapter Paul prays that the church will be strengthened through the Spirit in their “inner being” and that “being rooted and established in love, (they) may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”.

Paul seemed to be saying that, though it is difficult to comprehend, Christ’s love for us is without limits. And he prays that through the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we might be “filled to the measure of the fullness of God’ so that we might love like that too. That our love might be wide enough and long enough, and high enough and deep enough to include all God’s children, even through our differences- even through our differences.

And this is where we come to the other side of the coin you see. For unity is important, yes. Togetherness is important, yes. Yet it is also true that we just may miss a great deal if we push for unity at the expense of understanding the differences of experience and perspective, of gifts and wisdom, the different hopes and fears that we each bring to the table.

It is all too easy to slip into a “we’re all alike at the core, so we should all get along” kind of thinking. But it is not real and honest love if we do not also recognize and value and honor and respect our own unique differences.

Paul memorably writes in his letter to the Galatians that “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. But I don’t think Paul means that a Jew stops being a Jew and a Greek stops being a Greek, a slave is suddenly free or a man or a woman stop being who they are. Those facts remain but they no longer separate us for we have a greater and shared identity in Christ.

The early Christian Church would remain a family of both Jewish and Gentile decent, but when it no longer divided and separated them it in many ways became their strength.

There were those among them who remembered the stories and treasured the past, those who provided continuity and connection to the great long arc of God's presence and work in the world.

And there were those who brought a fresh new experience and excitement and who opened the church up to a whole other world out there that God also loved and where God also lived.

And the church of today still reaps the benefit of their diversity as we carry in our scriptures the witness and writings of both.

The message of Paul's letter was timely for the church at Ephesus and perhaps it is no less timely for our church today. We too