

Salvation in an Age of Tribalism

A sermon on Ephesians 2:11-22 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 July 2024

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Message

Healing the world's tribalism and uniting us as one human family is the central goal of the gospel, the mission of salvation, the realisation of the kingdom of God.

Sermon

There is a cliché you have probably heard that says that there are two kinds of people in the world; those who think there are two kinds of people in the world, and those who don't. In reality, I very much doubt that there are any of the second category, those who don't think there are two kinds of people in the world. There are those of us who aspire to not think in such binary, us-and-them terms, but we all get unavoidably caught in it at some level. The reason we can't avoid it is (and this will sound heretical to many of us); the reason we can't avoid it is that it is the basic expression of humanity's original sin, and it is therefore what Jesus came to save us from.

I know that that will sound startlingly unorthodox to most of us, because it is not how our evangelical churches have presented the ideas of sin and salvation, but bear with me. As we dig into tonight's reading from the letter to the Ephesians, I think that you will see that what I am saying here is not some weirdo new idea, but is simply what the Apostle was describing.

The reason it shocks us is that since the time of the reformation, we evangelical Christians have reacted so strongly against one wrong understanding of salvation that we have fallen into the opposite wrong understanding. This becomes very apparent here in this second chapter of the letter to the Ephesians. Just before where we picked it up tonight, it contains one of the absolute classic proof texts of evangelical protestantism:

even when we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ. ... For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

There are several problems with the ways we have usually read that, but the biggest one is that we stopped there. We have been saved through faith. Full stop. Saved from what? If we stop there, as we have so often done, we haven't even got to the bit that tells us what salvation is saving us from.

The passage doesn't stop there. It continues where we picked it up tonight, and it continues with a big fat "therefore" to make sure we know it is continuing what has just been said. We have been saved through faith, therefore ... Therefore what? We have been saved through faith, therefore remember that once you were divided into two hostile groups, but now, through the blood of Christ

he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law (that divides us), that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Do you hear that? The point of salvation through faith is not simply that you get personally reassigned from one type of people – the unsaved – to the other type of people – the saved – and so you get to go to heaven, leaving the world to its wars and conflicts and self-destruction. It's not that at all. The whole point of salvation through faith is the salvation of the world from its constant fracturing into hostile factions that hate and destroy one another. That's what Ephesians 2 says. Our individual salvation through faith is not the goal, it is the means to the goal. The goal is the salvation of the world from its division and tribalism and hostility and self-destruction.

Jesus called this the kingdom of God, and if you read the gospels you will see that the heart of the gospel as Jesus proclaimed it is that the kingdom of God is at hand. Indeed the Apostle uses similarly political language in this passage when he says that we are no longer outsiders and aliens, but are now “citizens” with the saints and also members of the one household of God. Think of the horrific debates taking place in our country and elsewhere about immigration with their sharp divide between citizens and the often unwelcome new arrivals. The Apostle is telling us in that in Christ Jesus, all distinction between alien immigrants and citizens is being erased. We are all citizens. There is just one human family and we all belong. The reunification of that one family is the salvation of the world.

If you've ever wondered whether the gospel is really relevant and important to the modern world, this realisation of what the gospel actually is should remove all doubt. Everywhere we look there is talk of tribalism and the threats that it is posing to our very existence.

Even the divide that is mentioned most clearly in our bible reading is still very much on display in our world. One group understand themselves to be God's chosen people, and the interpret that as meaning that everyone else is the unchosen, the rejected, and so are expendable and have no rights. We are watching this play out in Gaza. It is certainly not the case that all Israelis hold that view of chosenness, in fact it may even be a minority who do, but they are a minority who hold power in the ruling coalition government and are setting the agenda of the war.

Listen to the political rhetoric in the USA election campaigning, or even the political rhetoric here in Australia. We might not yet have gone as far as the USA, but we are clearly on the same trajectory, with the dividing lines between parties and their ideologies becoming deeper and harsher, and the prospects of any respectful conversation or understanding across those lines becoming less and less likely. Politics seems to be becoming more and more about identity rather than reasoned consideration of ideas. Instead of weighing up arguments, people simply adopt an identity and adopt the set of beliefs that are tied to that identity, and then despise the ideas and people associated with any other identity. Both Donald Trump and Joe Biden are labelling each other as evil. Not just mistaken on policy direction, but evil.

Those of you who are social media users will see this going on in your daily feed. You will see a constant stream of posts in which people – probably people whose opinions are roughly aligned with yours – denounce other people for their chosen identities and for their consequent support of positions or behaviours deemed unenlightened, abhorrent and objectionable. The rise of social media has deepened the divisions and diminished our capacities to listen to one another across the dividing lines, because it has made it easier to find and maintain our own little tribes, and the algorithms then sort us into silos and ensure that we hear more and more from our own tribe and less and less of any alternative views.

Social media may amplify this to new levels, but it didn't create the problem. Tribalism has beset us since the beginning of time. The Bible traces it all the way back to the story of our fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were warned by God not to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but they were deceived into thinking that this was some kind of unfair deprivation, and they ate from that tree. We have often had trouble understanding this story, because we've made the same mistake as Adam and Eve and imagined that this knowledge of good and evil was actually a good thing they were previously missing out on, so we can't quite make sense of its association with sin.

But what kind of God would be depriving us of good things in order to set up a mere obedience test? What was the real fruit of their eating? This poison apple infects them with the new capacity and inclination to decide that some things are good and others are evil. And right there, you have the basic driver of tribalism. We are good. They are evil. Always.

From the day we bit into that apple, chaos and hostility began to tear us apart and turn us against each other. It left us with a desperate hunger to know ourselves as good but, having broken our ability to trust God's love and affirmation, it left us trying to construct our sense of being good by pointing the finger at others and identifying them as evil. Only when we convince ourselves that others are evil do we feel assured that we are therefore the good ones. We are good. They are evil. Always.

When the Apostle said, in our reading, that Christ "has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two," it is not only talking about the commandments in the Hebrew Bible. Of course it referred to that first in the context of the Jew-Gentile divide in the first century church, but the principle is universal. Part of how we construct our group identities and constitute them as good is to create moral codes and rules around them that serve to identify who is "us" and who is not. The apostle is not saying that everything in these codes is wrong, but that their function as a dividing wall needs to be torn down, abolished. We might still live by much of what they taught, but we will no longer be using it to distance ourselves from others and look down on them as morally objectionable.

Let me give a little example of how this is happening in our own current context. A few weeks ago, Charlie sent an email to us all with a helpful guide to navigating the recent emergence of gender neutral pronouns. It helped us to understand why they matter to non-binary people like Charlie, and it also helped us to understand how to grow in our capacity to get them right. I thought the content was great, but I was even more delighted by the gracious spirit that Charlie demonstrated in sharing it. They weren't strident or demanding. They weren't accusing or angry. They didn't denounce anyone who gets the pronouns wrong, and I'm grateful for that because I frequently get them wrong. Instead, they said "this is why it matters to me and this is how you can help."

Now the reason I was so delighted about that is because I have frequently experienced that exact same issue used as one of these dividing wall moral codes that pushes us into hostile opposing tribes. Gender neutral pronouns have often become one of those identity markers that cements our hostility. One side rejects the new pronouns as a woke conspiracy leading us into degeneracy, and so refuses to use them as a matter of principle, and the other side slides

into castigating every mistaken pronoun as a nasty form of micro-aggression that mis-genders people and drives them towards suicide. Both sides are constructing a moral code that functions as an identity marker and wall of division, and so contributes to the fracturing and hostility that are tearing our world apart.

Charlie, on the other hand, didn't do that. Instead they were a shining example of what the letter to the Ephesians is talking about here. They showed us a pathway of increased understanding without "othering" anyone, and without dialling up the hostility. Even if you don't like the new pronouns, you wouldn't have felt attacked or rejected by Charlie. Disagreement is perfectly acceptable. Refusal to listen and seek understanding, on the other hand, is to become part of the problem, not part of Christ's solution.

The salvation for which Jesus lived and died is the breaking down of every wall of hostility and the reunification of the world's peoples into one family of humanity. The Apostle makes the point in our reading that this reunification happens "through the blood of Christ." What does the shedding of Jesus blood have to do with this?

Well, what happened to Jesus was that when we descended into a frenzy of mob identity posturing, we labelled Jesus as being an example of the dangerous evil others that we were against. And Jesus accepted that. He didn't defend himself. He willingly stood alongside all those we had othered and rejected, and allowed us to crucify him along with them. That's how he unmasks the sin we continue in.

And Jesus continues to do this. Whenever we are angrily denouncing and rejecting some other group, if we imagine that Jesus is standing on our side hurling insults with us, we've got Jesus very wrong. Almost without exception, the place we will spot Jesus in those moments, in those scenarios, is among those we are stoning, covered in blood. Even if the moral principle of the fight is on our side, Jesus will choose to die at our hands among our enemies rather than join us in making the principle of our righteousness a cause for dividing up into another hostile us-and-them. Jesus will side with our victims every time in the cause of calling us to embrace them in love and respect, tearing down the walls that divide us, and reuniting us as one human family.

There is a point in all this where we find this path impossible. It takes us right back to the joke with which I opened. However hard I try to reject any urge to divide people up into an us and them, I can't entirely do it. If nothing else I will get stuck thinking that "we" are the ones who support one unified humanity, and "they" are the ones who want to divide everyone up into us and them. And sure enough, in that paradox I find that I am still one of them.

But the impossibility of working this out and achieving it is not any reason to give up. In fact, it is precisely the reason that this letter to the Ephesians tells us that salvation is a gift and not something we can achieve. "For by grace the world is being saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

We can't work it out. That's why we continue to confess our entanglement in sin, week after week. But the good news is that we don't have to work it out. It is not up to us. It is God who is tearing down the walls of hostility. Our role is simply to rejoice instead of trying to rebuild them, and to recognise those whose faces we first see when the walls come down, as the face

of Christ, to be loved and welcomed and embraced. And in so doing, the world is being saved.