

I

Years ago, before there were debit cards and mobile phones with apps and online bill payment systems, people wrote something called checks to pay their bills. Like on paper, with pens, and everything.

And each month, the bank would send a printed record of your account activity in the mail, a document called a statement. And you would look at the bank's record and compare it with your own records, and you would account for any discrepancies between the two numbers – a process that in the accounting world is called reconciliation. As I have told our church leadership many times, I know just enough about accounting to be dangerous.

II

But reconciliation is not just an accounting term. Reconciliation is the process of taking an account of things and bringing them into right relationship with each other.

And this theological concept of reconciliation – the act of being brought into right relationship with God and with our fellow humans – is at the heart of our text this morning.

III

We're continuing this morning with our summer sermon series on the Book of Ephesians, and as we said last week, Ephesians isn't a book at all in the traditional sense of that word, but rather a letter addressed to a group of Christians living in the late first century of the common era in and around the city of Ephesus, which lies in modern-day Turkey.

Sometimes as we are reading old letters, there are cultural references that

would have been common knowledge between the sender and his or her recipients, but are perhaps less familiar to our modern eyes and ears.

For example, when he was serving in the United States Army in the Second World War, my grandfather sent many letters home to his mother, and those letters are still in our family. In his letters to his mother, he uses abbreviations and syntax that were common to the place and time, but when I first read them, I had to do a little extra research to decode some of the jargon and syntax for myself. And such is the case with some of the language in Ephesians, particularly around words like "circumcision" and "Gentiles." So before we get to the text, a bit of advance decoding is in order.

Jesus was born and raised as a first-century Jew, as were all of his first followers. They grew up reading and hearing the Hebrew bible and learning the customs and traditions of first-century Judaism. Remember, on the day Jesus was crucified, Pontius Pilate ordered an inscription placed atop his cross that read, "The King of the Jews."

Forty days after his death and resurrection, the Book of Acts tells us that Jesus ascended into heaven. And as he was ascending, he said to his followers, you will be my witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem, and then to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, they were all together when something when something like the sound of a violent rushing wind blew through the house, and something like tongues of fire rested on each of them. And the rest of the Book of Acts is about how the good news about Jesus began to spread

from Jerusalem, and out to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, including places like Ephesus.

But as the disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, began to take the good news about Jesus beyond Jerusalem and Judea, they made a startling discovery. People who had *not* been born and raised as Jews, people who had *not* grown up observing the customs and traditions of first-century Judaism, were nevertheless coming to the same conclusion that they had - Jesus of Nazareth was not just another prophet or moral teacher or revolutionary – he was and is the one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny is somehow tied together – or, to put it more simply, the Christ. These people who did not grow up as Jews were collectively referred to by the term Gentiles.

But this startling movement of the Holy Spirit, as wondrous as it was, also created something of a crisis in the early church. Is circumcision, the mark of the covenant in the Hebrew bible, still a requirement for belonging to the church? Are there two classes of Christians – a Jewish one and a Gentile one? These questions might seem silly to us now, but they were the subjects of no small amount of dissension and debate in the early church, as evidenced by long sections of the Book of Acts and almost the entire letter to the Galatians.

Most of the Christians living in and near the city of Ephesus in the first century CE were Gentiles – that is, they had not been born and raised as Jews. And so these questions about belonging, these questions about markers of identity, these questions about what, if any, lines must be drawn within the

community of faith – are at the heart of the text before us.

So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Ephesians 2:11-22. Again, the language and syntax are dense, so if you'd like to read along as I read aloud, the text is found on page 1067 of your pew bible. Listen now for a Word from God.

So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in

whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

“that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross.”

There’s that word again – reconcile. To take an account of things and bring them into right relationship with each other.

IV

When I was a very small boy, someone once told me that when I do something good, God takes out a gold pen and makes a check mark next to my name in God’s book. But when I do something bad, God takes out a black pen and makes an x next to my name. That thought appealed to me at the time, because it sounded just like how things worked at my preschool. So long as I had more gold checks than black x’s in my book, all was well.

But as I grew into adulthood, and as I came to better know God and to understand God’s Word, I learned a deeper truth about myself and about our human condition.

No matter how hard we try, no matter how good our intentions, on our own, we will always be out of balance with God. The truth about you, and the truth about me, and the truth about everyone we know and love, is that though we were created good by God, though we were made in God’s image, we rebel against God and hide from our creator. We ignore God’s commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves. We accept lies as truth, and exploit our neighbors and nature. In short, we are prone to sin, and

we can never outwork or out earn our own sin. Left to our own devices, we are alienated from both God and from one another, and we have no hope of having right relationship again.

But the good news of the gospel, the good news that the writer of Ephesians proclaims is that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has made a reconciling entry for us. God has reconciled us, brought us into right relationship again, through the work of the cross, not because of our genetics or because of our family ties, not because we said a certain prayer or did a certain thing, but simply because God is gracious to us.

My friend, God loves you wholly and completely and more than you or I will ever understand. You are no longer estranged from God, but you have been brought near by the gift of the cross – as the line from one of my favorite hymns says, no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.

You didn’t do anything to earn it. You couldn’t have done it on your own. God did for you in Christ what you could have never done for yourself – God has reconciled you - and that’s why they call it grace.

Your relationship with God has been set right again through Jesus Christ.

V

But what about our relationships with our fellow human beings?

Human relationships are often complex. And the closer we are to someone, oftentimes the more complex those relationships become.

As I shared with one of my own sons just a few days ago, one thing I wasn't prepared for emotionally when I became a father is how, in the same moment, I could feel such a powerful love for my son that I would gladly sacrifice my life for his without a moment's hesitation, and at the very same time, feel such a hot anger as to be capable of enacting violence against a child.

Our relationships with our fellow humans are complex, but God's desire for us, God's intention for us, is that we would be reconciled to each other.

And that, I think, is part of what makes the gospel so countercultural as to be confounding.

For we live in a culture that teaches us that mercy is for chumps. We live in a culture that teaches us that the way to get ahead in life is to strike first and strike fast and strike hard. We live in a culture that teaches us to always be looking for the angles, always be looking for an advantage. We live in a culture that teaches us, sometimes explicitly, but oftentimes more subtly, that some people are inherently better than others, that the hostility and inequity that exists between different groups of people is just the way things are, the natural order of things, rather than the result of human sin.

But the letter to the Ephesians, and the letter to us, reminds us that God's desire is that he might reconcile us to God in one body through the cross."

Every week, we pray a prayer that Jesus taught us to pray that includes this line: forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

The first step in reconciling accounts, whether financial or theological, is to take a good long look at them. If you don't ever open the bank statement, but instead just ignore it or pitch it every month, you won't ever be able to reconcile a bank account.

If don't or won't take an account of our debts, then we will never get to the place where we can truly forgive our debtors.

The writer of Ephesians speaks of the new humanity that God is creating, that God is destroying the hostility between human beings. But that work doesn't begin in the halls of power, or when the next election cycle rolls around, or when that person who wronged us finally comes to their senses and falls on their knees or their face. That work, that desire of God that we would be reconciled, begins right here in our own hearts.

This is not just an academic exercise, my friends. This is not just so that we might all get along. God is up to something big in the world. In and through us, as we practice reconciliation, God is building upon the foundation of the prophets and the apostles. In and through us, as we practice forgiveness, God is building a structure that grows together, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone. In and through us, a people who seek always to live in right relationship with God and with each other, God is building a dwelling place for God's own self, right here among us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.