

“Rooted in Christ: “God’s Everlasting Mercy - Christ’s Sacrificial Love”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: September 22, 2024



This summer, I went to a retreat center to have uninterrupted time to plan for the Contemplative Service and the Scripture we would be using. I spent time praying and reading; listening and pondering; walking and noticing. And I just kept coming back to the division that feels so palatable in our country and in our world. I came away feeling that it would be important to consider that division in light of God’s sovereignty and Christ’s loving actions.

It was this morning’s New Testament reading that led me to the Letter to the Ephesians as a focus for this fall.

You see, I have been spending regular time in this passage and in this version of the passage through some work that I and others are doing within our Presbytery.¹

Four years ago, our Presbytery made the decision to require all ministers to take antiracism training, and I have been a part of the team that has been offering the training.

The curriculum² that was selected uses this morning’s passage as a devotional element of the training, and I have grown to appreciate its incredible image of reconciliation between two groups who are enemies, who are separated, and who need reconciling.

Last week, our Scripture helped us to see sin both as what causes separation and the separation itself. Our separation from God. Our separation from others. And our separation from our inner selves.

The language of this morning’s New Testament reading is infused with the language of separation as Paul reminds the Gentiles (non-Jews) that they were once “outsiders,” “outcasts,” and “strangers” who were far away, hopelessly “stranded,” “separated,” “hated,” and “outside God’s covenant community.”³

And yet once Christ is mentioned, the descriptions of the Gentiles change — and change radically! The Gentiles become citizens, family members, and residents of God’s household. Christ gathered the Gentiles and brought them near, so they could be included in one new humanity made from two opposing groups.

¹ The Presbytery is a collection of Presbyterian churches that share a geographical area. Our Presbytery is the Presbytery of Charlotte.

² Dr. Lucretia Berry, *What Lies Between Us*, 52.

³ Ephesians 2:12-22 (Voice Translation)

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I learned a new word this week that illustrates the making of one out of two. The word is “inosculation”⁴ and it describes the phenomenon of this picture.



Inosculation is the ability of two separate trees to grow together by sharing branches and roots. Unfortunately, I don’t have time to explain the process of inosculation (so please google it if you are interested), but the process of inosculation is a visual of what happened with the Gentiles and the Jews. They were re-connected through Christ. They found connection across their separation. Two different trees become one. Two different groups becoming one.

It is as though these trees have agreed to grow together — to be community together.

So what keeps us separate? What keeps us from community?
Why, for example, does the Presbytery feel the need to require antiracism training?

This, of course, has a complex answer — but one factor is our vulnerability as human beings to being VERY influenced by our environment.
Our environment plays an incredible role in how we see things.

⁴ “Inosculation: Making Connections in the Woods,” extension.unh.edu

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We live in a country that prizes the individual and so our eyes become attuned to noticing individuals and to noticing the differences between individuals and then concluding that those differences are big enough to make us separate.

The author James Clear⁵ has been studying habits for several years and has been struck at just how powerfully our environment effects our habits and actions. He summarizes it this way

“We don't choose our earliest habits, we imitate them. We follow the script handed down by our friends and family, our church or school, our local community and society at large. Each of these cultures and groups comes with its own set of expectations and standards – –when and whether to get married, how many children to have, which holidays to celebrate, how much money to spend on your child's birthday party. In many ways, these social norms are the invisible rules that guide your behavior each day. You're always keeping them in mind, even if they are not at the top of your mind. Often, you follow the habits of your culture, without thinking, without question, and sometimes without remembering.”

We lead busy lives, and we go along . . . “follow[ing] the habits of our culture, without thinking, without question, and sometimes without remembering.”

Our sin-filled world tells us that we are separate and separated. And that becomes the norm.

But God suggests otherwise. The reality is that we are all one.
Our separateness is merely an illusion that is put forth by our sin-filled world.

There are a number of writers and theologians who talk about this illusion of separateness . . . Richard Rohr, David Benner, Father Keating . . .

But Albert Einstein took the discussion up a notch.
Instead of calling it the illusion of separation — Einstein called it the delusion of separation. And he wrote that “the striving to free ourselves from this delusion is the one issue of true religion.”

My friends, Christ has come to break through the illusion.
In our Scripture, the word for the peace that Christ brings is “shalom.”
And while shalom is certainly a sense of peace, and it is certainly the cessation of hostilities, shalom is much more than that.
Shalom means “wholeness.”
The “shalom” that Christ brings is an antidote to the world’s separations.
The Trinity is the perfect shalom, the perfect wholeness, and it is wholeness that God wants for God’s creation.

⁵ James Clear, *Atomic Habits*, 115-117.

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One last visual



At first glance, this looks like a picture of 100 trees or more, but the individual trunks only give the illusion that these are separate trees.

These are Aspen trees, and even though they look like separate trees, they really are one tree.

What makes them one tree is that they all grow out of the same root.

And this is our invitation.

So how do we work on see the illusion of separateness?

We stay rooted in Christ.