

2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 3:14-21

Grace to you, and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

The apostle Paul had been given a very specific mission. And that was to bring the message of Christ's love to the Gentiles. Now that's a great thing, you might be thinking, and I'd have to agree. Of the revamped twelve – after Jesus ascended and they elected Matthias to join them – many of them were busy bringing the message to the descendants of Abraham there around Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Others of the original twelve, like Thomas, went to far-away lands – like India in Thomas's case – which was well outside the scope of the Roman Empire.

Paul, though, stayed a little bit closer to home. He remained there in the Roman Empire. Now, true, there were Gentiles practically anywhere you went, but Paul was called to bring the message of Christ to those that we would term were living in Asia Minor. We would know better as modern-day Greece, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. These were the lands of the Gentiles, or as they were often known, the barbarians.

I had learned several years ago that the original definition of the term “barbarian” was “one who wears pants.” So, I guess we know where that leaves me.

Gentiles – how were they viewed by those descendants of Abraham? Well, as one first-century writer put it, “Gentiles were created to be the kindling for the fires of hell.” And these are the folks to whom Paul was called to serve.

Now, some of the congregations that Paul was called to launch we know a great deal about. The Church in Corinth, for example. Other congregations we don't know that much about at all. The Christian church in Ephesus seems to fall in that latter category. We do know that Ephesus was the Roman capital of the Asia Minor area. Its mentioned about twenty times in the New Testament. Paul didn't establish that church, but it was established during his ministry. He was in Ephesus for probably the latter half of the 50s; that is the 50s of the first century. He taught there for a while. He organized a mission party who went out to do mission work from Ephesus. Ephesus also just happens to be one of the seven churches that is named in the book of Revelation.

We conjecture that this congregation in Ephesus was made up of primarily Gentile converts. Gentile converts, or those who had grown up in the faith depending upon when exactly this letter was written. We look at some of what Paul writes and we can see how incredibly radical his message is. It's radical to the Jewish believers, but it's radical also to the Gentiles. We need to jump back to chapter two. He starts in chapter two by reminding the hearers of his letter of how they used to be. Ephesians 2:1-2: “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world.”

In other words, because of what you did, you are dead. Because you followed the world,

you didn't matter, you couldn't earn God's love no matter how much you wanted to, no matter how much you tried. That sin that you would do, that sin that caused that enmity, that strife between you and God, always gets in the way. But – and there's always a big but – but, the fantastic, the good, the great news is that we don't have to earn that love.

He goes on to say in Ephesians, chapter 2: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” There's nothing that we can do to earn God's love. But we don't have to, because it's given to us freely.

So what's the big deal, then, about the Gentiles? He continues in chapter 2: “So then you remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”... remember that you were at a 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.”

Gentiles who are only good to be kindling for the fires of hell have now been brought near by the blood of Christ. We're dead because of our sins, but we have been saved by grace through faith. We who are Gentile by physical birth, by our ethnic heritage, by our DNA makeup, we don't have the same physical sign as those who are of Jewish heritage. We don't have that physical reminder of circumcision. No, we still, though, have been brought together into the family of God, into the citizenship of all believers, and we have been marked not by the sign of circumcision, but by – as we heard in verse 13 – the blood of Christ. We bear the seal of Christ. Not the lack of foreskin, but the cross that we received on our foreheads when we were baptized.

So, as we get to our lesson today the power that Paul prays for, the prayers that he sends up, the glory to which he gives thanks to God, is all on the behalf of the Gentile believers, of which I, as a Gentile, happen to be very grateful for. But I do have to say that considering how the Gentiles were regarded, I don't know that had I been in Paul's place that I would have been grateful, that I would have been as magnanimous as Paul was. Because, I know that deep down – well maybe not all that deep down – that I'm a prejudiced guy. Now, maybe you believe that and maybe you don't. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago and I was surrounded by first and second generation immigrants. I grew up in a predominantly monochromatic neighborhood and that one color was this color right here.

I would spend my summers with my cousins down in Davie County, North Carolina. It was in Davie County that I was told that there were certain folks who were lazy. They were all drunks, they were none too bright, the women were all loose, the men were all cheats, and those folks were not this color – those folks were of a darker color. Now, what I found interesting is that about a decade later when I moved out to South Dakota and I lived in the northern plains for ten years, that I heard exactly the same thing said about the Lakota Sioux Indians.

But I know that I am prejudiced because of the way that I tend to react around Americans who are of Italian or Norwegian descent. Okay, maybe I said that for a bit of a laugh – it

obviously didn't work, but I do say that as someone who is of Italian-American descent. You know those movies and shows you see with those tough guys, those Italian tough guys? I have relatives like that, and I struggle with that.

As I said, I lived in South Dakota in the northern plains for about 10 years, and I came to resent the fact that I was often looked down upon or kept out of things because I was not of Norwegian-American heritage. And regardless of what Will Rogers used to say, "I never met a man I didn't like," I do honestly believe that all of us are prejudiced to some degree or another. Now, hopefully, you're working on that. I hope you're not proud that you look down on others because of their ethnic heritage, or because of their financial position, or what their employment might or might not be. I try not to look down on others because of what they drive, or where they live, or where they go to worship.

Paul didn't do that to the Gentiles. Paul specifically didn't do that to the Gentiles in Ephesus. And God doesn't want us to do that to one another either. As we heard tonight: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." And it's because of God's blindness to prejudice that we – that I as a Gentile – can receive that love. It's because of God's blindness to our ethnic heritage, it's because of God's blindness to our financial standing, or where we live, or the color of our skin, that brings us to God. None of that matters, because God looks at us through the blood of Christ. So, we're all the same. And that sameness allowed Paul to say to the Ephesians 1900 years ago, so that we might hear the words tonight: "to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever." Amen.