

Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 11)

Text:
Ephesians
2:18
*It is
through
Christ that
all of us,
Jews and
Gentiles,
are able to
come in the
one Spirit
into the
presence of
the Father.*



With different eyes

A teenage boy enters a high school classroom. He thinks, "Odd, there are nozzles sticking up out of the desks". He plays with a nozzle while the teacher calls the roll. The teacher shouts, "Joshua, don't touch that! You want to blow us to smithereens?"

Josh had never heard of a classroom that could blow up though he thought it a fun idea.

Then the teacher begins, "This week we are going to talk about safety". You might think this is boring and you might think you know everything there is to know about safety in this classroom. Take it from me – you don't – so listen to every word I say. Your life and future health may depend on it".

During the first week, someone behind Josh asks the teacher, "What is that chart up on the wall? What do those strange numbers and words mean?"

"You're not ready for that," says the teacher. "Those are the secrets that are only revealed to those in this classroom. For now, be patient and wait."

At the end of the week there is a test on the 'How to be safe'. In recognition of the students passing this test, they receive a white coat and goggles. "Now," says the

teacher with a sense of expectancy, "Now you are ready to enter the world of chemistry."

There is that day, later in the semester, when the teacher points to the chart and says, "Now you are at last ready to learn the secrets. I am going to teach you how to do things with these symbols that you have never done before. I am going to take you places you would never have gone, had you not had the good sense to take chemistry."

"And the chemistry textbook. It's not just full of facts, figures, and formulae; it has pictures of heroes with short biographies, lives of folk who stood by their convictions and ignored those who made fun of their beliefs and taught us how to pasteurize milk, make penicillin, discover DNA! You might say they are the saints of chemistry"

After the first semester Josh helps carry in a bag of groceries for his mum. As he puts down the package he pulls something out it. "Heat-activated deodorant," Josh reads aloud. He instinctively turns the can around, saying to himself, "I wonder what this has in it? Something that reacts to heat, I guess". And he reads the list of chemicals in the deodorant.

As his mother looks on she stands in awe of that moment. Here is a miraculous transformation in the life of her son which had been worked in a few short months. Now, when Josh looks out the window in the morning, he no longer sees the same world he saw five months ago. He has been adopted into a household called chemistry.

As Josh studied chemistry with all of its weird and wonderful rules, rituals, symbols, transforming chemicals, wonderful reactions and the discovery of new things, Josh began to see the world with different eyes. When he looked at a green plant in the garden he would not only see its shape and colour but he would see carbohydrates, lipids, proteins, nucleic acids, polysaccharides, cellulose, fructose, amino acids, enzymes, DNA - all combined together to make a simply leaf.

Just as Josh had been adopted into the family of chemistry and began to see things differently likewise when God adopts us into his family the world around us and the people in our lives are seen with different eyes.

Just as an adoption of a child in today's world takes a whole lot of patience and is very costly so also it is with our adoption into God's family. Paul highlights that this was no cheap exercise getting us into God's family and it took a whole lot of love on God's part.

And it took a whole lot of patience on God's part to pull off our adoption. He chose us as his own before the world was created and it took centuries for us to finally arrive here on this planet. During the centuries leading up to our birth the lack of faith and commitment of our ancestors from the time of Adam and Eve right up to today must have tested God's patience. But God's love for us was more powerful than his disappointment in us and those who have gone before us. He sent us his Son.

Paul really wants to emphasise how wonderful this is. Regular church goers like us have heard this a million times, but it really is quite something that blows your mind when we realise that the holy God came into the dirt and sin of this world. He suffered in the hands of sinful people. We nailed him to a cross.

And yet in spite of this rejection and suffering, God's love wins the day and it is his pleasure and delight to make us his children. The greatness of the love that God showed to us in Christ Jesus is extraordinary – in fact, extraordinary is too weak a word – how about amazing, colossal, enormous, gigantic, marvellous, surprising and what ever other words come to mind. Paul puts it this way, *"Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his love God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children—this was his pleasure and purpose. For by the blood of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven"* (Eph 1:3,5,7).

In other words, God comes to us personally with his amazing and surprising love and reclaims us from sin and guilt and death as his forgiven and adopted children.

When we realise all this we become like Josh who sees the world in a whole new way. Through chemistry Josh saw the world around him and even himself with different eyes. Paul points out that we see the other people in the church with different eyes.

No longer is it a matter of giving back equally, if not more, than what you are given when it comes to revenge, or discriminating against those who are different, have less worldly goods, hold different views about politics, religion and sport, or holding grudges, belittling others or being hard to get on with.

We now see everyone in the body of Christ, the church, with different eyes. Paul doesn't beat about the bush when he says, *"Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ"* (Eph 4:31).

Paul admits that in the church there are Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free people, the rich and the poor, males and females and here is the amazing thing about what God in Jesus has done. He has brought us all together in the church. There is no room for divisions or better-than-thou attitudes or gossip or back-stabbing. He makes the point that whatever our background or whatever our personality type we have all been joined together in Christ. We are now *"citizens together with God's people and members of the family of God"* and joined together *"into a sacred temple dedicated to the Lord"* to use Paul's words. *We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future"* (Eph 4:3,4).

People, like you and the people sitting around you, come together because here we find Jesus. Jesus makes a difference to the way we regard each. We are no longer strangers and foreigners as Paul says, but because of Jesus we are members of God's family, we are able to welcome and understand one another as fellow-members of God's household, even though we are all different and all have our individual ways and occupations.

Paul isn't suggesting for one minute that everyone in this congregation, in fact, in the church throughout the world must be best buddies or that we are to regard everyone the same. That's impossible. Besides we are all individuals with our own personalities and it's natural for us to be closer to some people than others. But what Paul is saying is that the love, peace and forgiveness that Jesus has brought into our lives and into the church should in no way be disrupted by selfishness, unforgiveness, anger, resentment or whatever might destroy the special bond that we have because of our oneness in Christ.

I wonder if we did a survey around the congregation and those who have had connections with St John's in the past how many people hold hurts, grudges, don't talk to certain people, or hold some kind of resentment toward a fellow Christian. If we would answer honestly, I think we would be embarrassed to discover the "*dividing walls of hostility*" (to use Paul's words) that separate Christians, members of families, and friends. We don't seem to be able to help ourselves. Either we are the ones giving the offence or we are the ones too easily offended, no one makes any attempt to seek reconciliation and up go the dividing walls.

That's why every time we gather together for worship we confess our sins. Disobedience marks our lives. We are cut off from God. We build up a dividing wall between us and our heavenly Father, a wall of sin. It is a wall that destroys our relationship with God, a wall that destroys our relationship with other people. We know how good we are at building walls between us and others. We know how easily we take the moral high ground and blame every one else for an unhappy situation. And so we humbly come confessing our sin before God and to one another.

And as we come to communion sharing in the one body and same blood of Jesus, we come to commune with Christ and come closer to one another. Sure there are those with whom we have had disagreements but in the body and blood of Jesus we put all that behind us and receive Jesus' forgiveness for our failure to keep the bond of love and peace that we share in Christ.

Just as Josh saw everything differently because of his knowledge of chemistry, we too see the people around us differently because of our knowledge of the love that Jesus has for us and the love that he has placed in our hearts. We see other people differently because they have a special connection with us because of our oneness in Christ.

Paul finishes his letter with a prayer for unity. "*May God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give to all Christians peace and love with faith*".

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