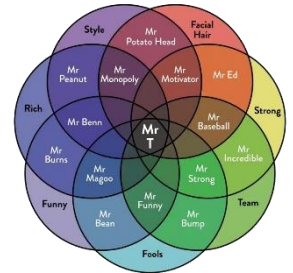


**“The Good News of Peace in Christ” based on Ephesians 2:4-22 and Isaiah 57:14-19
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on July 21, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Today, we live in a world that seems to be divided into smaller and smaller groups, even as the mass of humanity is connected in more and more ways. In our Western Culture, each of us is seen by the world as a collection of identities. For each of these identities, there is a community or at least a commonality.

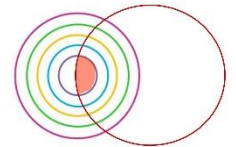
But then, in an indescribable Venn diagram of many, many circles, somewhere at the intersection of them all, there are we – an individual. Though you or I may belong to many communities, ultimately, we are told our value is as an individual. It was the word of the year last year, but really “authentic” is the word of the last 75 years. We are tied to an ethic of authenticity. Our authentic space is at the intersection of this Venn diagram. That’s who we are. We need to be true to that.



But it was different in the ancient world. Back then the individual received their identity from the world around them. It was more a system of concentric circles. You were part of a family, within a tribe, within a city, within a nation, and ultimately within an empire, perhaps. The value of these circles went from smallest being most important to largest least important for most people.



What made the Rome unique, compared to previous empires, was that it sought to make the biggest circle – the empire – as important to its members as the smallest one. Rome often made its conquered people citizens, bestowing benefits and rights to them. Other empires of that era and before built their armies by absorbing foreign fighting forces as whole units.



For example, Alexander the Great’s army centered on the Macedonian cavalry, and he took 1800 with him. When some died, more were sent from Macedonia to join him. The greatest trained soldiers from Macedonia were stationed together. Likely, he had the Macedonian phalanx and Macedonian hypaspists, and his infantry.

Alongside these Macedonian units, he added additional units from the people he conquered. He had the Thessalian Cavalry, which before the Macedonian cavalry had been the best in the world. They fought as a unit, together. Then other Greek cavalry units fought in their own companies, staying together to make up his larger and larger army. They were separate units in the same army. It was the same with archers, having Persian archers on horses and Cretan ones on foot. Then the paid mercenaries would fill in the gaps, mixed into one group or another as they were skilled. These groups were all separate within the same composite.

The reason Alexander and previous empires wanted to do this was to use local loyalties to their advantage, figuring that soldiers would fight more bravely alongside their tribes and countrymen. Rome assimilated its conquered into its army, creating a new community. These soldiers, perhaps from many different lands, were under one general, and they fought not for their family, tribe, city or nation, but for their general and for Rome itself. Rome’s army sought to create the Venn diagram, where Rome’s circle intersected with all those concentric circles, making this your identity. If you were a soldier in Rome you might be part of all these circles, but ultimately, this was who you are.

In Ephesus, at the time of Paul, we see the beginnings of the Imperial cult or worship of the emperor. This brought the practice of the army into the lives of everyday ordinary people. Ephesus was home to the goddess Artemis, whose temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. She was the local, primary deity. Families in Ephesus would be expected to worship her alongside Zeus primarily. But this city became ground zero for the idea of worshipping the emperor. Doing so was a marker of your Roman identity even in that cosmopolitan city, where people from all over were living. Household leaders were expected to pay homage, not just to the classical gods, but Caesar as well, offering incense to him too.

Paul then, in our passage, suggests something completely new. He presents taking whomever you are in those concentric circles or Venn diagrams, taking that person and entering into Christ. When you are in Christ, you are a new community, made up of individuals, who have not left behind who they are or were previously, because the goal here is not sameness. It's unity.

No, the people of the nations, or the gentiles, and the Jews, the people of the God of Israel, fit together as co-citizens in a new type of government. They were Holy ones set apart by God for a purpose and made into the household or family of God. This family is built on the foundation of the apostles sent by Jesus and prophets whom God sent to Israel. Then Jesus, the anointed King and Messiah, is the cornerstone.

Paul tells us that in Jesus the whole building is fit together, but it is more than just a building. It is more than any single identity, and bigger than an overarching identity. This building is the temple of God. It's the dwelling place for God's Holy Spirit. This temple, like the Garden of Eden, is in its entirety, the dwelling place of God. And so, the space of the world then, where it is inhabited by the believers in Jesus, becomes the temple. This is why there is an emphasis in spreading the gospel across the world.

We are sent by faith to do good works in the world. This is not done for us to be saved, because our salvation is God's accomplishment by grace. No, it is to reveal God's love and presence of the Spirit. Paul says this is achieved first by the peace of the good news of Jesus Christ. He uses the foundation of Isaiah 57 to make the point to the Jewish believers, as he speaks directly to the lived experience of the Gentiles in Ephesus. This is something I absolutely love about Paul because he's always reaching out to the pagan margins but at the same time using scripture to maintain his Jewish base.

In Isaiah, the Lord says through the prophet's words, that God dwells both in the high and lofty places, and with those whose spirit is crushed and humble. God reigns in heaven and also with the weak, the powerless, and marginalized.

God's anger is directed at the "iniquity of covetousness" as it is put in the King James Version, but more literally, it is the iniquity – or unfair behavior – of gaining things by force. That is not mere covetousness as jealousy and wanting what someone else has. This is the action of acting on that feeling to take it. This is the action of empire acquiring more and more in order to defend or protect the things already acquired, like a geopolitical Ponzi scheme.

The prophets, which Paul called the foundation, spoke truth to the powers of Israel and Judah, warning them of their failure to minister to, and failure to care the most vulnerable among them. But in the end, God promises to heal, to lead, and to "shalom" unto him and his mourners. This word "shalom" is the Hebrew word for peace, but it means more than that. It is comfort or

prosperity, and most of all, it is wholeness being brought to justice. God promises this wholeness by making peace with compassion.

As Paul put it, “God, being rich in mercy, on account of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our misdeeds – our trespasses – brought us back to life with the Messiah. By grace are you all saved. He raised us with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in the Messiah Jesus, in order that he might show forth, in the ages that are coming, the exaggerated riches of his grace in kindness toward us in the Messiah Jesus. For by this grace, you are saved through faith and not from yourselves. It is the gift of God, not from works, in order that no one may boast.”

Paul then explains how those who were once hostile with each other, are made one in Christ. This is more so than different colors of flowers or styles of music that get blended, but actual hostility is brought to an end as two are brought together. They become one new person, not to make one into the other and a same person, but to bring all the attributes of each into one, by the blood of the Messiah, “For he himself is our peace, having made both into one,” by removing the dividing hostility. This sets aside the requirement of sameness which is what circumcision and dietary food laws were used for as a requirement put on others.

Paul continues, “This was so that he might in himself, create a single human being from two making peace.” This reminds us of Genesis where Adam was split in two. That word we often translate as rib means half. God took half of Adam and made new human. Then the two are made one.

Paul said, this was so “he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross. He has slain the hostility by it. and having come, he proclaimed the good news of peace to you,” using then the language of Isaiah to say, “the distant ones and peace to the ones who are nearby. For through him, we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

Beloved, in this world of division where we see people so divided that they are drawn to political violence, and the words of hatred and anger fill our newsfeeds, whether in standard media or social media. We’re made to think our intersectional identities where they intersect in that giant Venn diagram are who we are and all that matters. We need Christ’s peace.

We need this peace when the pace of this world demands more and more from us, always acting as though the next fast thing we can go to is what matters most. We need to find rest. We need to be different. The Good News of Peace in Jesus is that he is our peace, our wholeness, our comfort and prosperity. We bring to him our identity in that space in the Venn diagram or who we are at the center of those concentric circles. We bring those into Christ Jesus who will do what our identity cannot. He will make us whole and give us rest.

This is why the good news is so important – that God broke into history for us. The eternal Son of God, fully one with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, came down, descended into our flesh to be one of us in our limits. He humbly submitted to our humanity, lived as we live, and after he was rejected by his own people, he died at the hands of the great Roman power structure, hanged on a cross.

All the powers of the world – sin and death – came down upon him to kill him, but the grave could not hold him, and he rose again, for us, and ascended to heaven, for us. He is the God who resides both in heavens, the high and exalted places, as Isaiah put it, and, also, he is here with us. This is

most notable by the Holy Spirit residing with the crushed and the humble. We trust in his love because God being rich in mercy and on account of his great love, knows you by name and is involved in your life, giving you opportunities to recognize that presence. He is loving you, even in your missteps – your trespasses and sins. God is with you, saving you by grace.

You are God's accomplishment, or handiwork, formed in Christ Jesus to do good works in this world. These works have been prepared for you to share that love and awareness of God's presence with you. You are not alone in this because by faith God's Spirit is with you. You are part of God's family. You share as a citizen in the promises made to Israel.

No matter what is going on around us – whether your candidate wins or loses and whether we see more horrifying violence, wars, and violence – God is with you. You are loved and called to share that love and be a part of making a difference in this world by pushing back against the things that scare us. Perfect love, God's complete love in Christ, casts out all fear. This is the good news of peace in Christ Jesus. Amen.