

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship
July 18, 2021
Rev. YoungMin Kim

One New Humanity
Ephesians 2:11-16

(1)

Let me share some pictures of a country. (pictures) What country comes to your mind? Yes, it is Turkey. I assume that most images about Turkey might be filled with Islamic icons or buildings in your mind. However, before it was fallen by the Seljuk Turks, it was the center place with Greece for the Byzantine Empire, full of Eastern Orthodox Church heritage. For example, one of the key places in Istanbul is Hagia Sophia. It looks like a traditional Islamic Mosque, but it was initially built as the patriarchal cathedral of the imperial capital of Constantinople in 537. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, it was converted to a mosque, and all sacred paintings on the walls were whitewashed. And then, it was turned into a museum in 1935 after the Republic of Turkey was established; some sacred paintings were restored; Hagia Sophia was open to the public regardless of their religions. But the current Turkish President Erdogan recently converted Hagia Sophia to a working mosque, so that non-Muslims cannot enter into the world's precious architecture. What will happen to the restored sacred paintings?

Before the Byzantine Empire period, Turkey was also a key place for Christianity. It was called Asia Minor, a Roman province under the Roman Empire. Of course, it was under great influence by the Roman Empire worshipping Roman emperors, Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, and practicing its customs, traditions, and laws. It seems far off from Christian faith and cultures. But the Apostle Paul visited Asia Minor during his missionary trips, spread the gospel, and founded seven churches there. And one of them was the place where today's passage was sent.

(2)

According to the Lectionary schedule, we read Ephesians 2:11-16. The main place related to today's passage is Ephesus. Ephesus was the capital city of a Roman Province in Asia Minor, today's Izmir in Turkey. It was an important harbor city for trade, and major roads connected Ephesus to all the other significant cities in Asia Minor. It was known for its amphitheater, which was the largest one in the world at the time holding up to 50,000 spectators. It was also known for the great temple of Artemis (or Diana) built in 550 BC, which is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ephesian industry was significantly related to Artemis and the temple. In other words, most citizens of Ephesus worshiped Artemis and followed the related customs.

The Apostle Paul finally visited Ephesus during his second missionary trip and stayed there for two years. There, Paul introduced Jesus Christ to the citizens with his co-missionaries, Priscilla and Aquila, so that Acts 19:10 says, "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." Paul of course confronted threats of Ephesian citizens due to their religion with Artemis and Jews in Ephesus due to their Jewish tradition and laws. In spite of the objections to Paul and the gospel, many Ephesians accepted Jesus Christ and became Christians. The church of Ephesus started there. A few years later, Ephesus played a vital role in the spread of Christianity, and about four hundred years later, it became a host city for a major church meeting known as the Council of Ephesus in AD 431.

After his third missionary trip, Paul was captured and sent to a prison in Rome. There, he wrote four letters, known as Paul's prison letters, and one of them was the Epistle to the Ephesians. Paul wrote and sent this

letter to the church of Ephesus, especially to new converts to Christianity, to enhance their spiritual knowledge about God and the church, to promote harmony between Jewish Christians—existing members—and Gentile Christians—new members, and to encourage them to resist evil spirits.

(3)

Let's go back to today's passage. For the Ephesus faith community members, Paul emphasized oneness in Christ. He reminded the Gentile members of their previous position. He said, "...remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision'... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (vv. 2-3). The Gentile members were those who were born and/or grew up in Ephesus under the influence of Roman religions, laws, customs, and traditions. And they might have been enthusiastic worshippers of Artemis. But they chose (or were chosen for) a completely different life purpose and direction.

These verses were written to the Gentile members. However, they were also written to the Jewish members, reminding them of their previous position. Let me paraphrase the verses: "...remember that at one time you Jews by birth, called 'the circumcision'...remember that you were at that, being locals from commonwealth of Israel, heirs to the covenants of promise, having hope with God in the world but you were without Christ." God's initial salvific plan was enough for those who were circumcised, citizens of Israel, heirs to the covenants of promise. But due to their unfaithful hearts and deeds, God changed His salvific plan through the new covenant...through Jesus Christ. After all, without Jesus Christ, Jews had no difference from the Gentiles.

So, Paul said, "In Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For his is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." In Christ, it does not matter whether they were Jews or Gentiles because by His blood and death, the dividing wall crumbled and they became one. Paul continued, "[Jesus] might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it" (vv. 15-16). In Christ, there are no Jews or Gentiles. There is one new humanity, called Christians.

(4)

This is not limited to the Ephesus faith community among Gentiles and Jews in the first century. Since Jesus Christ was crucified, oneness in Christ has been applied throughout history, up to today. Through Jesus Christ, we are one in Him regardless of our difference from others. However, such truth has been distorted or has been taken according to our taste. As a result, we keep trying to find differences from others. And due to the differences, we exclude them in a variety of forms like discrimination, bullying, violence, etc.

I do not deny that we cannot be completely freed from such a mindset and deeds. Since sin came from the first person, we lost our image of God and became separated from God. When Jesus was crucified on the cross, we became reconciled with God through Him, but we are not restored in our image of God yet. It will be done when Jesus comes back. Until the time comes, we will come to struggle with it throughout our lives. That is why God sent us the Holy Spirit as our Advocate. Thus, when a mind of hatred comes into you, a mind of discrimination comes into you, and a mind of anything that breaks harmony with others comes into you, please remember that we have no difference from others. Just as God loves us, so does He love them, too. Just as Jesus died for us, so did He die for them, too. Just as the Spirit advocates for us, so does the Spirit advocate for them, too. In Christ, there is no us and them. In Him, Jesus created one new humanity in place of us and them. Amen.