

EPHESIANS 2:11-22  
ONE BIG, HAPPY, CHRISTIAN FAMILY

I am... how would you complete that sentence for yourself? Here are some of the options and possibilities:

Gender: male or female – perhaps the easiest choice you have to make!

Nationality – Scottish, English, Irish, Welsh, British, American, Australian, French.

Upbringing – Juniper Green, Leith, Gorgie, Morningside, Glasgow (that suburb to the west!)

Physical attributes – tall, short, thin, fat, red-haired, blue-eyed, blonde, bald.

Personal qualities – introvert, extrovert, quiet, loud, gentle, patient, bold, friendly.

Work – teacher, plumber, musician, shop-worker, minister, student, pupil, lawyer, nurse.

Sport – golfer, cricketer, rugby/tennis/badminton player, runner, swimmer; I hate sport!

School you attended – Currie HS, Forrester HS, Watsonian, Heriots, Tynecastle

Political affiliation – Labour, Conservative, SNP, Lib Dem, others.

When we put all of that together, the options are almost endless; the combinations of all of these nine categories of answers (& there are more that we could add) show us just how different we are or can be. We look the same, but there are all sorts of ways in which we are different and individual. Just amongst the 150 people in this room now, the number of combinations is frightening; we can multiply that over and over again when simply add another group from the next-door community; how much greater is the difference if we were to do same with people from Africa, Asia or South America. We are more and more aware of the differences that divide us from other people, the different opinions and views that there are on all sorts of matters and we retreat into 'camps' and fire shots at one another over the barricades. That's just what Church is like; Church is made up of millions of people, each one gloriously different, with different experiences of life and faith.

Then we declare about Church that we are "One, big, happy Christian family!" How, on earth, does that work? How can we take a people who have so many differences, in so many areas of life and then possibly claim to be "one big, happy, Christian family"? The most important word in that sentence is "One": is there something that overrides all of these differences? Is there some glue that binds us together, despite all of these differences? It will need to be pretty strong glue! Yet, from the very beginning, the Church has declared that there is "One Church!" and that there is a unity about the Church that is powerful and strong. "One Church" is about local congregations being united; and is also about the big picture, the global brand, that says the Church, no matter where we find it, no matter what it looks like, is part of this one big, happy Christian family.

Last week, we talked about 'grace' from Eph 2; we talked about the way in which grace is about God loving us when we don't deserve His love, about God blessing us with every spiritual blessing when we deserve little, if anything, from Him. If you want to catch up on that sermon, the text is on website, the CD is in library! We said at the end of that sermon that grace shapes the way in which we think about ourselves, to recognise our faults and failings, but also to see that we are loved and accepted and blessed by God. We also said that grace shapes the way in which we should think about God; we should get rid of the 'we get what we deserve' way of thinking and see that God loves us with a love that we don't deserve. We also said that grace should shape the way in which we think about other people and didn't have time to develop that theme last week, but here it is today. Grace is at the heart of this "one big happy Christian family".

In Eph 2:11-22, Paul begins with two groups; the Jews and the Gentiles (everyone else!) All he says about these two groups at the start is about differences, is the language of exclusion, and strangers, division because the Gentiles didn't share all of the religious privileges of the Jews. Circumcision was the mark of that distinction. That distinction and division and exclusion was strongly felt: There is a stone slab on display in an Istanbul museum that came from the Jerusalem temple: "no foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have to blame himself for his ensuing death." Or: "trespassers will be executed!" It is hopeless, surely, to think that anything could break down that kind of cultural and religious hatred; it is ingrained; it belongs to way people think.

Then we read the story of Jesus with the Canaanite woman and at first sight it seems as if He is perpetuating these differences. She has come asking Him to heal her daughter and His disciples want Him to send her away because she is becoming a pest. Jesus says at first: "*I was...*" (15:24) and so He seems to be perpetuating the Jewish way of thinking. But the woman was not to be chased away so easily; was it the way in which Jesus said these words that made it clear He was saying what she thought He would say, but He didn't really believe it? She persisted and so Jesus says again: "*It is...*" (15:26) Again He seems to be perpetuating the Jewish way of thinking – Gentiles are no better than dogs. But again, did He say this in such a way as to make it clear that He is repeating a culture that He didn't accept; she came back: "*Yes, Lord...*" (15:27) Jesus applauded her faith & her daughter is healed. If we see this story as Jesus needing to be persuaded out of a Jewish cultural mindset, then we misread Him; there is more to this story than mere words, otherwise the woman is still excluded.

Why do I say that? Well, look at the other evidence of His ministry. One day in Nazareth, His home town, He is preaching in the synagogue and setting out His priorities in ministry; He reads from the Old Testament book of Isaiah and then goes on to give some examples of the ways in which God has blessed in the past and will bless again; the two examples He gives are both of Gentiles blessed by God, not Jews. Or, we nearly read part of the story of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, when tells Nicodemus 'you must be born again'. Nicodemus is the epitome of Jewishness, the religious leader of the people, in with the bricks, the 'pillar of the Church'. Who is the next person Jesus meets and talks to and blesses? A divorced, Samaritan woman at a well outside a small village; three reasons why Jesus should have avoided her and why she should be excluded, the sworn enemy of the Jews, yet she too is blessed by and accepted by Jesus. Here is grace at work!

So when the early Church is faced with divisions and how to include these two groups within one Church, they have model of Jesus and the fact that God has already blessed some Gentiles in Jesus. "One big happy Christian family"? Well, yes! Here's why. "*now in...*" (2:13-16) God's plan is to make 'one new man' out of two, one new Church out of the two groups that once hated each other. He did that by putting to death all that divided them, making all the dividing things completely irrelevant and unimportant because something bigger and better blesses them all. Both Jews and Gentiles find their life, their peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God in the same way; everyone is reconciled to God through Jesus and His cross. All the things that made the Jews distinctive – circumcision, religious and ceremonial laws – all of these things are done away with; all that created separation and division and created hostility is done away with and everyone, Jew and Gentile alike is blessed by God in same way and for same reason – Jesus died for us on the cross. "*through...*" (2:18) We all come to God in the same way; we are all equal in God's

eyes; His grace is given to all of us in the same way; so we are “one big, happy, Christian family!”

Paul goes on then to use three pictures to describe the Church that God is building for Himself, all pictures that are about God creating one new people for Himself.

**Kingdom** - “*You are...*” (v19) citizenship is a huge issue in our society; there are more people than ever crossing the world looking for a place to belong, to find a passport, or a place that will welcome them. We are all citizens of God’s kingdom, we belong to God, all of us belong and Jesus is our King. True of all of us equally in Christ Jesus.

**Family** – “*members of...*” (v19) ‘family’ does not always have a positive press; it can be place of stress and heartbreak, but at its best family is a wonderful thing, a place of acceptance. “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in” (Robert Frost) Family are the people who love and care for us unconditionally; God does that for us; we are His family.

**Temple** – “*Built on...*” (v20) This is about people who worship God together, Jesus is One who holds them together. We share a common faith, we serve Jesus as Lord. “He is not tied to holy buildings but to holy people.” (John Stott) God has committed Himself to a people, to us; God has committed the future of His plan to bless the world to a people, to us.

This is what God has done and continues to do. We come with all our combinations of differences, but God makes us into “one big happy Christian family”. We are part of that family because of His grace to us in Jesus, because He has loved us when we didn’t deserve His love, so He accepts us into His family and accepts all of us in the same way. There is only one way for us to be reconciled to God, to find forgiveness and peace and salvation and that is through Jesus and His cross; there is one way for all of us; we stand together at the foot of the cross and we all have only one prayer to make: “Lord, save me!”

So we need to treat each other with grace. We do not treat ‘as they deserve’ in our opinion, but we love even when others are not lovable; we care when people don’t deserve being cared for; we forgive and take an interest in others, even when they will not take an interest in us. It is good for a Church to be happy and friendly, it is something to be applauded to be a friendly church; but this is about more than being friendly, this is about acceptance of one another as we are. Last week’s blog was asking ‘how many names do you know of people in the congregation?’ and I used that as a way of saying ‘how good are we at knowing one another, understanding one another, welcoming one another, accepting one another? We don’t always get it right; it is not always easy for people new to Church to find that sense of belonging; but that has to be our aim. This has to be the impact of grace on the way we relate to one another!

We are not called to be the same as each other; we are not called to get rid of these thousands of combinations of differences. But being different we are called to accept one another as we are; that is the impact of grace on our relationships with other people. Christ has accepted us as we are; we are to accept one another. We stand together on Christ Jesus; He is our peace for all of us; His cross is place of reconciliation for all of us with God; it needs to be the place of our reconciliation with one another too! “One big happy Christian family” – is that not just a pipedream? Actually, no – this is what the Church already is! We need to live out what God has already made us!