

**Proper 11B
Ephesians 2:11-22
July 19, 2009**

The year was 1968, the year of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death. The year the Civil Rights Act passed. The year of the U.S. track and field stars, silently offering the Black Power salute during the awards ceremony at the Summer Olympics. Across the United States, there were riots in Washington, Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland and New York City. The tension between the races was as intense as it had ever been.

And down in rural Georgia, Clarence Jordan kept working away on his Cotton Patch Bible. Clarence Jordan was an amazing and unusual man. He and his wife, and another couple, had founded Koinonia Farm in 1942. Their reading of the Bible led them to pool their resources, in order to create a place where blacks and whites could work together equally. Throughout the civil rights era, the farm and its inhabitants were routinely threatened, even shot at. But Jordan's vision of Christian love, justice and equality persisted. Koinonia endured.

During this time, Jordan began translating the New Testament from Greek into rural Georgian vernacular, drawing parallels between the early church in the first century, and the American church in the 20th. His translation of our reading from Ephesians today is startling and challenging ... and I want to share it with you now. In Jordan's translation, he wrote it not to the church in Ephesus, but to the church in Birmingham, Alabama, and he said,

So then, always remember that previously you Negroes, who sometimes are even called "niggers" by thoughtless white church members, were at one time outside the Christian fellowship, denied your rights as fellow believers, and treated as though the gospel didn't apply to you, hopeless and God-forsaken in the eyes of the world. Now, however, because of Christ's supreme sacrifice, you who once were so segregated are warmly welcomed into the Christian fellowship.

He himself is our peace. It was he who integrated us and abolished the segregation patterns which caused so much hostility. He allowed no silly traditions and customs in his fellowship, so that in it he might integrate the two into one new body. In this way he healed the hurt, and by his sacrifice on the cross he joined together both sides into one body for God. In it the hostility no longer exists.

In the midst of a dangerous time, Jordan saw the early church's struggle with issues of difference and inclusion playing out in the very world he lived in. Where the church in Ephesus had grappled with including Gentiles into this new Jewish movement that proclaimed Jesus as Messiah, Jordan lived in a place and time that struggled to accept African-Americans as full and complete children of God.

This has been the journey of Christianity from its very beginning ... the struggle to see and accept the all-encompassing love of God, to let the Holy Spirit push the faithful right past their boundaries and comfort zones, into places they never thought they would go. Or to resist. To turn away. To turn inward.

It started with Jesus, who began pushing those boundaries by eating with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other Jews whose lifestyles had made them untouchable among their own people. But even Jesus himself could be challenged by the logical extension of his message of love. In a few weeks, we'll hear the story of his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, a Gentile, who sought healing for her daughter. Jesus tells her he was sent to the house of Israel, and that it's not nice to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. And the woman comes right back at him, saying "even the dogs can gather up the crumbs under the master's table." Jesus, amazed at the woman's faith, heals her daughter.

And so it has gone. From Peter struggling in the book Acts with the question of eating with Gentiles, venturing outside the Jewish dietary laws. To Paul, insisting to the Galatians that the community of God could expand to encompass them – and they didn't have to be circumcised to be included. And as the faith spread, across the Mediterranean, into the farthest corners of Europe, into Asia, through Africa, into the New World, the struggle to include or exclude, to accept

or to reject, to welcome or to banish, has followed us every step of the way.

Sometimes, Christianity has failed -- in astounding and horrifying ways -- to rise to that challenge. We have turned against the Jews – the very people of God, the family of Jesus, our forebears in the faith – in centuries of religious-sanctioned hate, persecution and genocide. We have gone to war in Jesus’ name against heretics, Muslims, and the indigenous inhabitants of places we think WE discovered.

Over the centuries, Christians have covered their ears and refused to listen to the words of this letter to Ephesus ... *now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.*

No, instead we have clung to our walls and our divisions. We have been ruled by our fear of the stranger rather than by the reconciling message of the cross. Because after all, how can we be confident that we are in-siders, in-cluded, part of the in-crowd, if there aren’t people on the outside to define ourselves against?

There is a story about a battle in Southern France in the early 1200s. A group of heretics called the Cathars had become very popular in that region. So Pope Innocent III authorized a Crusade against these French heretics. War erupted across southern France. At the walls of the city of Beziers, the crusaders, led by a monk, Arnaud, Abbot of Citeaux, offered all the faithful Catholic inhabitants a chance to leave, before they attacked the city. Most of them refused the offer. They chose to stay with their fellow citizens, even though they were heretics, even though the armies of the pope were about to invade.

As they prepared to attack, someone asked Abbot Arnaud how they could possibly tell who was a Catholic and who was a Cathar. Arnaud reportedly replied, “Kill them all. God will know his own.” Twenty thousand people were slaughtered in Beziers that day. And in the aftermath, no – you couldn’t tell who was a Catholic and who was a Cathar. In their deaths, they were all merely human.

I believe each of us is confronted with the same dilemma, every time we encounter someone who is not like us. In our streets, in our schools, right here in our own church, we decide every day how to relate to each stranger, each alien. And I wonder ... which part of our nature will win out in those encounters? The crusading abbot who rejects anyone who is different -- or the Catholic villager who stands by their neighbor's side, regardless of the cost?

It is a challenge, but I believe it is our calling ... to extend our embrace beyond our walls, in the name of him who is our peace, who trampled all those divisions once and for all, on Golgotha's hill. But we will always have that choice, to reach out or not ... not simply between black and white, or even between gay and straight, but to welcome every alien, every stranger.

Can we do it? Can we welcome the tattooed and the tongue-pierced? The high school dropout and the Ph.D.? The working class and the upper class? Those who read the New York Times and those who read their Facebook feeds? Those who love plainchant and those who love LEVAS? Republicans and Democrats? Soldiers and pacifists? Little children and little old ladies? English speakers, Spanish speakers, new to town and born in town?

Is there room, at All Saints, for all of God's children?

Like Clarence Jordan, can we hear the ancient words of the epistle in the language of our time and place? Jordan translated the message of reconciliation for Jew and Gentile into a word of peace and hope for black and white. Can we do the same thing, here, now, in East Lansing in the year 2009? Can we hear these words as meant for us, those of us who are already here, but especially for those who have yet to find their way through our doors ... "You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

What if we take that medieval monk's outrageous statement and turn it on its head?

What if we say, "Welcome them all. God will know His own."