

God's Chosen People Ephesians 1: 3-14

Last Sunday our nation celebrated its 245th birthday. Despite the countless numbers of community parades and backyard picnics, it is painfully obvious that the land of the free and the home of the brave is deeply divided, perhaps more so than at any time in our history. That is a disturbing observation, for two bloody wars were fought and thousands of lives were lost to secure our freedom from the tyranny of England and to end the practice of slavery that prevented so many citizens of our nation from enjoying God given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We are divided politically, socially, culturally, and it pains me to say that we are also divided spiritually. **That is nothing new, for God's people are no strangers to division and conflict.** We find example after example in the Scriptures. Some of the most prominent were the family and tribal feuds between two sets of brothers, Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Esau. They were the sons and grandsons of Abraham, respectively. Today, thousands of years later, their Jewish and Arab descendants remain at war with one other in the Middle East. And then there was God's original chosen people, the ancient kingdom of Israel, who split into two kingdoms following the death of King Solomon. Today, Judaism is further divided into Conservative, Reform, and Orthodox denominations and Arab Muslims are divided into Sunni and Shiite.

Even after Jesus came to earth little changed. In fact, conflict and disagreement escalated. Some of the most disturbing verses in the entire NT are found in **Luke 12:49-53**, where Jesus plainly says He did not come to earth to bring peace, but fire and division. It is a difficult truth, but some forms of separation and division are part of God's will.

Internal conflict among God's people continued after Jesus' resurrection. We know from Acts 15 that there was a major falling out between Paul, Barnabas and Mark, three prominent followers of Jesus. Paul asked Barnabas to go back to some cities they had preached in earlier to see how the churches were doing there. Barnabas agreed, and wanted to take Mark with them. But Paul wanted nothing to do with Mark because Mark had abandoned them when the times got tough. He missed all the fun Paul and Barnabas had, including being stoned and dragged through the city of Lystra and left for dead. Eventually Barnabas and Mark went in one direction and Paul met up with a man named Silas and chose to go another.

Fifteen hundred years later, Martin Luther famously nailed 95 theses to the door of his home church in Wittenburg, Germany, marking the beginning of the Protestant Reformation and split from the Roman Catholic Church, who by the way is divided from the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Catholic churches. We could go on and on for hours looking at other examples.

There is no doubt that conflict and division are part of the church, and even the people called Methodists, we who claim Scriptural holiness to be the root of our doctrine and beliefs, are not immune from it. The modern-day UM Church is the result of several splits and mergers, and like modern Judaism, we remain divided primarily over the authority of the Scriptures. It is likely that the United Methodist Church will split into two or three different denominations when General Conference convenes in September 2022.

Is conflict and separation a sign that we are falling short in our love for God and each other, or is it a sign of something else? That is a complex question, and like the “how much is enough” questions we looked at the past two Sundays, the answer will depend upon the context. **There will be times when separation and division are a blessing and are in perfect compliance with God’s will as revealed in the Scriptures.** They are both good and necessary, perhaps even unavoidable, and strangely enough they ultimately lead to greater unity. A prime example is Christians separating themselves from worldly desires **1 John 2:15** or from those who seek to divide God’s people by false teaching **Romans 16:17**. There will also be times when separation is outside of God’s will, causing unnecessary harm and confusion. Perhaps Paul refusing to forgive Mark might an example.

Sometimes separation is our choice, and other times it is God’s choice. Sometimes we make bad choices, but God never does. **We can take comfort in knowing that God always gets it right.** Look at verse **1:3** again. God chooses to bless us with spiritual blessings. Why do you suppose He did that? The answer is in the next verse **1:4** We have been blessed so that we can be a holy and blameless gift to His Son Jesus. Even before God created the universe, we were in His plans. The kingdom of believers was in His plans. He chose to make you and I part of His family and make us part of His kingdom. **God always remains faithful and has chosen to bless believers in His Son Jesus.** And at the same time, God also gives us a choice in the matter. There will be those who are not willing. We were not created preprogrammed to love Him and each other. **John 5:40** God gives us a choice.

The good news is that once we make that choice, our sins are forgiven. Just as God chooses to bless us and adopt us into His family, **Jesus chooses to redeem us, save us from our trespasses, save us from our sins. 1:7.** Forgiveness and redemption are spiritual blessings that come when we choose to be part of the kingdom of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit then frees us from the fear of death and allows us to catch a glimpse of what is to come in glory. **1:13** What is to come? The answer is found earlier in verse 10. Unity! It seems there will not be unity until there is separation. Until that day comes, we have choices to make. **We can choose one of two spiritual kingdoms in this world in which we live.** There is the kingdom of the Son of His love, which is the kingdom of Jesus and the kingdom of believers, and there is the kingdom of darkness. **Colossians 1: 13-14** God's desire is that we choose wisely so that He might share the spiritual blessings of the kingdom of Jesus with us.

My prayer is that we will continue to identify and remove the barriers that separate us that are not in God's will, those things that hinder us from coming together as God's chosen people. There are many. Some are physical, like clothing, appearance, or street address. Others are cultural and social, like our political views or our ethnicity. The complete list would be too long to mention this morning, yet they have one thing in common. They will keep us from loving each other as Jesus loves us if we do not identify and remove them. **It is a choice we must make, because of the choices God has made.**

God chose us to love Him, He chose us to love each other, and He also chose us to love those who have yet to know Him. May God give us the grace and willingness to truly live as His chosen people. Amen.