

An overwhelming embrace

God embraces the unlovely so that we can embrace those unlovely to us
Ephesians 2:17-20

We live in a world of exclusion/alienation, where tribes/cliques dominate the landscape, but God is creating in it an upheaval by an embrace that overwhelms. Paul's text is key.

Question: what's with this Gentile/Jew animosity? Why the preferential treatment?

Answer: God didn't choose Israel to exclude the nations, but as an instrument for salvation.

Israel's mandate was to bless the nations

Genesis 12:3 - "All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

Genesis 18:18 - "Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him."

Genesis 22:18 - "through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed"

Genesis 26:4 - "And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed."

Genesis 28:14 - "And all the families of the earth will be blessed through you and your descendants."

1 Kings 8:41-43 - Solomon: "In the future, foreigners who do not belong to your people Israel will hear of you. They will come from distant lands because of your name, for they will hear of your great name and your strong hand and your powerful arm. And when they pray toward this Temple, then hear from heaven where you live, and grant what they ask of you."

Motivation: Because they were foreigners too!

Israel forgot over time

Isaiah 1:13,17 (NLT)

Stop bringing me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting— they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings...Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.

Don't blame Israel. We wouldn't do much better.

Their privileges as the chosen become for them a sort of security blanket

They are occupied by Rome, no Messiah in sight.

The only thing they had left was their religious background.

Why would you share it with Romans?

They pushed away the Gentiles

Seen in the strict table fellowship:

Many Jewish groups during Jesus' time had strict rules to govern their fellowship time around food. Pharisees would only eat with *Haverim*, certain associates who observed the same strict rules as they. And the *Essenes* had purity laws that made the Pharisees look lax by comparison.¹

¹ Ann Spangler and Lois Tverberg. *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*. (L.2532)

Gentiles were alienated

Gentiles were “dead” (1) and “without hope” (12), “outsiders” (11), “excluded” (12).

Imagine the plight of a Gentile who sought the Lord...they could only go so far:

- they were excluded from the worship of the Hebrews in the Court of the Gentiles...
 - *The Great Court of the Gentiles* was a square of 750 feet, and formed the lowest, most outer enclosure of the Temple.
 - This was as far as a Gentile could go.
 - “The noise, especially on the eve of the Passover, must have been most disturbing, For there were oxen, sheep, and doves selected as fit for sacrifices were sold as in a market”²
 - It was in the court of Gentiles that Jesus overthrew the money tables³

Josephus used to write about these warning signs, and now, we can read it for ourselves. For in 1871, an engraved block of limestone measuring 22 x 33 inches was found in Jerusalem...

NO FOREIGNER IS TO GO BEYOND THE BALUSTRADE
AND THE PLAZA OF THE TEMPLE ZONE
WHOEVER IS CAUGHT DOING SO
WILL HAVE HIMSELF TO BLAME
FOR HIS DEATH WHICH WILL FOLLOW

Gentiles were simply tolerated, not approved (Bruce, 1.880)
Have you ever felt this way?

Our response to alienation?

We build a mechanism to keep us safe from others: *ethnocentrism*⁴

We form tribes with other “safe” people.

- those who have not yet hurt us
- those who don’t “seem” like they would hurt us

The problem with this: our desire to self-preserve causes us to reject those who don’t fit into our tribe; it hurts others, and perpetuates the cycle we were so afraid of.

² Alfred Edersheim. *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*. 22

³ Ibid, 23.

⁴ Ethnocentrism: evaluating other peoples and cultures according to the standards of one's own culture.

Conflict

Filipino race-riots. Watsonville, 1930.

When a new Filipino dance hall opened in January 1930, White Watsonville residents exploded in anger. Four days of rioting began on January 20th. A mob of over 200 White citizens roamed the streets hunting Filipinos. The next day the new taxi dance hall was raided by a group of White Watsonville residents. Two days later a crowd of 500 Whites destroyed the Filipino neighborhood in Watsonville, pulling Filipinos out of the taxi dance and beating them in the streets. One man was shot in the back as he tried to escape the violence.⁵

- Alienation

- don't date our girls
- don't use our bathrooms
- don't eat in our restaurants

- California apologizes in 2011

- My dad: "it was nice. It stopped the problem, but it did not erase the hurt from our memories. It was nice, but it didn't make things ok."
 - Tribes still exist; we are still threatened by one other

It didn't fix anything, but it triggered something:

Perhaps this enmity can stop

Yet, have you noticed that stopping bad things still leaves something good to be desired?

1. "Knuckles"⁶ - duke it out, and make it right.
2. We keep perpetuating the cycle⁷
 1. We need something relational to happen to cure our ethnocentrism

Our deeper need is to be embraced

Redemption

That desire is met in the Gospel of Jesus.

Ephesians 2:14 (NLT)

For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.

But he doesn't just fix the problem...

he doesn't just bare-knuckle the wall or apologize to its victims

⁵ Picture This: *California Perspectives on American History*. <http://www.museumca.org/picturethis/timeline/depression-era-1930s/watsonville-riots/info>

Mahohla Dargis. *Brawling for Money, Clan and Just Because*. New York Times. <http://movies.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/movies/knuckle-documentary-about-fighting-irish-travelers-review.html>

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman called this "injustice-with-role-reversal"--perpetuating the hate to protect yourself. *Life in Fragments*. 183. Quoted by Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*. 104.

Read 17-20a

He reconciles groups that are hostile towards one another

He brings us, not simply to tolerate one another, but to be reconciled as fellow imagers.

- He does not turn Gentiles into Jews, or vice-versa, but "both believing Jews and believing Gentiles are incorporated into one new 'race, class,' namely, the church"⁸
So that it can be said of us, "Together, we are his house" (20)
- Imagine the scene at the first church service in Ephesus/Jerusalem...
 - Nicodemus/Centurian (Jew/Gentile)
 - Onesimus/Philemon (slave/slave owner)
 - Rabbis/Lydia (men/women)

The Gospel brings supernatural restoration to broken relationships.

Look at us in this building!

Naturally hostile people, sitting next to each other because of a common bond we share in Jesus Christ.

What Israel, and we failed to do, Christ did, and forms a church out of it to brag

We're not perfect, but being restored as we drink deeply of the Gospel.

How the gospel heals...

it embraces the alienated

it humbles the ethnocentric

What was first heard by Peter, is now heard by all of us

"What God has made clean, do not call dirty" (Acts 10:15)

God embraces the unlovely

For some of us, the unlovely are those who have hurt us...

Miroslav Volf

After I finished my lecture Professor Jurgen Moltmann stood up and asked one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: "But can you embrace a *cetnik*?" It was the winter of 1993. For months now, the notorious Serbian fighters called "*cetnick*" had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a *cetnick*--the ultimate other---so to speak, the evil other? What would justify the embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? It took me a while to answer, though I immediately knew what I wanted to say. "No, I cannot---but as a follower of Christ think I should be able to." (Exclusion and Embrace, 9)

⁸ Harold W. Hoener. *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*. 395.

Some of you are asking that question of someone right now.

You aren't just feeling alienated by someone, you've been hurt.

And reconciliation is hard for you to accept, because justice requires one side to change. But reconciliation requires both sides to change.

You didn't do anything---you're the victim.

But, your heart will chew on your pain, until the "other guy" gets his due...

Either in a real situation, or in the conflict in your mind that you have on replay.

God will bring justice, but...

They must be released from your prison,
just as you must be healed from their oppression.

We need redemption

The hurting will ask:

But can there be reconciliation when I've been betrayed so bad.

The indifferent will ask:

Can there be embrace when they are so unlike me?

I don't even *like* that person.

I want a church I can go to where I can customize my friends.
It doesn't exist.

The Gospel is bad news before it is good.

Bad: we are all unlovely to someone else.

Good: God embraces the unlovely.

He does this by taking our place as victim and oppressors.

He conquered the sin that lies at the bottom of every person's heart.

And he teaches us how to live in that kind of freedom.

It doesn't mean that you need to go back to being abused, betrayed, or walked over.

(Remember, Jesus was a champion for the oppressed, and sets them free)

It means he doesn't just free you from their oppression, but from yours as well.

It means that in this church, friendships can develop between people groups that, ordinarily would never have anything to do with each other.

It means that when the world looks at the Church, they would see naturally hostile enemies, who are able to find a common bond.

It means that our common bond, is that

God embraced the unlovely us, that we might embrace those who are unlovely to us.