

Sermon July 21, 2024
[Ephesians 2:11-22]

We Were the Outsiders
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Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

“We were once outsiders.” Today’s message contains material that I promise you have never heard before, material new to me; material, I believe, that opens our eyes to the presence of Christ already among us.

“The people in the village have always hated us.”

So begins, or nearly begins, Shirley Jackson’s masterpiece, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. This was written in 1962. The story is narrated by an 18-year-old whose name was Mary Catherine Blackwood, or Merricat, as she calls herself, and it explores what it means to be an outsider. Now, the Blackwoods keep to themselves. They are eccentrics who live in an old house outside of town, closed off to the rest of the world. Six years before the story starts, we learned that all but three members of the Blackwood family were poisoned at dinner with arsenic. Merricat’s older sister Constance was charged with the crime. She was tried but acquitted, leaving the townspeople all the more suspicious at best, and hostile at worst. Unfortunately for Merricat, she must go, on behalf of her family, into town one time a week to buy groceries. And when I say on behalf of her family, that is her uncle and her sister. As you might imagine it, she hates it. The children taunt her and mock her. The men harass her. “Even upon entering town,” Merricat says, “I could tell a local car by the quick ugly glance from the driver, and I wondered always, what would happen if I stepped down from the curb onto the road? Would there be a quick, almost unintentional swerve toward me, just to scare me; perhaps just to see me jump? And then the laughter. Laughter coming from all sides.”

A dark book. Now, obviously, Merricat’s experience is extreme. Most of us, if not all, thanks be to God, have never encountered such hostility. And yet, on some level, we can probably all relate to the feeling of being an outsider, can’t we?

I’d like you to take a moment to think of a time *you* felt like an outsider.

What was it like? What were the circumstances?

In my case, I’ll share with you what it feels like to be an outsider. As a single person living on the top of Queen Anne Hill, a culture that prizes couplehood, families walking to and fro, I’m constantly reminded that I am alone, that I don’t have a family, and in the process, feeling somewhat judged. I tell you, when I leave for California, I come back, not for Queen Anne Hill: I come back for *you*. *This* is where I don’t feel like an outsider. You are my people.

Now, whatever comes to mind in your case, (and by the way, I also *like* living in Queen Anne! Love the shops. I love meeting neighbors here and there. But I do often feel like an outsider, absent children and a family and a wife) whatever comes to mind in your

experience, the feeling of being an outsider in various contexts throughout one's life does not belong to you or to me alone. In the Bible, we have plenty of examples of individuals who were outsiders.

The first one that came to mind for me was John the Baptist there on the outskirts of town, dressed in camel's hair, eating locusts. (Now if I tried that on Queen Anne Hill, I would feel even more like an outsider, so I wouldn't advise it.)

My point is that there are a number of outsiders in the Bible, including, among others, the writer of Ecclesiastes. The text tells us it's Solomon, but most of these texts were written long after Solomon was dead, and they contain ideas that are not normative for the rest of Scripture. So in a way, Ecclesiastes is the outsider in the Hebrew Bible.

But we also meet, in addition to people, or texts, entire *communities* of outsiders in the Bible, which takes us to our second reading for today. And before I get to what our second reading for today says on the topic, I want to share a few fun facts about this fascinating letter first – and this is for our guest organist, as well as for our various members of the choir: According to the theologian Karl Barth, there are 13 passages in Ephesians that are either hymn fragments, or are at least written in a hymn style. Ephesians 2:14, is an example. There, the author quotes a hymn, “Sleeper, awake, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.” 13 references to hymns. Whoever the author was of this text, and we'll come to that in a moment, he wrote from a liturgical context. This was a person deeply familiar with emerging Christian worship. I find that fascinating. 13 times!

Second, roughly 80% of scholars, according to the Biblical scholar Raymond Brown in the Catholic tradition, roughly 80% of scholars argue that Paul did *not* write the letter, and with good reason. Here, in fact, are several: The address to the Ephesians is missing in some of our earliest copies of this letter. That means it's a *general* letter, not written to a specific audience, like the Corinthians or the Galatians. When it comes to Paul's original seven letters in the New Testament, that is, letters that are undisputedly written by Paul, according to scholars, he always names a specific locale, a specific audience. Ephesians, on the other hand, is a general letter, a universal letter, to Christians living everywhere at the time, throughout Asia Minor, throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

Also in Paul's original letters, he usually names people who belong to the community that is being addressed. One of my favorite examples in this case is Romans 16, where Paul names roughly a dozen people, including several women who are leaders of early house churches – Junia, for example. (Martin Luther said, “It can't be rendered *Junia* in the German; that's a woman's name! How could she, as the text says, ‘Be prominent among the disciples?’” There's Luther's patriarchal bias.) But also people like Priscilla, and people like Phoebe, who delivers and interprets the letter; Paul mentions all of these. He also refers to personal circumstances in his letters, as well as previous activities. These personal references, as well as names, are almost entirely absent in the Letter to the Ephesians.

We also read something strange in Ephesians 1 through 5. There, the writer says, "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus." Let me repeat that. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus." Yet in Acts 20, we know that Paul already spent *three years* in Ephesus, so simply "hearing about their faith" makes no sense. Paul even describes his ministry later in the same letter, which once again, to people who are already familiar with what Paul would have been doing, makes no sense.

Third, in addition to style and diction, there are some teachings in Ephesians that are different than Paul's original letters. You remember my reference to being single a few moments ago? Well, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says, "It is better for you to be single. Marry only if you burn." In other words, Paul *tolerates* marriage, and the reason he does this is because he believes that the return of Jesus is right around the corner. Why would you get married and start a family if the end is near?

On the other hand, Ephesians talks about marriage as part of God's plan for the church, and addresses approvingly a variety of issues revolving around the married life.

We also know that in Paul, the time is not yet. It's been started with Jesus's resurrection, but we still await the fulfillment of his Second Coming. In Ephesians, for the most part, that Second Coming has already happened! When I say at the table before the Eucharist, that "though God in Christ fills all things, God comes to us in a special way here, where God has been promised," I'm quoting Ephesians 4, which maintains that Christ is now cosmic in nature. The nerd term for this is *panchristicism*. "Christ is everywhere," Luther argues, "That's great; Christ is in with and under all things." I might say, to be a Lutheran Christian, following Ephesians is to be, not blue, or red, but *green*. We are stewards of God's creation, because God *is here*. God is present in the inmost reality of all things, as Luther says. And so, this Christ has now accomplished that task. This Christ has confirmed God's presence everywhere. That's different than what we find in the original letters of Paul.

Now, these discrepancies might be a problem for some, but as you know, it doesn't have to be that way. Most Biblical scholars believe Ephesians came from a loyal disciple or disciples of Paul as a tribute or testimony to the great apostle and his teachings. "Ephesians glorifies Paul," writes, once more, Raymond Brown, "by the quality of his disciples' teachings who carried on his work and applied his insight to new problems."

Now, as a teacher, I can relate. I have former students on occasion who will email me thanking me, maybe for a class, and saying, "I remember when you taught us this." And I have to reply, "I never taught you that. I don't know where that's coming from, but it didn't come from my classroom here!"

The writers of Ephesians were listening to Paul's teachings, and they filled in some of the gaps as new circumstances arose. Indeed, the fullest expression of the gospel of grace is in Ephesians 2, next to Ecclesiastes, my favorite passage in all of Scripture.

Now, my favorite discrepancy appears in "what Christ's death accomplished and what it means for a community of outsiders." This is the part you've never heard.

According to Raymond Brown, “Christ loved the church and gave himself over for her.” Let me repeat that. “Christ loved the church and gave himself over for her.” That is, in Ephesians, 5:25 – “Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”

That’s different. That’s different from the idea that Christ died *for sinners*, which Paul states in Romans 5, or that Christ died *for all* which Paul states in 2 Corinthians 5. Christ’s death, in other words, cleansed *the church*, so that a group of outsiders could now become insiders.

And who is that group? Well, look around you. It’s the Gentiles, this ragtag bunch, myself especially included, you and me, all of us who are gathered here this morning. We were once outsiders, as Gentiles, Paul says, but not anymore. Listen to verses 11 and 12 from our second reading: There Paul writes, “Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, so outsiders and strangers to the covenants of promise.”

Now, *covenant*, as you know, is a contract that God makes with God’s people. We were strangers to those promises made in covenant, having no hope and without God in the world.

“But now in Christ Jesus, you, who were once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

It is, in other words, the blood of Christ that brings these two groups, Jew and Gentile together, for he is our peace in his flesh. He has made – this is the most important part – both groups into one, and has broken down the dividing wall that is the hostility between us.

Then listen to verses 17-18. “So he came and proclaimed peace,” – that is, Jesus – “to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near.”

Well, who were you, who were far off? The Gentiles. Who were those who were near? The Jews. For through Him, both of us, Jew and Gentile – or Jew and *all other people* – have access, in one Spirit, to the Father. (Or to the Mother. That’s a sermon I’ll have for you later this year.)

This is the good news. This is “the gospel of our salvation,” as the writer of Ephesians puts it. The effect of Christ’s blood, symbolically, unifies the church. It cleanses the church from division. That’s what blood did, in ritual acts, according to the Hebrew tradition in the ancient world; it was a cleansing agent. So, the effect of Christ’s blood, used here as a symbol, was to unify the church, so that no one, *no one*, whether in Queen Anne, Wallingford, or yes, even Ballard, no one would feel or be an outsider Here the Jews. and the Gentiles, without losing their identity, have been made one in the church. The dividing wall of verse 14, incidentally, probably refers to the wall that prevented Gentiles, that is you and me, from entering the courts of the Jewish Temple. That wall has been torn down..

So. Do you know what it feels like to be an outsider, the way the Gentiles once did? If so, then here's my message for you today: You have a place here.

Do you know what it means to be an outsider, the way Merricat Blackwood did? If so, you belong here.

Or do you know the feeling of being an outsider, say, in the family or, as I mentioned, before, the community? If so, you have a place here.

By practicing connection, by coming together each Sunday and throughout the week, we testify to the Gospel, the good news that Christ welcomes all people and breaks down all barriers between them. To quote one of my favorite songs in the tradition, "All are welcome in this place."

So what about Shirley Jackson, the author I mentioned at the beginning of today's sermon? As some of you know, she was a popular writer in the mid-20th century who has since been largely forgotten, with the exception of her most famous short story, one I'm guessing that Jimmy might have read in middle school. Does anybody know what it was? *The Lottery*. That's exactly right. *The Lottery*.

That story, as well as her masterpiece, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, reflects her experience of being an outsider. She was born to a woman who considered her a failed abortion. She married a verbally abusive husband who repeatedly cheated on her, and who once characterized her as "a gifted idiot," and she lived on the outskirts of a small town in Vermont, where she felt that any time the townspeople could turn on her and her husband because he was Jewish.

And that's the irony, isn't it? We Gentiles, who were once the outsiders, have made outsiders of the Jews. But as Ephesians tells us, it doesn't have to be that way. Whenever we experience unity in worship or in communion with others, we glimpse Christ's victory over division. He died to bring us together.

We are no longer outsiders.

Amen.