

Text: The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Yawn. We have heard all this before. Gentiles are fellow heirs (yawn). Members of the same, over-used body image (yawn). Promises in/ through/ with Christ Jesus (yawn). Really, can't preachers find any new texts?

Of course, having a context here might, just might, perk up the text a bit. And the context is actually quite curious. Paul, even if he did not actually write this letter, certainly inspired it and it is from the Pauline school of theology. You see, Paul is more than simply the purported writer of a number of letters, which the church calls "epistles," this one included. Paul is more than just the second founder of Christianity; he is more than the topic of some seriously boring homiletics. He is also someone with a pretty remarkable story, because he was not always a spokesperson for Jesus. In fact, he intended to be Christianity's destroyer until Jesus went and got in his way; he went so far as condone Christians' murder, and to incite people to persecute them. So for him to say what he said above, all that stuff about Gentiles being fellow heirs, well, I don't know how many of us truly appreciate what a RADICAL reversal of heart and mind that was for him.

Paul was a Pharisee—the strictest of strict religious-type people. For a Pharisee, and they come in all shapes and sizes and in all religions, there is only one way to God, and it involves a lot of rules; and if you do not follow them well, you are plum out of luck, and straight into hell. Even within Judaism, as far as Pharisees were concerned, there were those who were in, and those who were out . . . a bit like most churches nowadays. Either you toe the line of the rule givers and the dogmatists, and either you believe and behave exactly so, or you pariah, cursed. Jews at least had a chance according to the likes of Paul: they could become Pharisees. Gentiles had no chance at all as far as Pharisees were concerned. They were outside, beyond the pale, rejected and despised of God.

Do you know that despite the actual faith of most people in the pews, the majority of the leaders of the majority of Christian sects believe that they possess the ONLY way to heaven and everyone else is going to hell? The majority of Christian churches believe that. Their way is the only way. Not even other Christians get in.

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I mean, can you imagine going up to Paul during his "Let's Kill the Christians" phase and trying to convince him that his way was not the only way? Gimme a break. That would be as futile as saying that to the heads of most of the largest Christian sects in the world. Sharers in the promise indeed.

So, I ask you, what does it take to do such a huge about face, for Paul, for Christians? How do you travel that road from a self-justified stance of everyone else is on the outside looking in to a place where everyone is on the inside looking in, because there is no outside at all? Whoa, that is some journey. That was some light Paul saw on the road to Damascus.

Of course, you are likely justified in saying to me, "Hey, preacher! Are you really so arrogant that you think you are any different? You may preach a gospel of inclusion, and you may even believe it in your heart, believe that it is a faithful rendering of Holy Scripture, but do you BEHAVE it? Are there no Gentiles in your life? Are there no outsiders?"

Um, maybe this is a good time to change the subject.

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You know, the older I get the harder it is to preach. I thought that, what with all the years of experience and practice, it would get easier but nope, that ain't so. There is something about the Gospel, something that demands searing self-honesty, something about grappling with it week after week that wears down the defenses and the arrogance and the certainties and leaves you with fewer and fewer answers and a lot more questions.

Of course, it also leaves you, paradoxically, more and more passionate about sharing the Good News. No, not sharing the arrogance, not sharing the self-righteousness, not sharing the dogmatism, not even sharing the few answers you have left, but instead sharing a way of compassion and peace and hope and healing. Sharing a path of forgiveness and humility. Sharing one of the only things left when the other certainties are all gone: the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love, the Way of Peace, the Way of the heart, the Way of the Gospel. The Way where there is no one outside. No one.

Looking around us here is it obvious that there are Gentiles not in our midst. We are largely white, straight, upper middle class and English speaking. We might proclaim that we are a progressive, inclusive home for all, but there are still Gentiles not in our midst, Gentiles on the outside.

The magi, people from the outside, followed a star to where there was and is no out and in, journeyed to a light, a light that enlightens the world and invites all people, ALL PEOPLE, into the fellowship of justice and love and forgiveness. The apostle Paul journeyed from darkness to a light so intense that it blinded him to his old way of inside and out, and called him out to be inside with all people, ALL PEOPLE, as fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. The people of this Body of Christ, we here today, are also on a journey to the light, on a journey to where there are no Gentiles, on a Way with the One who came to all people, ALL PEOPLE. We are on the Way with the one who gave his body and his blood as life and love and who shared the bread and the wine of his life so all might have life. We are on a journey with the one who gave us this table of rest and refreshment that we might learn to be disciples of Light. So come to this table:

COMMUNION IS SERVED