



## **Day 5: Heal our Divisions**

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### **Ephesians 2:13–22**

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<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far-off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far-off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

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Peace, peace to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them (Isa 57:19).

Ephesians 2 is a wonderful text about reconciliation that draws on Isaiah 57:19 to proclaim peace. Written to address the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles, it sings also of the cosmic reconciliation of the entire world. As we consider the healing of divisions today, Ephesians offers a prototype in the healing and reconciliation that Christ effected on the cross. Such healing is part of God's "economy" (*oikonomia*) or plan, to "gather up into one" all things in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Eph 1:10).

The whole letter may be a baptismal homily, underscoring strong contrasts between our previous life and our new life in Christ through baptism. Spatially, the contrast is between "far-off" and "near." Temporally, the contrast is between "once" and "but now." The language of the early chapters of Ephesians is doxological, giving thanks to God in prayer. It is as if the author of this letter, in reflecting on Christ, cannot help but break into song or prayer.

### Bringing "near" those who were once "far-off"

What are the divisions that need healing today? What ethnic and other walls separate people from God and from one another? (see the Village Group chapter on "Removing Barriers that Exclude")

Christ goes out to seek those of us "who were once far-off" in order to bring us near. In the context of Ephesians, the people who are "far-off" are the Gentiles—that is, we ourselves. As you read, try reversing the language of "we" and

Have you ever felt far-off from God? How did God bring you near? Who are those in our world today who are being "brought near" by God?

"you" in order to hear the full impact of reconciliation. We Gentiles are those who once were separated from God, having no place in the commonwealth of Israel; we are the ones who were "strangers to God's covenants of promise" (Eph 2:12). But now we who were far-off have become fellow citizens in Christ, full members of God's household.

The word for "far-off" (*makran*), repeated twice in this passage (Eph 2:13,17), is the same word as in the story of the Prodigal Son: the father runs out to embrace his son when he is still "far-off" (Lk 15:20). While we Gentiles were still far-off, Christ "went out to us" to proclaim the good news. Ephesians proclaims Christ's reconciling embrace in welcoming us home to God, just as the father welcomed home the son.

### A hymn to Christ?

A number of scholars suggest that verses 14–16 (or 14–18) were originally an early Christian hymn about Christ and about his work of reconciling opposites. The context of the hymn may have been baptism, reminding both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians of their radical change of status. If this text is a hymn, its character as shared song may open up possibilities for reconciliation today. Singing and music can sometimes heal divisions and bring people together even when differences seem irreconcilable.

This hymn may also be modeled on Colossians, a letter probably written one decade earlier. Compare Ephesians 2:14–16 and Colossians 1:15–20. Themes common to both hymns include cosmic reconciliation and peace. What other similarities do you see in the descriptions of Christ?

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## Christ is our peace

The word “peace” forms the core of the Ephesians’ hymn, occurring three times (verses 14, 15, 17). Many biblical texts proclaim peace, but Ephesians makes a daring theological claim: Christ himself *is* our peace. Not only does Christ make peace, he himself becomes peace, in his own body—in his blood on the cross—reconciling people to God and to one another.

The other references to peace in Ephesians—the calls to be peacemakers and to put on the armor of peace (Eph 4:3, 6:15, 23)—are rooted in this proclamation of verse 14 that it is Christ himself who is our peace. Because of Christ, the church is called to peacemaking work in the world. In verse 17, the word for “preaching” peace is actually “evangelizing” peace. Evangelism must include working to overcome violence and to make peace where it seems impossible. The church’s initiative for peacemaking comes not from ourselves, but from Christ.

Christ’s peace “makes us both one,” creating one new humanity. The combination of the words “create” and “human” (*anthropos*) echoes the Genesis creation story. Ephesians’ vision of oneness is bigger than the church, encompassing a unity that embraces the reconciliation of the whole human family. Indeed, the word “church” is not mentioned in this text. A “new humanity” is proclaimed, the mystical reconciliation of long-divided peoples.

Christ preached “peace to those who are far-off and peace to those who are near.” Read Isaiah 57:19, the text from which this image is taken. In Isaiah the far-off ones were God’s people still in exile, while the near ones were those who had stayed behind on the land. Both groups receive the promise of the healing of the world, God’s assurance that “I will heal them.”

How is your church involved in peacemaking? How does the vision of Christ as our peace inspire commitments to overcome violence? (see Village Group chapter on “Overcoming Violence”)

## Dividing walls

Christ made peace by destroying the dividing wall of hostility, the enmity that exists among people and between people and God. It is the “cross” (verse 16, a word probably added into the original hymn) that brings enmity to an end. The “wall” image in verse 14 may have referred originally to the temple wall that separated the court of Gentiles from the inner sanctuary; now it refers to all the walls that restrict access to God. Similar to the ripping of the temple curtain in the Gospel of Mark (Mk 15:38), through Christ’s death the wall is broken down.

The Berlin Wall may be gone, but our world continues building walls to keep out enemies and to enforce separation. “Gated communities” exclude people of lower economic status from private neighborhoods. Many countries have built fences and walls along their borders. Walls and checkpoints confine thousands of Palestinians, while some Israelis hope to build an even more impenetrable wall. Ephesians 2 was the theme for a recent conference that envisioned an end to the dividing walls separating Palestinians and Israelis.

What are the major dividing walls of hostility in our world today? In your society? How does the cross of Christ break down walls? How have you witnessed enmity between groups of people being overcome?

## Reconciliation as full citizenship

Ephesians uses a rich combination of political and household imagery to describe the reconciliation and inclusion

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we receive in Christ. We now have “access” to God in one spirit (verse 18; see also Eph 3:12). We, who were once strangers or “aliens” (the Greek word *xenoi*, from which “xenophobia” is derived), now have a commonwealth (*politeia*) in which we are co-citizens (*sym-politai*). These are political terms (note the root word *polis*), expressing a longing for citizenship that is felt even today by many aliens and refugees.

## Reconciliation as homecoming

In verse 19 the terminology shifts from political imagery to the more intimate language of “home.” The Greek for house is *oikos*, from which words such as ecu-

menical, economy and ecology are also derived. Ephesians 2 contains a concentration of “*oik-*” words: We are members of the household of God (*oikeoi*, Eph 2:19). The whole house of “structure” (*oikodome*, verse 21) holds together in Christ. We are being “built together” (*syn-oikodomeisthe*) into the “dwelling” or home (*katoiketerion*, verse 22) of God.

The household of God is a wonderful metaphor for the church—allowing space for diversity (rooms in which each person can be themselves) as well as for unity (common spaces).<sup>1</sup> Walls that exclude and divide need to be dismantled, in order to welcome everyone into the structure, built on Christ as its cornerstone.

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Describe a place where you have felt completely at “home.” What qualities did it have? How can the church deepen this sense of hospitality and welcome? How can we offer a sense of “home” as a way of healing a divided world?

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> So Anne Svennungsen, “God’s Peace,” Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Triennial Convention Bible Study, July 1996 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press), pp. 21–22.



## Luke 24:13–35

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<sup>13</sup> Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. <sup>15</sup> While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, <sup>16</sup> but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. <sup>17</sup> And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. <sup>18</sup> Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” <sup>19</sup> He asked them, “What things?” They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, <sup>20</sup> and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. <sup>21</sup> But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. <sup>22</sup> Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They



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were at the tomb early this morning, <sup>23</sup> and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. <sup>24</sup> Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.” <sup>25</sup> Then he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! <sup>26</sup> Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” <sup>27</sup> Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. <sup>28</sup> As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. <sup>29</sup> But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. <sup>30</sup> When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. <sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” <sup>33</sup> That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. <sup>34</sup> They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” <sup>35</sup> Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

How is the sharing of stories important in the life of faith?

## On the way to where the others are

Two people are on their way to Emmaus. They have left Jerusalem and the others in their group behind.

The Emmaus episode is the story of a journey. The language of mobility, of walking, of moving along, of proceeding, of learning on the road, reflects a fundamental theme in Luke’s writing. The whole outline is one of moving from one place to another, of not just being **on** the way but **being** the way. Such is the Christian self-designation in the Acts of the Apostles: the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

The direction of the movement is never insignificant. In the Emmaus story

the two disciples are on the road, but they are not moving on, following their master. They are leaving the miserable end of their previous commitment behind; they are going back home. Their expectations of the prophet they had chosen to follow had been high. They had eagerly awaited the redeeming moment of victory. They had looked forward to seeing the enemies of their people slain and humiliated. They had hoped for the day of glory—the ultimate manifestation of God’s preferential option for them, God’s people. But reality had defeated them. Their hero of promises had lost his case. If hopes were to survive, they would have to look elsewhere, to start again from square one.

When and where have you experienced similar disappointments?

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They are leaving Jerusalem, the place of power and glory that has turned into misery. As they turn toward Emmaus, this is the scream of their return, the hurt of misplaced trust, of no longer knowing what to believe. In fact, the whole gospel story is at an impasse. The male disciples do not believe, even ridicule, the women's tale of the empty tomb. Peter may have been amazed at the empty tomb, but he has gone home, and so do the two who are on their way to Emmaus.

As they search for some sense and reason to it all, they talk together. Luke always has the disciples travel two by two, so that there is a taste of community, so that responsibility is shared, so that reflection does not take place in isolation. In this case, they also welcome a stranger into their conversation. He makes them tell their story. They do so, assuming they possess knowledge he does not have.

The three elements of their story all start with statements which, elsewhere in the New Testament, are positive affirmations of the Christian faith. Here they lead to expressions of utter frustration. The wonderful life of Jesus is punctured by his tragic death. Their hope that he was the one to redeem Israel is replaced by disillusion. The talk of some women that his grave is empty and angels had proclaimed him to be alive, is undermined by the fact that they did not actually see Jesus.

The report of the two carefully reiterates the story as it has just been told in the gospel narrative. This is done for the benefit of the stranger who they assume does not know. For us, as readers, this is mere repetition. Is this only a means of making us wait impatiently for the moment they will understand what we **already** know, that the stranger in fact is Jesus? Or are we being told something that we do not already know?

Their rendering of the morning's events is quite faithful, but it also reveals confusion and a hesitation on their part

Should we sometimes question those whom we are accustomed to trust and believe? How does a story become authoritative for us? What does it take to convince us?

as to who and what to believe. Their re-telling brings out the irony of the story: the two still doubt what the reader knows to be true. It shows how they struggle to transcend their own experience of defeat, by trusting the stories of others whose credibility they have not readily accepted. They ask for more, and in the end it seems that only the recognition of the Lord brings restoration. He is the one verifiable teacher. By his surprise appearance, he lends credibility to those they had been reluctant to trust. There is a lesson here as to how credibility is conceived and authority attained.

The language of the text continually reminds us that there are two "of them." Those whose stories they re-tell and hesitantly discredit belong to the same group. They are still characterized by this shared sense of belonging but they are about to move apart. Each will opt for his or her own destination. As they head for Emmaus, they have left the others behind in Jerusalem.

When they reach Emmaus, they want their fellow travelers to stay with them. They have hardly settled in when their eyes are opened. In recognizing Jesus they are compelled to return to Jerusalem the very same day. The attraction of the Emmaus story has often been its sacramental dimension: in the end, faith is restored in the revealing of the Lord through the breaking of the bread. Thus, every place becomes a place for his presence to be revealed. Yet, the risen Lord does not remain with them beyond this moment of revelation. As he vanishes, they move to join those whom they had left. From Emmaus they find their way back to Jerusalem. The geographical focus of this story is Jerusa-

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lem. The road to Emmaus leads to Jerusalem, to where the others are.

In returning to Jerusalem, they are reunited with “the others.” Communion is re-established as they mutually give account. Immediately the two learn that in Jerusalem the risen Lord has appeared also to Simon. They respond by telling their story. In this manner, the Jerusalem story of the Lord appearing to the prominent Simon Peter and the Emmaus story of Jesus’ walk and talk with two otherwise unknown disciples are merged with the story of the women. These stories together become a shared recognition of the resurrection and abiding presence of the crucified Lord.

The impasse is overcome, not because the disciples knew the right direction in which to go, nor because some of them

were “right.” But Jesus found them. He came to them where they were, and in walking along with them, made them aware that they were destined for community—with him and with each other.

In the Gospel of Luke, there is no further competition among the disciples. There are no more arguments over which of them is the greatest (Lk 9:46–48; 22:24–27). For the remainder of Luke’s Gospel, the Lord appears to the entire community; no one is in a privileged position. Thus, in its entirety, the Emmaus story is about restored faith and restored communion. It is about the sharing of stories and mutual recognition. It is about unity as gift and calling.

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What are some implications of this story for how power and privilege often operate in and between churches? Will we allow the recognition of the presence of the Lord to heal the distortion of our disconnected and competing voices? What does this say about disputes regarding who is the greatest? Instead of insisting on our own way and familiar space, can we be moved to go to where the others are?