Last week, we meditated upon the event that captured the attentions all around the world. No, we’re not talking about the World Cup, but the miraculous rescue of the 12 boys and their football coach in northern Thailand. In light of the dire and desperate situation that they were in, something good did come out of it, and gave us a glimmer of hope for the human race. A communal “global village” was formed to lend their physical and spiritual supports to a group of total strangers. Random people became friends in the midst of desperations, while overcoming the various adversities and challenges. It was an effort of collective good wills, prayers and devotions, and a little bit of good kharma that made this miraculous rescue possible. Those rescue workers, volunteers, and the boys are no longer strangers and aliens,but are now friends and families bonded for life.

In the passage that we just read, the Apostle Paul was addressing to a diverse community of people who were also facing great deal of challenges and adversities among themselves. Now, these were fellow believers who were from various backgrounds who live in one city, believe in one faith, and now worship and pray in the one church.

One of the major challenges that the early churches had to deal with was the issue of identity, who’s in and who’s out and who have we become? Are the Jews still the “chosen people” of God’s covenant or the non-Jews (the Gentiles). As you would imagine, there were a great deal of cultural nuances and practices that need to be adapted and tolerated with one another. In spite of their differences, they needed to get along with one another and share what they had in common with others.

I’m pretty sure that most, if not all of us have next door neighbors. Some of us might have to share a wall or partitions with our neighbors. In the suburbs, it’s less obvious…sometimes there are no clear separation from one’s property to the neighbor’s. But sometimes people get too “territorial”. *“This is my space, and you stay on your side of your property and don’t bother me. You do your things over there and keep it on your side of the fence….that is until they have a backyard BBQ and the smoke and the smell of the BBQ blow onto your side.”* But sometimes we often get into territorial disputes. Unfortunately despite our efforts, not all neighbors are as easy to get along with. It’s NOT easy to love our neighbors as we love ourselves! We put up invisible walls that often isolate and separate us, rather than unite us.

In the passage that we read earlier, the early church was living in a time of great transition and uncertainty about their future. They were still discovering what it means to be called into this new community of faith. On one hand, they were blessed by the Holy Spirit that they were **growing exponentially in numbers**, but on the other hand, they weren’t quite sure of what they were becoming. It was a good problem to have but a problem nevertheless! They found themselves in this huge identity crisis trying to figure out who they were as followers of Christ.

In the demographically diverse community like here in New York, it doesn’t take much for us to notice the difference and to see how things have evolved over the years. But sociologically, that’s the modern day challenge, as well as opportunity, that God has invited us to explore.

Ministering to a diverse community of people is a messy and tolerant act of faith that requires a great deal of forbearance and grace. You cannot just put a group of people into one place and expect them to work in harmony and hash out their differences. It is both a blessing as well as a challenge.

As evident in the newly crowned World Cup football champion –France, 15 out of the 22 players on the roster are either migrants or children of immigrants, mostly from French speaking African nations. This was not by coincidence, but a conscientious effort of inclusion and welcome, not only for their skills on the football field but for who they are as contributing members of society. France was sending a message to the world that this is the “New World”, the new reality that we must embrace today.

In the same way, as we read in our passage today, the Apostle Paul acknowledged and challenged the early church in Ephesus to do likewise…embrace one another, surrender themselves to one another, for the sake of the larger community. At times they must become vulnerable to one another, by giving up their personal privileges and inherited rights. But this is beyond their material or economic disparities. This is about bridging the social disparities of how they must relate to one another, to see others for who they are, without claiming superiority or dominance over the others.

Our text today reminded us how we must strive to co-exist along with others who might be different from us, whether by how he or she looks, where they came from, or how they do things that might not be the same way as we do. Keep in mind that some of these differences are not just limited to one’s race, ethnicity or country of origins. Often times we put up invisible walls and barriers, and place judgement upon those who may have various forms of physical or hidden challenged abilities and special needs. We put up those walls inadvertently to shun others as well.

Paul offered us a message of hope, in verse 14, that we may still find peace in the midst of conflicts and our differences. ***Christ is our peace, and in his flesh, he has made all groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall****.[[1]](#footnote-1)*  Just what “dividing wall” was Paul talking about?

Well, some scholars believed that Paul was referring to the outer wall of the ancient Jewish temple that literally separates the Jews from the Gentiles. But that divided wall implied more than the physical separation, it implied the long-lasted hostility and enmity between the Jews and the Gentile.

But this tension between the Jews and the Gentiles took a dramatic turn when Christ came. All of a sudden, they were asked to worship and pray side-by-side and must learn to co-exist with one another. Imagine what that felt like. **Paul used this metaphoric to imply that this spiritual “dividing wall” between God and us must be broken down.** This was what Christ’s earthly mission of reconciliation all about**. Christ came** **not only to demonstrate why we must bridge the divisions among ourselves but more importantly we must tear down the eternal separation between God and humanity.**

As you know, the temple veil was split in half, when Christ took his final breath upon the cross, as a sign of that separation between God and humanity has been eliminated.

In verse 15, Paul talked about this “***New Humanity***” that has been created? What New Humanity? Don’t you just love how Paul used these theological metaphors and similes? What Paul really meant was that this “New Humanity” shall be founded upon **mutual reconciliation** and **peace among all people**. In another translation, this “new humanity” was simply translated as a “new person” or a “new creation”.

Furthermore, the term “Christians” was first introduced to describe this newly created unique people who are the followers and believers of Christ. These are random (but not so random) people that God put together…such an odd combination of people who are connected together through their common faith in Christ. ***We are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the same household of God, with Christ being the cornerstone and his teachings as the foundation.[[2]](#footnote-2)***

We become this “New Humanity” or a “New Creation” not by our own personal accomplishments but by our collective effort of working things out with one another, hashing out our differences, breaking down the barriers or “walls” that often separate and divide us.

As one theologian puts it, “*the peace Christian have in Christ enables us to engage boldly, perhaps even foolishly, in what may appear to the rest of the world to be hopeless situations. Christians know it is not our task to bring peace to the world. God has already done that in the person of Christ.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

When Paul described us as being “strangers and aliens”, he didn’t particularly mean that we are foreigners from different nationalities or ethnic backgrounds. What Paul described us of being “strangers and aliens” reflect upon our **estranged and distant relationship with our God, due to our own human sinfulness and rejections.**

In the same way, when Christ visited us as “strangers” and visitor to this earth, the people rejected him and treated him as aliens, the same way we treat some of our neighbors today. We shoo them away, we want to build physical walls that would keep them out and deport them back to where they belong. But through God’s grace and reconciling love, Christ overcame the sins of our human betrayal and rejections and we shall do likewise toward our neighbors as well. **Being at peace does not mean that there will be no conflicts. We can still come to peace in the midst of conflicts. But we must look beyond what human sees, by seeking a higher calling by embracing one another and accepting one another for who they are, just as Christ embraced and accepted us for who we are.**

Later on, as our *Affirmation of Faith*, we will be reciting the Law of God that was handed down to us. This was also better commonly known as the *Ten Commandments.* These laws served as an important reminder of not only our relationship with God but our relationship with one another as well. These laws are to be committed in our hearts (not just to know who they are but to put them into practice!!!) and teach them to our children and our children’s children.

Symbolically on one hand, these laws remind us of what separates us from our ultimate intimate relationship with God; while on the other hand, they remind us that God still loves and cares for us, in spite of what we have done, as God establishes new order in a world that is filled with chaos, divisions, and hostilities among us.

This original covenant of the Law still holds us and binds us in account, but thanks to Christ who came to liberate us and supplement us with this new covenant of Grace. **We are therefore no longer strangers and aliens but as fellow citizens of God’s household, and siblings in Christ.** This was God’s hope and vision for us ALL today.

In closing, I would like to share with you the words of the retired former Episcopal Archbishop Desmond Tutu of the once Apartheid South Africa. Tutu spoke, “*God saw our brokenness and sought to extricate us from it but only with our cooperation. God will not cajole or bully us, but wants to woo us for our own sakes. We might say that the Bible is the story of God’s attempt to effect atonement, to bring us back to our intended condition of relatedness. God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to God. God sent Jesus who would fling out his arms on the cross as if to embrace us. God wants to draw us back into an intimate relationship and so bring to unity all that has become disunited. This was God’s intention from the beginning. And each of us is called to be an ally of God in this work of justice and reconciliation.[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Friends, there is a biblical mandate and a challenge for all of us today to love our neighbors as ourselves and to see others as God’s children, as fellow citizens, and as members of God’s household, without partiality or judgement. **No longer are we strangers and aliens to one another but as friends and cohabitants of God’s kingdom that is already here and is to come.** Thanks be to God. In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Ephesians 2:14* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. v.19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stroup, George W. *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 3 p.258* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Charkoian Karen, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3 p.258* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)