

## STRANGERS?

IN TODAY'S NEW TESTAMENT READING THERE IS ONE VERSE THAT CATCHES THE EYE. IN VERSE 19 **"So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household"**. THINK ABOUT THAT FOR A MOMENT! THEN IT CONTINUES ON **"As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone"...** then it finishes with **"Christ is building you into place where God lives through the Spirit"**. WITH SUCH A BENEFIT, WHY WOULD ANYONE BE A STRANGER?

**THERE WAS A ONENESS AND UNITY CREATED BY CHRIST HIMSELF FOR ALL OF US. EVERY SUNDAY, WE HAVE COMMUNION WE INVITE ALL TO COME TO THE COMMUNION TABLE.** WE EVEN CALL IT "OPEN COMMUNION", WHERE ANYONE PROMPTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT CAN COME FORWARD. WE DON'T QUESTION THAT BECAUSE WHEN THE HOLY SPIRIT MOVES IN SOMEONE'S HEART HOW WE BEGIN TO QUESTION OR JUDGE THAT. THANK GOD IN THE METHODIST CHURCH WE DON'T EVEN BEGIN TO ATTEMPT SUCH A JUDGMENT.

THE QUESTION COMES AROUND AGAIN **"WHY WOULD ANYONE BE A STRANGER IN THE HOUSE OF GOD, THE FAMILY OF GOD? NO ONE SHOULD EVER SENSE THEY ARE A STRANGER IN THIS HOUSE OF GOD, THIS FAMILY OF GOD WE CALL CENTENNIAL.**

**"UNITY"** DOESN'T COME FROM THE ORGANIZATION MAN HAS CREATED OR THE LITURGY A CERTAIN CHURCH USES, IT **COMES FROM JESUS CHRIST.** HE IS THE ONE WHO HAS BROKEN DOWN, OVERCOME THE BARRIERS THAT RELIGION CREATED SINCE THE DAYS OF THE PHARISEES. **HOWEVER, TRUE TO OUR NATURE WE PERSONALLY AND CORPORATELY BUILD WALLS, EVEN INSIDE THE CHURCH! HOW CAN WE DO THAT?** WHEN TOGETHER WORSHIP IS MORE INTIMATE THAN ANYTHING ELSE YOU CAN THINK OF, YES EVEN THAT!!!

JUST THINK ABOUT WHAT WE ARE DOING THIS MORNING – **WE ARE GATHERING TOGETHER AND WORSHIPPING GOD, COMING INTO HIS PRESENCE AND SENSING HIS HOLY SPIRIT HERE WITH US.** IF YOU DON'T SENSE THAT, THEN *MAYBE YOU HAVE CONSTRUCTED A WALL.* IT IS GOD'S DESIRE FOR US TO COME INTO HIS PRESENCE, BUT *HIS HOLY SPIRIT WON'T COME WHERE HE IS NOT INVITED.* "FREE WILL" GIVES US THE CHOICE TO ACCEPT ALL THIS OR JUST SIT THERE EVERY SUNDAY FOR AN HOUR AND LEAVE, WONDERING WHY NOTHING CHANGES. GOD WANTS TO GIVE US THE GIFTS FROM A TO Z, BUT SADLY MANY PEOPLE IN THEIR SPIRITUAL LIFE NEVER SEEK MORE THAN A, B OR C.

PERSONAL NOTE HERE – THERE WAS A TIME WHEN CHURCH WAS NOT EXACTLY FRONT AND CENTER. OH, I WENT TO CHURCH, SANG, PRAYED, THEN WENT HOME. NEVER OPENED A BIBLE OR A RELIGIOUS BOOK AND WAS CONTENT WITH LIFE. THEN A GUY AT WORK STARTED TALKING TO ME ABOUT HIS FAITH AND IT SOUNDED A BIT OFF. TO MAKE A LONG STORY SHORT, I WENT TO MY MINISTER AT THE TIME AND STARTED ASKING QUESTIONS AND HE INVITED ME TO A PRAYER GROUP. I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED THAT NIGHT, WELL, YES I DO, BUT WHAT WENT ON IN THAT GROUP OPENED MY EYES AND NOT LONG AFTER THAT MY HEART AND MY DESIRE WAS TO EXPERIENCE WHAT THEY HAD. **TO THIS DAY**

**I CONTINUE TO BE OPEN TO THINGS GOD HAS FOR HIS CHILDREN. WE NEED NOT BE STRANGERS TO A GOD WHO SENT HIS ONLY SON TO RIGHT THE RELATIONSHIP HE SO DESIRES US TO HAVE WITH HIM.**

**WHAT MAKES US STRANGERS IN THIS FAMILY OF GOD?** THERE ARE MANY THINGS THAT CAN DO THAT, BUT DO THEY REALLY MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO GOD?

**AGE CAN BE A REAL FACTOR IN MAKING US STRANGERS WITH OTHERS.** NO MATTER WHETHER WE ARE YOUNG OR OLD *WE HESITATE TO REACH OUT AND JUST TALK.* THINK RIGHT NOW, *IF A YOUNG PERSON CAME TO YOU OR YOUNG PEOPLE IF AN OLDER PERSON CAME UP TO YOU HOW WOULD YOU REACT? WHY?* IF AS WE SAY WE ARE A FAMILY THEN WHY SHOULD IT BE SO DIFFICULT TO TALK TO EACH OTHER?

MAYBE WE SHOULD SPEND SOME TIME FINDING OUT ABOUT EACH OTHER AND WHAT MAKES THE OTHER PERSON "TICK". YOU MAY JUST FIND OUT THERE IS A SUBJECT OR ISSUE THAT YOU BOTH HAVE AN INTEREST IN, AND DESPITE THE FACT YOU COULD BE AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE SUBJECT THAT'S OKAY. *IF THERE IS ANYWHERE WE SHOULD BE ABLE TO DISCUSS OUR DIFFERENCES IT SHOULD BE IN CHURCH.* JOHN WESLEY CALLED IT "**HOLY CONFERCING**", **JUST A FANCY NAME FOR TALKING AND AGREEING TO DISAGREE, BUT RESPECTING THE OTHER PERSON'S TAKE ON THE SUBJECT.**

IN OUR CULTURE TODAY I BELIEVE A BIG REASON WE ARE "STRANGERS" TO EACH OTHER IS **WE JUST DO NOT LISTEN TO THE OTHER PERSON TALKING.** THERE IS MUCH SHOUTING DOWN OF PEOPLE AND THEIR IDEAS. WHEN YOU BECOME A LICENSED PASTOR YOU MUST HAVE AN EXPERIENCED MENTOR, A PASTOR. I ASKED FOR MY PASTOR FROM VALLEY NOT BECAUSE HE WAS MY FORMER PASTOR, BUT BECAUSE HE IS VERY DIFFERENT THAN I AM IN THE WAY HE APPROACHES THINGS AS WELL AS HIS PERSONALITY. *I HAVE ALSO DISCOVERED IN SCHOOL THAT MY TEACHERS I LEARN THE MOST FROM CHALLENGE ME THE MOST AND HOW I LOOK AT THINGS. I COME AWAY WITH A DEEPER APPRECIATION FOR THE DIFFERENCES.*

**HERE IN THE FAMILY OF GOD WE ALL HAVE A VERY COMMON LINK AND THAT IS JESUS AND OUR FAITH.** DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT THIS GROUP OF PEOPLE WOULD EVER HAVE GOTTEN TOGETHER ANYWHERE ELSE? THAT BOND IS STRONGER THAN YOU MAY BELIEVE AND THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US NOT ONLY TO FUNCTION, BUT TO GROW TOGETHER!

**THE VARIETY OF BACKGROUNDS CAN MAKE US STRANGERS WITH EACH OTHER.** RURAL AND CITY, DIFFERENT SCHOOLS, INTERESTS, LIFE EXPERIENCES OR EVEN LOOKS! WE ALL HAVE BEEN IN A SITUATION WHERE BECAUSE OF SUCH DIFFERENCES WE REALLY FELT OUT OF IT OR IGNORED BY OTHERS, TREATED DIFFERENTLY.

IN TODAY'S READING PAUL WAS WRITING TO THE PEOPLE AT EPHESUS, A TOWN FULL OF GENTILES. HE WAS WRITING THEM *TO TELL THEM BECAUSE OF THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.* IN FACT ACCORDING TO THESE VERSES **WE ARE NOT ONLY FAMILY, WE ARE THE VERY MATERIAL OF THE BUILDING IN WHICH GOD THROUGH HIS SPIRIT WILL DWELL!!!**

THERE IS A PLACE IN THE FAMILY OF GOD FOR EACH AND EVERY PERSON AND NO ONE THAT COMES THROUGH OUR DOOR SHOULD EVER, EVER SENSE THEY ARE LEFT OUT IN THE COLD BY THE FAMILY OF

GOD HERE AT CENTENNIAL. **WE CAN NOT AS GOD'S PEOPLE BE MORE EXCLUSIVE THAN GOD.** REMEMBER AND NEVER FORGET HE HAS ACCEPTED YOU AND ME RIGHT WHERE WE ARE. *ONE OF THE MYSTERIES OF THE FAITH IS HOW HE IS USING YOU AND ME DESPITE OURSELVES TO BUILD A DWELLING PLACE FOR THE HOLY SPIRIT!*

**THE SECOND HALF OF THE GREAT COMMANDMENT IS TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES.** NOW THROUGH OUR FAITH DO WE TRULY BELIEVE GOD LOVES US AND BECAUSE OF THAT "FACT OF FAITH" WE ARE FREE TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBOR AS OURSELVES? WHEN WE DO THIS THEN **THERE ARE NO STRANGERS IN THE FAMILY OF GOD.** HERE COMES THE HARD PART WHERE WE NEED THE HELP AND POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT BECAUSE WE CANNOT DO IT ON OUR OWN.

GO BACK TO TODAY'S READING AND IN VERSES 13 AND 16 *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." in His flesh He has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us...16and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.* NO ONE IS A STRANGER ANY LONGER BECAUSE OF NOT WHAT WE HAVE DONE, BUT THROUGH THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST ON THE CROSS. THAT IS WHY WE MUST ACT AND THINK LIKE PAUL WHO ONCE STATED HE EARLIER IN THE READING IN VERSE 9 *"Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it."*

**THE WORK OF CHRIST ON THE CROSS PLACES US ALL IN THE SAME BOAT.** I HAVE A PICTURE OF THOSE LARGE CRUISE SHIPS WITH THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE ON THEM, QUITE A TASK TO NOT BE A STRANGER TO ALL ON THAT SHIP FOR SURE. FOR MANY THAT IS THE REASON OR EXCUSE THEY GIVE NOT TO DO ANYTHING TO BRING A STRANGER CLOSER TO GOD. HEAR THIS, **GOD I AM SURE IS JOYFUL IF WE AS HIS CHILDREN AND DISCIPLES OF HIS SON CHRIST WOULD BRING JUST ONE STRANGER CLOSER TO HIM!**

JUST RECALL THE **PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP.** HOW MUCH REJOICING WAS THERE WHEN THE ONE WAS FOUND AND RETURNED TO THE FOLD? IN LUKE 15 IT IS TOLD THIS WAY WHEN THAT WHICH WAS LOST IS FOUND - *"You would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me! I've found my lost sheep!' Count on it—there's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue."* THE PERSON, THE STRANGER, NO LONGER LOST OR FAR FROM GOD IS IN THE FOLD – HALLELUJAH! AND **ISN'T THAT OUR "MISSION" TO "MAKE CHRIST KNOWN IN OUR COMMUNITY"?** IT IS RIGHT THERE IN BLACK AND WHITE AT THE BEGINNING OF OUR BULLETIN.

YOU WONDER MAYBE WHY I HAD TORIE PLACE IT THERE INSTEAD OF LEAVING ON THE BACK WHERE IT HAD BEEN? I WANT US TO SEE IT THERE AND REMEMBER THAT JUST AS THE STATEMENT BEGINS THE ORDER OF OUR SERVICE, IT IS IN THOSE WORDS - THE VERY *FOUNDATION OF WHY CENTENNIAL IS HERE AND UNIQUE TO THIS FAMILY OF BELIEVERS.* *WHEN WE PUT IN TO PRACTICE THE WORDS OF OUR MISSION STATEMENT THERE WILL NOT BE ANY STRANGERS INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THESE WALLS.*

AS I HAVE SAID BEFORE **PEOPLE WANT TO BELONG TO SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES, CONNECT TO SOMETHING MEANINGFUL AND BE ASSURED THEY ARE STRANGERS NO MORE!**

**THAT IS OUR MISSION!** IT IS NOT JUST TO GATHER SING, LISTEN, FELLOWSHIP AND LEAVE IT ALL HERE. **NO, THROUGH WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, STEWARDSHIP, EVANGELISM, AND SERVICE IT IS A BEGINNING WHERE WE BECOME THAT LIGHT ON A HILL THAT WILL ATTRACT “STRANGERS” TO CENTENNIAL AND MORE IMPORTANTLY A LIFE LIVED IN THE SHADOW.** NO, RATHER IN THE LIGHT OF THE CROSS, BELONGING TO THE FAMILY OF GOD IN THIS EARTHLY BUILDING WE SEE AROUND US, BUT ALSO WE WILL ALL BE A WORK IN PROGRESS WHERE GOD BY HIS HOLY SPIRIT WILL DWELL.

Although at times it seems as though the church is in ruin and rubble, God sees it as a beautiful building. Clinker bricks are bricks that did not quite make it. For some reason or another, they come out of the kiln misshapen or deformed. There was a church in New York State that was intentionally built of clinker bricks. Apparently, the congregation wanted to send a message, so they build their church of imperfect, rejected bricks. The message is that we are all clinker bricks, we are sinners, we are imperfect people, but through Christ we become living stones in His church.

**We do not become living stones because we are so great. It is Christ who is great. We are connected into his church through Him, no longer strangers.**

**I PRAY** THAT THE FREEDOM WE INDEED HAVE THROUGH THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS NOT USED TO DO ANYTHING WE DESIRE, BUT TO DO THAT WHICH WE KNOW, IN HERE, IS THE RIGHT THING SO THERE WILL NO LONGER BE STRANGERS WITHIN THE WALLS OF CENTENNIAL OR WITHIN OUR “REACH”!

AMEN.