



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

June 7, 2015

"Together" (WORTHY Sermon Series)

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**E**ph. 2:11 *Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.*

*Eph. 2:12 In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.*

*Eph. 2:13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*

*Eph. 2:14 For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.*

*Eph. 2:15 He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.*

*Eph. 2:16 Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.*

*Eph. 2:17 He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near.*

*Eph. 2:18 Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.*

*Eph. 2:19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.*

*Eph. 2:20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.*

*Eph. 2:21 We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord.*

*Eph. 2:22 Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit. (NLB)*

We continue our WORTHY sermon series this morning. It's a study on the six chapters of the book of Ephesians, a book in the Bible that the Apostle Paul wrote to the first church in a city called Ephesus. We are calling it the WORTHY Sermon Series because it is based on a verse in the book of Ephesians states that we are to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called." (Eph 4:1)

I don't know how it turned out that in making the preaching schedule and my choosing to preach this Sunday I happened to choose the passage that talks about circumcision! Lucky me! Lucky you! But don't worry! You will be surprised how, by the end of this sermon, there will be something useful for us all.

So let us cut to the chase. And if there are young kids here, you can ask your

parents later what circumcision means. It's something about a physical sign in the ancient days of who was considered to be in the "in" crowd and who was not. How's that for euphemism?

You see, before Jesus came to Earth, the Jews and the non-Jews, known as Gentiles, kept far apart from one another, physically and spiritually. The Jews believed that if you were not circumcised, you were heathen or pagan, you didn't believe in God. After Jesus came, the early church had to decide whether the men still needed to be circumcised after becoming followers of Christ. But the first Church council held in Jerusalem decided that no, Gentiles who decided to follow Christ did not have to be circumcised. As the news of that decision spread throughout the lands, you could hear a sigh of relief from thousands of Gentile men! They had dodged a bullet, or knife, so to speak.

We need to know that for many cultures, unlike America, circumcision was an important cultural passage for young boys.

I remember when I was in the Philippines a few years ago with our medical missions team, there were hundreds of young boys, some as old as 11 years old, waiting in a long line for our team to perform circumcision—not for religious reasons but for health reasons, which I know is debated in America.

As I went up to the boys with their pastor, he yelled to them, "What are you here for?" And they all yelled back, "Circumcision!" They said that with such enthusiasm! If only they knew.

I think this sermon marks a first in my preaching history in that I'm using this word so often and even yelling it out! But I'm not here to make fun of this ritual, and I do understand the deep respect it has in many societies. In Central Turkey, for example, circumcision is a huge rite of passage for a young boy. It's accompanied with a lot of partying for the adults, but not so much for the little boy. Take a look at this one-minute clip from good ole tour guide Rick Steves in Central Turkey. (A short video was shown.)

So what does this have to do with us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Hawaii? A lot! And it is really important. As I said earlier, before Jesus came, Gentiles and Jews stayed away from each other.

Then Jesus came and said those who were to follow Him become part of one family—God's family. No distinction anymore between the Jews and the Gentiles.

*Eph. 2:12 In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.*

*Eph. 2:13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to Him through the blood of Christ.*

Much of the New Testament letters in the Bible talks of this huge cultural shift that said though circumcision WAS the mark of a follower of God, Jesus was saying that NOW it is no longer true! His blood sacrifice was enough. If you follow Him with all of your heart and have the Holy Spirit in your heart, then it doesn't matter if you have a physical sign of faith, like circumcision.

In fact, when you are baptized, that is the new spiritual circumcision and the physical mark of faith of a new follower of Jesus. Aren't we happy that baptism is the new sign of a believer? It's gender inclusive showing women can

be full followers of and leaders for Jesus. And it's pain free.

Baptism means you have been soaked with His grace and mercy. You had been submerged in sin, so to speak, but now you rise cleansed of all your sin through the blood of Christ that was shed on a cross for you.

All throughout the Old Testament the ritual of circumcision was so spiritually important. But when Jesus came, and even until today, it no longer is. Having faith in Jesus is sufficient. That is huge. No more walls between those who were circumcised and those who were not.

But we are not talking about believers versus pagans. No, Jesus destroyed the barriers BELIEVERS had built between THEMSELVES. No more walls means believers could have true unity. Believers could be together as one.

We are now part of His ONE family. Metaphorically, we are built right into the Holy Temple of God with Jesus Christ as the corner stone, the most important stone that gives us stability and unity in design. So all those Jewish laws that excluded Gentiles now could be removed. As our passage said:

*Eph. 2:14 For Christ Himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in His own body on the cross, He broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.*

*Eph. 2:15 He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in Himself one new people from the two groups.*

Did you hear that? Jesus has created one new people, a new family, a new tribe that is known for unity.

So let's bring it to us in a very practical manner. First the big picture, and then how it applies to you and me.

Let's take a look from the 30-thousand foot level. If we are mature followers of

Christ, then we should be in unity with all Christian churches and denominations.

Centuries ago, in North Africa, around the fourth century, the Donatists, named after their leader Bishop Donatus Magnus, separated from the church and said, "We have the truth. All the rest of you are wrong." The Donatists saw themselves as purists, the true believers. Those who didn't believe like them should not be allowed to fellowship in their church. This caused a schism in the Church that lasted four centuries.

But the famous St. Augustine argued against their thinking. His point was that you, Donatists, don't have the truth because the truth only comes in unity.

It is in unity that we learn the truth. How can we say we have the truth if we are not unified, loving, and forgiving to others? Forgiveness is the mark of truth.

In communion, in the Eucharist, we see the forgiveness of Christ for all.

I say to us all beware of any church that says it has ALL the truth and you don't. Beware of its members who think they have the only way to interpret the Christian faith and anyone who doesn't agree with them is either not a Christian or a failed one. The only reason Donatism didn't last longer was that the Muslims wiped them out in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Now in terms of unity, let me talk about Muslim terrorism. ISIS is beheading Christians all over the world. They hate Christians and they want to kill us. But when ISIS kills Christians, it is assuming we are one people, that we are unified. They don't ask, "Oh, are you a liberal Christian, a conservative one, or an evangelical? Are you a protestant, a Catholic, charismatic or Pentecostal?" No, given the chance, they will kill, abuse, or behead any Christian because they ASSUME we are one body.

Is it not ironic that we, Christians, don't always see ourselves as one body, but our enemy does? Our enemy assumes we are unified, so why don't we live up to that? We should be ONE and we should keep on working on the unity that could really change the world. Let's allow God's love and NOT terrorism to reign in this world.

We are dreaming if we think that ISIS doesn't have cells in the US already. We are dreaming if we think that ISIS doesn't want to have cells here in Hawaii. We are dreaming if we think that it doesn't matter if there is church unity against evil. We need churches to pray against evil. We need to always pray for our military and intelligence services. They are the first lines so the bad guys don't get to us.

I just came back from New York. I had a chance to go to the relatively new National September 11 Memorial Museum.

There are two large holes in the ground where the two towers of the World Trade Center once stood. Today there's a beautiful fountain around the site. (A picture of the fountain was shown.) Around the fountain are the names of those who died on Sept 11, including a distant cousin of mine named Stuart Seid Louis.

In the museum you go down underground (picture of the memorial wall was shown.) And as you go down further and further via escalator or stairs, you see some of the original remnants of the World Trade Center.

There's a tall column with some of the writing there from the rescue teams, part of the original wall. There is one of the fire trucks that was there and got damaged by the falling towers.

There are large quilt murals honoring those who died there. We even saw the picture of Hawaii's Heather Ho, whose funeral was held at our church in the old Makiki campus. Heather is Stuart Ho's daughter. She was a pastry chef at the Windows of the World Restaurant at the very top of the world

Trade Center. She had resigned the month prior but was asked to stay until her replacement came.

Later I went to a special room for relatives of the victims, and I saw a monitor with a picture of my cousin Stuart. He was only 43, a devoted family man who had a wife and two children. He was a great fan of the Yankees, and worked for Sandler O'Neil on the 104<sup>th</sup> floor of Tower 2. My wife, Pam, and I later found his name on the outside memorial wall. It was good to see it there, and there is a kiosk to help relatives find their loved ones. In fact, if you are a relative of a victim, the museum waives the \$30 ticket price for each person in your party, which is nice.

My first cousin Duffy Shue was in the tower also when the plane hit. But by God's grace, he got out and survived, as bodies from higher floors were dropping on the ground near him. Until today he still doesn't like to talk about that day. We didn't know where he was for hours after the 9-11 attack because the cell phone networks were all jammed. We found out later that he had walked for hours to my late cousin Paulie's apartment in Chinatown.

So I personally know what it is like to have my family attacked and killed by Muslim terrorists. I understand the evil in this world, big time. That time it was Al Qaeda, and as it would happen in the museum is a brick from the house of Osama Bin Laden taken by a journalist after American forces eliminated Bin Laden. I suppose it was to give some closure for the visitors, that the guy who masterminded the terror of 9-11 was finally caught.

What does this have to do with unity? Any global war— be it World War II or Operation Desert Shield—needs allies and friends to win the war against evil. The long list of allies of Operation Enduring Freedom, our war in the Middle East, included the UK, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Denmark, Romania, Estonia, France, China, Germany New Zealand Italy, Australia, even tiny Cyprus, nearly 60 countries in total. We would be crazy, we would be out of our

minds to enter any war against evil by ourselves even though we think we are the most powerful individual nation in the world. Yes, there is military might, but there needs to be Christian might as well that's focused like a laser with prayer and action.

We need unity as believers to fight homelessness, sex trafficking, poverty, domestic violence. Our church has taken steps toward that when a First Prez team went to the Philippines last February to help the poor and the abused, particularly in the island of Mindanao where Al Qaeda forces are present.

When it comes to local churches and since we should be in the same movement for Christ, may we never ever criticize another church or pastor. For in reality they are our friends and allies. "No talk stink" should be our motto.

In our new members class, when people talk about their former churches, I always say I don't want to hear the name of the church they came from. I also discourage people from criticizing their former church. We will not say anything derogatory about other churches for we are allies and friends.

That is why we are always trying to work together with other churches in solving the homeless problem or sex trafficking or in evangelism programs like Alpha where last weekend we had four churches represented working together.

But now let me bring it home from the 30-foot view to you and me personally. We know from Scripture that the Devil is like a roaring lion. It says in the first letter that the Apostle Peter wrote, *"Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. 1Pet. 5:8 (NLB)*

The Devil is real. Hear this – he doesn't play fair. He goes after those who don't deserve pain. He is the essence of why bad things happen to good people. He doesn't care.

**H**e loves sniping on good people. And he is not reactive but proactive. He is intentional. He's after our families. He is ISIS and Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban and Al Qaeda all rolled into one to the 100<sup>th</sup> power.

So when we are in pain, hurting, or in despair, and when we need help, don't play lone ranger. Seek allies and friends, or you'll lose the war. The odds against us are tremendous. It's just that your spiritual eyes may not see it. Be OPEN to receiving help from one another. Be OPEN to seeing a therapist. SEEK help from one another. You may think you are as powerful as the United States all rolled into you, but even the USA needs allies and friends to fight its battles.

When we ask if anyone wants prayer, then come forward for our ministry time. Please don't have the attitude that "I have to work this out on my own, so I don't need any help or prayer for anyone." Come forward for prayer. No shame. We all need allies and friends to make it in this world.

The COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, lost her husband David suddenly last month while on vacation in Mexico. David was the CEO of Survey Monkey. She recently wrote this post at the end of her 30 days of grieving, explaining how her loss changed her relationships with colleagues and friends.

"I have lived thirty years in these thirty days. I am thirty years sadder. I feel like I am thirty years wiser.... I realized that to restore that closeness with my colleagues that has always been so important to me, I needed to let them in. And that meant being more open and vulnerable than I ever wanted to be."

Even someone as tough and competent and strong as Sheryl Sandberg (author of the book "Lean In") knew that at times she had to let people in. The healthy ones know they need help and ask for help. The sick ones don't ask for help. They don't ask for a simple thing, like prayer. That is

the irony.

We need each other. Take advantage of the allies and friends we can find in our small groups ministry, headed by Pastor Jenny Sung. Small Groups is like a pit stop that we need in the race of life.

Take advantage of the care ministry headed by Pastor Marianna Meachen, that offers seminars like Grief Share, Divorce Care, Facing Cancer with Hope, or Celebrate Recovery to help us with our addictions and issues.

Have your kids get to know God as their friend through Children's Ministries headed by Pastor Karen Makishima, or have your teenagers know God through Pastor Drew Hulse and the youth ministry, or check out the singles ministries under Pastor Aaron Larson.

We need all the help we can get. And we should be sharing that help that love from God with others. Invite them to Alpha or to worship services or to a July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration where we have a concert or an outdoor picnic. Many of these are soft ways to introduce non-church friends to our church.

You know, God may have set it up that you are the key ally or friend to invite that friend. You may be the only lifeline, and if you don't invite them, they may not hear the gospel. Live a life **worthy** of the calling God has on you. God has changed our lives, so part of our calling is to tell others about it.

You see, the ultimate friend and ally is Jesus Himself. He loves us. He died for us. He is always available to help. And if you want to shut out the best friend and ally you could ever have, then go ahead and be a lone ranger.

And you might say, "But I'm not worthy." Well, on your own merits you're not. But we are worthy for at least two reasons. First, God died for you. His Son Jesus died for you. His Son took the bullet for you, so to speak. He was tortured was abused for you. He went through the most horrible death on a cross, was nailed to it, hung there

for you and me. If you don't think He is an ally and friend for taking that for us, then your definition is pretty high, and may I add unrealistic? What more will it take?

You might have some questions like so what about all those Old Testament wars? Why did they have to die or why do bad things happen to good people? I would say put those aside on a shelf. You don't need to have all the answers right now. None of the followers of Jesus have ALL the answers, but we cling to the one thing we know—once we were blind and now we see. We thought we were pretty hot stuff but now we see our sinful nature. We thought we knew it all or could do it on our own. but we realize that is so dumb, and to align ourselves with the God of the universe is the smartest move in the world as we want God to be our friend and ally.

Jesus Himself used the word "friend." He calls us friends, so why don't we accept that and follow Him for the rest of our lives? And if you think you are not worthy, remember it is in the act of the last supper, the Communion, that we realize God forgives all of our sins. All of our sins.

The true circumcision of our heart is to carve away all of our false notions of God, all the false rules that have nothing to do with Him. Know that in taking the sacraments we declare that we believe in the name of Jesus and accept His friendship and Lordship of our lives.

Maybe if you take Communion today, it may be your first step of faith. If you take it today, it will be saying, "Okay, Jesus, I am so all in with you now. And I want you to be all in, in my life, and I definitely need help."

So let me explain communion to some of you new people. (The sermon goes into the Communion service.)