

**Series: Rethinking Church**  
**Today: No Longer Strangers**  
**Text: Ephesians 2:11-22**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, July 11, 2010**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

We moved a lot when I was young. It didn't have anything to do with not being able to afford the rent. My father worked for the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, and as is the case with many large corporations, moving executives from one branch office to another was commonplace. We moved four times before I graduated from high school, but one of those moves stands out in my mind.

I was in second grade. As I remember it now, I was having the time of my life. I had been elected president of my homeroom. I played shortstop and was captain of my class softball team. I was on the top of the heap when it came to four square and tether ball. Whenever my class put on a play, I got the lead part. And believe it or not, I even had a girlfriend all at the tender age of seven.

Then came the shattering news. In the midst of all that was going so well in my life, my Dad was transferred from Southern California to the San Francisco Bay area. There were goodbyes to be said; many tears to be shed, but what I remember most of all was the fear that my sister and I felt about moving to this new place. San Francisco seemed like a foreign country to us. What were the people like? Would we make friends there? Did they even play baseball and four square in San Francisco? Would there be anyone who was like me in this new place we were going to live?

Armed with a new Hopalong Cassidy lunch box and a new baseball glove my parents had given me, I was enrolled in my new second grade class at White Oaks Elementary School in San

Carlos, California. The teacher introduced me to the class and showed me to my seat. My knees were shaking because I really felt on display. I sat down, put my lunch box and my new baseball glove beside my seat, and waited for class to begin.

Then from across the aisle came a whispered voice: *“Hey, what kind of glove have you got?”*

*“It’s a Wilson—Joe DiMaggio,”* I responded. Now for those too young to remember, when I was seven years old, having a glove endorsed by Joe Dimaggio would be like having the same kind of glove that Derek Jeter of the NY Yankees uses or the same kind of bat that Ryan Howard of the Philadelphia Phillies uses. It was simply the best that money could buy, and it was my parent way of trying to soften the impact of the move.

*“Same as mine!”* came the voice from across the aisle. *“You like to play ball?”* Did I like to play ball? Did they really play ball in San Francisco? *“You bet,”* I responded. *“My name is Kenny,”* my neighbor said. *“You want to play ball with us at recess?”*

Here I had been scared to death that I wouldn’t find a friend; that somehow I wouldn’t fit in; and now I was going to play baseball at recess. I was no longer a stranger. I belonged.

As we continue this series of sermons on Ephesians, today’s lesson is for all of us who have ever felt like a stranger. Moreover, it is perhaps one of the most important passages in the New Testament for those of us who were not born of Jewish ancestry. It speaks of the condition of non-Jewish people before God became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Today Paul is widely known as the “apostle to the Gentiles,” but it wasn’t always that way. Paul was a Jew among Jews, and he never forgot that special, unique place of the Jews in the design and revelation of God. Before his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul was one of those who believed that if you weren’t born Jewish, you would never have a special

relationship with God. In Jewish law, if a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, a funeral service was conducted for those who married outside the faith. They were shunned, much like the experience of the Amish in our own community.

The Temple in Jerusalem was a witness to the place of Gentiles in the Jewish community. It was arranged in five concentric circles: an inner court called the Holy of Holies where the High Priest would make a sacrifice on behalf of the community; a court for the priests; a court for men; a court for women; and an outer court for the Gentiles. They were on the fringes, in the outside circle, furthest away from the Holy of Holies where the High Priest met with God.

Paul says that God changed all that in Jesus Christ. Those who were in the outer court of the Temple were brought into the Holy of Holies to be claimed by God. There is no more “them” and “us.” We have been made one by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. We are no longer strangers to God or to one another. We are all “*citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.*” We are brothers and sisters to one another.

This is an important message for us to remember in a society which is increasingly polarized by political and social disagreements. We live in a society which is constantly trying to create a “them” vs. “us” mentality: rich vs. poor; black vs. white; immigrant vs. natural born citizen; educated vs. uneducated; gay vs. straight. If there isn’t an enemy, we will create one in order to make ourselves feel better and someone else feel worse.

Yet the message of our text is clear. While Jewish people will always hold that special relationship with God, in Jesus Christ we have all been brought into that special relationship through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Christ did not die for rich people or for poor people; for black people or for white people; for immigrant people or for natural born residents; for gay people or for straight people. Christ

died for all people, and because he did, we are no longer strangers to one another. We are fellow citizens in the household of God. Every single person on this earth has been brought into a relationship with God, and our task, as we “rethink the church” is to simply treat others with this in mind—at all times and in all circumstances.

Presbyterians made headlines in the national news this week. At the General Assembly in Minneapolis, the majority of the delegates wrestled with several issues which some of you may find upsetting: the war in Afghanistan, peace in the Middle East; a new form of government, and many more.

However, none made headlines like the recommendation that was approved and sent to the 173 Presbyteries in our church to remove language in our constitution which is intended to keep gay and lesbian people from serving as Elders, Deacons, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament. This is the fourth time in fourteen years our church has wrestled with this issue, and if I were a betting man, I would lay you odds that it is the fourth time it will not receive a confirmation of a majority of our Presbyteries.

In order to remove the language regarding sexuality as an ordination standard, which was only put there 17 years ago, 87 of our 173 Presbyteries have to affirm the vote of the 51% of the commissioners who recommended it. Each Presbytery has one vote, and that vote will be determined by a majority of the commissioners in our Presbytery sometime in the next two years. While my vote will probably be in the minority of the commissioners to the Presbytery of Donegal, I would like to share with you how I am going to vote and why.

For biblical, theological and personal reasons, I will vote to sustain the recommendation of the General Assembly, even though I will likely be in the minority again within the Presbytery of Donegal. My biblical reasons are centered in this text and others like it. Like the Gentiles of

the early church, I believe that gay and lesbian people have been labeled as the “them” of our church while those of us who are heterosexual are considered the “us,” and I believe that Paul is telling us that Christ died for all people; that gay and lesbian people deserve to serve in leadership roles in our church based on their sense of call and the gifts that God has given them and not excluded because of their sexual orientation.

However, I do not believe we can find common ground on this matter from a biblical perspective. As soon as I tell you the verses which speak to my mind and heart on this matter, there will be those who will quote other verses which confirm for them a different conclusion. This is why my vote is more than just biblically based.

My theological reasons are essentially the same. I believe that all of us are created in the image of God and after the likeness of God, and I believe that God did not make a mistake in creating people who have a same-sex orientation. With Paul, I believe that in Christ Jesus all of us have been made citizens of the kingdom of God, and I do not believe that anyone created in the image of God should be treated as a second class citizen.

In our church polity we claim that any person has been baptized and is a member of a particular church is eligible to serve as an officer of that church. If we believe that gay and lesbian people are created in God’s image, and if we do not withhold the sacrament of baptism from them, then I believe they deserve the right to be nominated to the same offices as heterosexual people if they are called by God to serve in such a capacity.

Of course, many of you know my personal reasons. Our daughter is a lesbian. She has been in a committed relationship with her partner for ten years this month. From that relationship we have two wonderful grandchildren. My daughter is a clinical social worker at Fox Chase Cancer Center and a leader in that hospital environment. She is also a leader of the

Parent/Teacher organization of our granddaughter's school. Any church would be lucky to have the gifts of leadership that our daughter can offer, but until the current language in our constitution is removed, she cannot even be considered by our nominating committee or any other nominating committee in the PCUSA as one who might be called by God to serve.

So when the vote is taken by our Presbytery sometime in the next two years, I will stand with the 51% of the delegates, a very slim majority, to remove the language in our constitution which prohibits gay and lesbian people in committed relationships from responding to the call of God in their lives. Even though I believe my vote will not prevail in the Presbytery of Donegal, I pray that it will eventually prevail in 87 of the 173 Presbyteries in the *PCUSA*.

On our recent trip to Germany, our guide had the bus slow down as we crossed the imaginary line which was once the Iron Curtain. While preparing this sermon, I found an article in the Wall Street Journal which referenced the Iron Curtain; that while it has been down for quite some time, but things haven't changed for everybody.

For years the Iron Curtain (actually, a fence) separated two populations of red deer living in the forests encompassing the border between Germany and what is now the Czech Republic. When government officials began to dismantle the fence in 1989 (around the time the Berlin Wall fell), the physical barrier between those populations was removed. But when wildlife biologists began studying the deer in 2002, they quickly realized that the deer living in Germany were not migrating into the Czech Republic, and the deer living in the Czech Republic were not migrating into Germany. In other words, both populations of deer were still behaving as if the fence remained intact.

One deer in particular has become a microcosm of the entire population. Her name is Ahornia, and her movements in the forests of eastern Germany were tracked for several years by

a GPS collar fitted to her neck by biologist Marco Heurich. During the time she was monitored, Ahornia's location was tracked more than 11,000 times in Germany—but not a single time in the Czech Republic. She was tracked at the border of the two countries several times, but she never crossed over.

Two elements of Ahornia's story are particularly noteworthy. First, she was born 18 years after the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the fence that comprised the Iron Curtain. She has no physical memory of the fence's existence, and yet she is still blocked by it. Second, the land formerly occupied by the fence and its guard towers has now been turned into a large and thriving nature preserve. In other words, the land beyond the fence has become a haven—the perfect home for deer like Ahornia and her family—and yet she will not enter.

A team of biologists have come up with several explanations for the deer's strange behavior. Most deer travel across traditional trails, for example—ones that are passed down through generations by modeling and repetition. It's possible that Ahornia and the other members of her herd simply haven't ventured beyond the beaten path.

However, a wildlife filmmaker [Tom Synnatzschke] who often works in the area has a different explanation. According to him, "The wall in the head is still there." [Source: *Associated Press, "Deep in the Forest, Bambi Remains the Cold War's Last Prisoner," The Wall Street Journal (11-04-09)*]

As we “rethink the church,” it behooves us all to ask ourselves what walls in our heads are still there, and to remember the words of the Apostle Paul: “*You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God.*”