

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Alleluia People: Everybody’s Community”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Micah 4:1-5; Ephesians 2:11-22

It was one of those mornings. Brennan slept late and missed his bus. As a high school freshman, wanting to finish his school year well, he decided to walk to school. Never having walked before and trying to retrace the bus route, he worried that he might be lost. With no cell-phone handy he did what many of us would do. He chose to knock on a door and ask for directions. When the woman of the house came to the door she started screaming at him saying, “Why are you trying to break into my house.” Brennan tried to explain that he was a freshman at Rochester High School and only needed directions. The woman kept yelling and then her husband ran downstairs with his shotgun. Brennan ran as fast as he could and only because the husband forgot to take the safety off the first time he tried to fire, Brennan escaped unharmed. All of this was caught on a home security system, which also caught the woman at the door saying, “Why do those people choose my house.” These people. What did she mean by that? Probably we can guess, but what it shows is that she is infected with a bad case of “thosepeopleitis.”

Those people. We know who those people are, right? Those people are those people who should know better. Those people are those people who ought to think, act and believe like we do. Those people are the ones who, even if they don’t know any better, ought to straighten up and fly right. Those people are those people who are damaging society. Those people were those people who weren’t as good as we are. Those people were those people who were inferior. Those people were those people we ought to stay away from. In fact, let me ask, how many of you here this morning were taught, either directly or indirectly that there were those people? Let me ask again, and I am not asking you to raise your hands this time, how many of you know deep inside that when you look out at the world, even though you know you shouldn’t, you can name, those people? This is thosepeopleitis. It is one of the great diseases of the world. It allows us to feel superior, to be exclusive, to discriminate and to be tribal. And I hope you realize that thosepeopleitis is nothing new. It was in fact alive within the heart of the early church.

The churches that Paul founded and wrote to were churches infected with the “those people disease.” There were the Jews, who had chosen to follow Jesus. They believed in him as messiah and Lord. Yet when they looked at the Gentiles, the Greeks, and the Romans who had become part of the church, they saw them as, those people; those people who were not circumcised and who did not follow all of the dietary laws proscribed by Moses. Those people were those who felt no great allegiance to the Torah. Those people were those who refused to become Jewish. Then there were the Gentiles. For the Gentiles, the Jews were those people. They were those people who clung to outmoded ways of seeing the world and who insisted upon circumcision. Those people were those who had all of these strange rules about what you could or could not eat. Those people were those who needed to act more like Gentiles if they were going to truly follow Jesus. What we need to realize is that this particular outbreak of those people disease was a carryover from the larger outbreak that infected the larger Roman world. It is into this outbreak that Paul offers something completely new.

In Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus, he lets them know that there is a cure for the “thosepeopleitis”. That cure is Jesus Christ. That cure is what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Listen again to Paul’s words and hear the number of times he uses the term “one.” *“But now in Christ Jesus you*

who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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. 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,¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in **one** body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in **one** Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God..." (Ephesians 2:13-19) For Paul there are no longer "those people." There are only Alleluia People. There are no longer different humanities but one.

What I believe Paul is arguing here is that the death of Jesus changed the reality of the universe. It had taken all of "those people" and made them into a single humanity. His words are echoes of those of the Prophet Micah that we read this morning. That passage, probably written after the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Babylonians, rather than seeking revenge and victory, offers a vision of the new humanity Paul is describing. People from many nations will come to God seeking to know the right way to live and to be. God will settle the differences between nations everywhere. Human beings will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. People will live peacefully in their own land. This is what the Lord who rules over all will do. And even when other nations still trust in their gods, the people of God are to trust that God will create this new humanity that lives in peace. In this world there will no longer be those people. There will be one people who live together in peace.

Six or seven years ago the session agreed to begin describing our church as Everybody's Church. We did so because we believed in the vision offered in Ephesians and Micah, that every church ought to be Everybody's Church because in Jesus Christ, there were no longer any of "those people", but there was only one humanity. Thus, our doors were open to all. And this was not some sudden awakening. It was the culmination of a long, transformative journey encouraged and nurtured by members and staff over the years. You can hear this in our inclusion statement. *"As Everybody's Church, we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the participation of all people of any ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance."* As we did so, I believe we understood the difficulty of being a "thosepeopleitis" free zone. It is difficult being this kind of church because of the Homogeneous Unite Principle, that states, *"People become Christian fastest when the least change of race or clan is involved."*¹ In other words, any church that wants to grow needs to be clear about who are our people and who are those people. By intentionally claiming our identity as Everybody's Church we rejected this belief as unbiblical and claimed Paul's vision instead.

To some degree of another, all of us are infected, both individually and corporately, with thosepeopleitis. The question is how do we live with it. Do we give into it and divide, or do we struggle with it and work toward God's vision of a united humanity learning how to live together as God desires? My challenge to you then this morning is this, to ask yourselves, how am I allowing Christ to cure my thosepeopleitis such that I can see and treat everyone I meet as a beloved child of God, and not one of those people.

¹ Understanding Church Growth; McGavrin and Wagner, (1970, 3rd Ed. 1990)