

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(May 26, 2019)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Under Construction**

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

### **The Beautiful Fruit of *Discomfort***

(Ephesians 2:11--3:13)

**Study #3**

#### **Introduction: Comfort is overrated...**

Much of life in 2019 revolves around the pursuit of comfort.

If we buy a house, we may add touches that increase comfort - a sprinkler system, a water softener, a lawn service. We get married and we want a comfortable relationship with our spouse.

We would like to enjoy low-maintenance friendships, a nice, comfortable couch, a universal remote control for our "devices", and heat and A/C in good working order in both house and car.

It is certainly delightful to surround ourselves with creature comforts and a comfortable life is not to be despised.

But, most growth in life happens in the context of *discomfort*.

- Students don't learn much except through diligent study.
- Athletes run faster because of the discomfort of hard workouts.
- Money for a rainy day doesn't appear without the willingness to not spend all available income. That's not comfortable.
- Promotions at work and advancement in a career come when we agree to do more than what is comfortable to do.

- The discomfort of relational tension is often necessary to break through to new levels of trust, respect, and intimacy.

So, while, yes, comfort is delightful, a life of comfort is dangerous. A commitment to comfort may lead to a life of shallow relating, occupation stagnation, mental sloth, and physical decline.

Frankly, comfort is overrated. So, this morning, I'm making a pitch for *discomfort*. It's the path to growth.

I'm arguing that God wants us to overcome discomfort to find a better, richer, fuller, more meaningful life. He created within us all the capacity to turn lemons into lemonade and He designed us to flourish by fighting through discomfort and conflict to resolution and progress.

We're going to see all of that today as we look at the genius of God's gift to us of the church.

Last Sunday, the Apostle Paul told us that Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead provides the basis for a relationship with God. (Ephesians 1).

Today, we find a corollary to that truth. What Jesus did for us also provides the basis for healthy relationship between us.

That is news worth celebrating, because the second greatest need of our world today is deep, genuine human connection.

Relationships are challenging, and the challenges increase as the differences between us increase. There's the age gap and the gender divide. There is ethnic diversity and there are culture wars. Relationships can be uncomfortable.

The message from the Bible we'll hear today is that despite however great may be the differences between us, however great the discomfort between us, Jesus can bring us together.

Sure, the process that leads to unity may involve conflict and some pain, but the love and the peace we will find in the fight for unity will be completely worth it.

Before exploring the relationship “wins” we have in Jesus, Paul reminds us of our lostness, apart from Jesus.

### **The Reconciling Work of Christ (2:11-22)**

#### **Reconciled with God (2:11-13)**

*Outside of Christ - LOST (vv. 11-12)*

***[11] Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands - [12] remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.<sup>1</sup>***

#### Separate from the Messiah (v. 12a)

Paul is writing here as a Jew to non-Jews. And he wants us Gentiles to know that the spiritual status of non-Jews was always pretty bleak.

The Jews received special blessings from God that Gentiles did not.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, from the days of Abraham forward (2,000 BC), the Jews had eagerly looked forward to the coming of a Messiah. Messiah (or, “Christ”) would deliver them from oppressors, grant them forgiveness, and usher in the Kingdom of God.

Not so for the Gentiles.

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<sup>1</sup> The Jews of the first century viewed Gentiles, generally, as unworthy of the mercy and love of God. For instance: When a Jew entered Palestine after a journey through Gentile lands, he would shake the dust off his feet so as to not pollute the Holy Land with non-Jewish dust. Jewish women would typically refuse to help a non-Jewish woman give birth, because to do so would bring another Gentile into the world. The Jewish family would consider of man or woman who had married a Gentile as good as dead, often conducting a funeral service.

<sup>2</sup> The purpose? So that they would be redemptive blessings to the Gentiles.

A typical Gentile-ish worldview from the days of Paul was that history was not going anywhere. It simply repeated itself. The non-Jew saw no purpose, plan, or destiny at work in the world.<sup>3</sup>

Here in the secular West, there is a lot of pessimism about the future. (Do you discern a great hope for the future as you rub shoulders with people and talk with them about what the world will look like in 150 years?)

But we would be mistaken if we believed that pessimism is a 20<sup>th</sup> or a 21<sup>st</sup> Century thing.

The current threats of famine and disease, climate change and nuclear holocaust did not usher in the era of despair. Pessimism has been the order of the day for thousands of years.<sup>4</sup>

We Gentiles never had a hope for a Messiah and we also never had the benefit of the blessings God gave to Israel.

#### Separate from Israel (v. 12b)

Israel received God’s promises, God’s laws, God’s kings, and God’s judges. She was given the prophets, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and His special guidance.

Gentile nations got none of these.

But that is not all the bad news there is. There was a third strike against us. Not only were we separate from Christ and separate from Israel. We were separate from God.

#### Separate from God! (v. 12c)

***[12c]...having no hope and without God in the world.***

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<sup>3</sup> First century Stoic philosophers believed that at the end of each three thousand year cycle the universe was burned up and then remade by the gods to repeat the same futile pattern.

<sup>4</sup> While in India recently with Paul Lere, I met the same worldview in the teachings of Hinduism. Human existence is seen there as an inescapable cycle of *karma*.

With respect to expectations for after this life is over (“*no hope*”), many people the world over think of an endless wandering or of torment or of eternal nothingness.

And with respect to this life, here and now? Without God. Spiritually alone.<sup>5</sup>

This alienation from God, though, is a thing of the past for those of us who have trusted Jesus.

*In Christ, brought near to God (v. 13)*

***[13] But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”***

The gulf between us Gentiles and God has been bridged. What was formerly alienation has been reconciled.

As bleak as our prospects were apart from Jesus, now, IN Jesus, everything is looking up. As Paul told us in the first section of this letter to the church at Ephesus, we have been made alive. We have been raised up with Jesus.

We have been seated with Him in the Heavenly places. We have received every spiritual blessing in the Heavenly places. We have been brought near.

And this reconciliation between us and God means that we who have come to faith in Christ all call God “Father”, are all brothers and sisters, and can enjoy great relationships with each other in the church.

Paul applies that thought to the two camps into which any Jew would divide humanity: Jews and Gentiles.

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<sup>5</sup> When Paul says that they were without God in the world, don’t misunderstand him. They had “gods” galore, but they were without the one true God. See Acts 17, and Paul speech on Mars Hill. It is possible to be extremely religious while having nothing to do with God.

## Reconciled with Each Other (2:14-22)

*In Christ, we are brought near to each other (vv. 14-16)*

Jews, generally, didn’t have much dealings with Gentiles. (but then, non-Jews didn’t go out of their way to interact with Jews, either.)

There were, it was believed “irreconcilable differences.” It was like a giant wall had been erected between us Gentiles and Jews.

Paul says that, in Christ, that wall has been torn down.

***[14] For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall,<sup>6</sup> [15] by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, [16] and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. [17] And He came and preached PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; [18] for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.”***

In the first century world, there was no greater relational wall than that which divided Jews and Gentiles. There was even a literal wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles in the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

This wall divided the outer temple area (where Gentiles were allowed to go) from the inner court (where Gentiles could not go).

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<sup>6</sup> The Jew/Gentile divide made for a bifurcated humanity. God wanted the Jews to be distinct from all other nations for two reasons. First, He wanted them to be distinct so that they would never be absorbed into other peoples and would remain *holy* (set apart). Note the strict dietary, clothing, marriage, ceremonial, and other laws that ensured that they could never fit into another people’s culture. Second, He wanted the other nations to notice their difference and be enticed by those differences to trust and serve the living God. This is Israel’s call to be *evangelistic*. Their salvation was not an end in itself.

<sup>7</sup> This may be what he is referring to in verse 14.

On the Gentile side of that wall was a sign which read, “*No Gentile may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Any Gentile who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his own death.*”<sup>8</sup>

But a funny thing started to happen as churches were established throughout the Roman Empire.

In these Jesus-centered gatherings, Jews and Gentiles worked through conflict, worked hard at understanding each other, and ended up getting along just fine. They loved each other and worshipped together, served and reached out together. In Jesus, the wall was gone.

So, the original application of Jesus’ reconciling work was to Jews and Gentiles. More broadly, Jesus and His Gospel breaks down all the walls that exist between people.

As Paul wrote elsewhere, in Christ divisions between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free are gone. (Galatians 3:28)

We could add other 2019 groups that sometimes don’t mix well: labor and management, enlisted and officers, married and single, young and old, wealthy and not, this and that ethnicity, this and that culture. We are all one in Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

The enmity between God and humanity and between humans was complete. Alienation was pervasive. But the coming of the Son of God was the death blow to alienation and estrangement, because Jesus is the Peacemaker.

So, how united are we? Real united.

Paul provides three images that describe the relationship into which we have all been brought who have placed trust in Jesus for salvation.

First, we are citizens of a kingdom.

*In Christ, we make up a new society (vv. 19-22)*

We are citizens of His kingdom (v. 19a)

***[19a] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints...***

In the ancient and the modern world, citizenship is a big deal.

Roman citizenship was primarily conveyed by birth, although it could be purchased (see Acts 22:28). If you were a Roman citizen, you enjoyed special privileges.

You had the right to vote, to receive due process, and to appeal to Caesar if you were accused of a capital offense. If convicted of a crime, you were exempt from flogging and crucifixion.

Each year thousands of people go through the arduous process of becoming citizens of the United States of America. They want to enjoy the privileges associated with being a citizen of this country.

Every Wednesday evening, men and women meet up here at church to take Citizenship classes and to study for a rigorous Citizenship test because they value the prospect of being a US citizen.

A citizen of the US has a sense of unity with every other citizen, especially at certain moments.

- On September 11, 2001, and for days afterward, Americans felt quite bonded with each other.
- When I’m standing in line to vote, I feel united to the people in front of me and behind me - regardless of who they are voting for - as we, together participate in the privilege of voting.

<sup>8</sup> This “Court of the Gentiles” was to be a place of Jewish evangelism of the visiting Gentiles, but it had become, as Jesus said, “*a robber’s den.*” (Luke 19:46)

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:28. This does not mean that all functional distinctions have been done away with, even in the church. For instance, male headship is still affirmed in marriage (Ephesians 5), and only male Elders are recognized by the New Testament. Paul’s point is that while there may be functional distinctives, there is equal access to God and equal status before God for all who are in Christ.

- On Memorial Day weekend, we are all reminded of the sacrifices of those who gave their lives for our freedom.

Paul says that there is a kingdom greater than any that has ever flown a flag or raised an army. It is the Kingdom of God, and its citizens become such not by birth, but by re-birth. No one buys this citizenship, and nobody earns it. We're receive it as a gift.

And all citizens of this kingdom are united with each other under the Lordship of Jesus, and this citizenship transcends gender, race, ethnicity, money, position, and power.

Any solidarity you might sense with those standing by you when the National Anthem plays at a Spurs game is nothing compared to the solidarity that truly exists between you and every other believer in Jesus, here, and around the world.

Second, we are members of God's family.

We are God's household (v. 19b)

**[19b]... and are of God's household**

God is the adopting Father to every believer in Jesus. We are all part of His forever family. And no family, no matter how wonderful, can compare with the wonder of being in God's family.

- Being God's child doesn't mean that you are protected against all misfortune; it does mean that you are protected against the greatest misfortune.
- Being God's child doesn't mean that you are always safe when you travel on 1604; it does mean that you are safe when you take your last breath.
- Being God's child doesn't mean that you always get your way; it does mean that, in the end, you always get His way.

Each of us here receives individual care from our heavenly Father. And each of us are brother or sister to each other.

Third, we are, together, God's temple.

We are God's temple (vv. 20-22)

**[20] having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, [21] in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; [22] in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.**

Temples appear in lots of cultures the world over. I saw temples in India, ornate buildings for the worship of one of the many Hindu gods or goddesses.

In Paul's day, there was a temple in Jerusalem dedicated to the worship of the one, true God.

The Jewish temple established the nation in worship. It served as a light to the nations so that all might come to know the Lord.

Paul tells us that we - we who believe in Jesus - are now God's temple. He even provides blueprints.

In ancient buildings, the cornerstone was the first stone laid. The entire project depended on the cornerstone. If the cornerstone was of the wrong size or shape, or was badly positioned, the building wouldn't last.

The perfectly positioned *cornerstone* of God's temple - the church - is Jesus. Perfect in every way. Just what was needed. The *foundation* upon which God's temple is built consists of the ministries of the original apostles and prophets. And ever since that foundation was laid, the *superstructure* of God's temple has been "under construction."

If you travel to Europe, you'll see massive cathedrals that were sometimes centuries in the making. Communities of faith were always adding a new room, a new alcove, a new chapel, a flying buttress or a stained-glass window.

Since the time of the Apostle Paul, God has been adding Christian-shaped bricks to His temple. We are the superstructure.

And our function in this temple is exactly the function of Solomon's temple in Old Testament times. We are to be all about worship. We are, together, to serve as a lighthouse, inviting people to know the Lord.

There is a fundamental unity binding every Christian to every other Christian.

Jew or Gentile, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, Asian, Hispanic, black, or white, we are fellow citizens of God's kingdom, brothers and sisters in God's family, bricks in the God's temple.

That is the church. And for the last two thousand years, the church has been God's prime instrument for furthering His purposes in the world.

And nobody ever saw it coming.<sup>10</sup>

### **God's "Mysterious" Work (3:1-7)**

***[3:1] For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus<sup>11</sup> for the sake of you Gentiles-- [2] if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; [3] that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. [4] And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, [5] which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; [6] to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, [7] of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power."***

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 3:1-7 are properly understood as a parenthesis in the argument of the book. It is, however, a very important parenthesis.

<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Paul didn't refer to himself as a prisoner of Rome, although he was. He was, first and foremost, a [voluntary] "prisoner" of Christ.

Paul uses the term "mystery" to describe the church. These days, when I think "mystery", I think of Sherlock Holmes or Father Brown. There is a puzzle that needs to be solved. Put the right clues together, think long and hard about it, figure it out.

That is not what Paul means here. He means to say that the idea of *church* was never revealed in times past.

You can look high and low in the Old Testament and you will never find a reference to the church. Nobody from Moses to Malachi saw it coming.

The church simply was not revealed. Not that Gentiles would be saved. Gentile salvation stories abound in the Old Testament.

What was not revealed - and what nobody would have ever dreamed would be the case - is that God would unite Jews and Gentiles in one body as equal sharers in His eternal plan.<sup>12</sup>

But equality is exactly what God orchestrated in the church. And, it was designed to do what all of God's works do: bring Him maximum glory and honor as it brings us maximum blessing.

### **The Church, United, Brings Glory to God (3:8-13)**

***[8] To me, the very least of all saints,<sup>13</sup> this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, [9] and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; [10] in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. [11] This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, [12] in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.***

<sup>12</sup> This helps to explain why the New Testament Jewish Christians at times had such a hard time accepting the Gentiles into their fellowships.

<sup>13</sup> In describing himself as the "least" of all the saints, he coined a new Greek word that expressed his own self-perception based on the fact that he had been a violent persecutor of the church.

***[13] Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.***

Throughout history, there have been several divinely orchestrated administrations, just as the United States has lived through many administrations, each one having its own characteristics.

The administration of each American president will go down in history as positive or negative, progressive or conservative. All administrations have their distinguishing marks.

Likewise, God's different administrations have each had their distinguishing marks.

For instance, certain conditions prevailed in the Garden of Eden. Things changed after the fall until Noah's flood. They changed again during the time of the patriarchs from Noah to Moses. Another administration was established under the Law of Moses.

The church is one of God's "administrations".<sup>14</sup> And Paul says that there is something about the way that God has chosen to organize and operate His church that makes Him look glorious.

So, what is it about the church, when it's working the way God designed it to work, that brings Him maximum glory?

To answer that question, let's go back to where we started this morning, and talk about discomfort.

### **Conclusion:**

I love San Antonio and we have a great city. But I think we all know that we wouldn't have a population of 1.5 million without air conditioning.

A/C makes San Antonio more comfortable, and we do love our comfort.

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<sup>14</sup> Or, "dispensations".

No, there's nothing inherently wrong with comfort. But at the beginning today, I made the point that a life of comfort, while delightful, is also dangerous.

A comfortable life can lead to shallow relating, occupational stagnation, mental sloth, and physical decline.

Discomfort, while uncomfortable, is the path to growth. It is for me and for you and for us here at Northwest.

We could picture a first century group of Law of Moses-loving, believe-in-Jesus Jews joyfully and lovingly filling a church on a Sunday morning.

That would have been a beautiful thing to behold, and we would expect to see easy relating between the members of that church. The similarities in culture and worldview made for relational comfort.

Today, if you and I are in general political agreement, are more or less the same age and station-of-life, and are of similar ethnic backgrounds, we'll be comfortable with each other and love will be relatively easy.

When, two thousand years ago, the Lord added some Gentiles to the mix of Jewish believers at church, things got dicey. And today, if you add some salt to the pepper, some diversity to the mix, love will become more challenging.<sup>15</sup>

Bringing Gentiles and Jews together into one church created discomfort in the first century.

But they remembered that they were all citizens of God's kingdom, brothers and sisters in God's family, and stones in God's temple.

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, there is always diversity, even when it seems like there isn't, because each of us is unique. The possibility of giving or taking offense is always present. That possibility increases exponentially, though, as obvious diversity increases, exponentially increasing the glory of the unity of the church when we love well.

They worked through the discomfort to a God-glorifying, united love that changed the world.

Today, Jesus calls us to take up our cross, deny ourselves and follow Him. Given that, how could the goal of our church be that we would be comfortable? It isn't.

Homogeneity makes for easy loving, but God is glorified to the max when we differ with each other in any of the ways we might differ, work through the discomfort caused by those differences, center our unity on Jesus, and love and serve Him together.

Every passage in the Bible gives us a "what" and a "so what". There is information and application, some nouns followed by a verb.

Here's the verb to today's message: Love one another.

*Love one another*

Greet like you mean it. Pray for your friends here. Make contact during the week.

Look for ways to express your love to those you meet here at church. Keep your eyes and ears open to ways to serve when you hear of a sickness or a job loss or a birth or a death.

God is greatly glorified by the way you stand with and support your brothers and sisters here at church.

And reconcile with each other.

*Reconcile with one another*

It won't always be necessary to reconcile with someone here because there won't always be a broken relationship with someone here.

But here's a dirty little secret we don't often tell. If you are involved in the lives of people here, it will happen. There will be a rift.

Somebody will misunderstand something you said or did and will be offended or hurt. You will say something or do something you instantly regret.

The instant you become aware of a relational fracture, take the first step toward reconciliation. Confess your sin to your friend. Apologize for what you did. Ask forgiveness.

You honor the Lord by repairing what is broken between you and your friend in Jesus.

And pursue each other, especially "the other".

*Pursue "the other"*

Welcome someone you haven't seen before. Greet someone who doesn't fit your demographic. Go out of your way to engage with somebody you don't normally even notice.

As you get to know him or her, you might discover how delightfully (or frustratingly) different they are from you. You will remember that you and your new friend are citizens of God's eternal kingdom, children of God's family, and stones in God's temple.

You will then be able to move through the discomfort that always accompanies differences, learn to love and accept, walk with Jesus together, and serve Jesus together.

And God will be glorified to the max when our city sees you and your very different friend loving each other, accepting each other, doing life together, and serving Jesus together.