

Last Sunday we began a little series of messages on “*How are Christians Different?*” Last Sunday we heard that we are called to be Holy, and we are called to be God’s witnesses in a troubled world. Today we go in a very different direction, and one that we probably need to know about for a lot of reasons. Actually, just to get us heading in a good direction, we have to have some agreement on a simple concept. Here it is: is it better for people to be arrogant, haughty, puffed up, full of themselves; or is it better for people to be gracious and humble, being people of humility? Which seems to work better? Should we vote? That should not be needed. As we sometimes say, **What Would Jesus Do?** So, especially in this place, our place, in the presence of all of us, it should clearly be preferred that people should be gracious and humble rather than arrogant and full of themselves.

OK. Here is a quick follow up to this: what if we found out that somehow, long ago, things were flipped in a sense, and it became a part of our Western European culture NOT to be humble and gracious, but rather more arrogant and dominant? If something happened to point us in the wrong direction, would we want to know that that had happened? And if we could be clear that something did go wrong, would we want to fix it? I would hope that we would want to know if something happened, and I would hope that if we thought we could fix something that we would lean in that direction as well.

It has been a belief of mine for many years that Christians should **BY THEIR NATURE** be very gracious and humble persons. It should be in our wiring, in our DNA. It is in our Scripture lesson for today. It should be automatic. It should never be a part of our nature to walk around, smugly, pointing out what we think is wrong with everyone else. It should not be in our nature to have the smug attitude of *we know we are the champions, we know that we are superior, we know that we should be in control of all things, we know that we are never wrong.* None of those ideas should be in us as Christians. Do any Christians have these attitudes and ideas today? Regardless of today, somehow those ideas seemed to get there. Actually,

going back to the year 400, 1600 years ago, this new attitude started to set in. Where did it come from? Let's check on this.

It came from a few things. Most of all it came from what we call the Roman Empire. They had been rolling already for more than 400 years. When Christianity began, Christians were somewhat persecuted by Rome. Christians were a part of Judaism, and they were a tiny minority. Let's recall that the Roman Empire did in fact kill Jesus, Peter, and Paul. They did use Christians in the arena for gladiator target practice. The worst persecution was around the year 280. But then it all changed, especially due to one man, the man we call **Constantine**. He embraced Christianity, and actually decided that it should be the religion of the Roman Empire. People would submit, and they would be baptized, or they would lose their land, they would lose their rights, they would lose all sorts of things. The Roman Empire began to pay for the building of churches, all over the Empire with tax money. No other religions would get any help from the Empire. Just the Christians. But this came with a price. They started to own us.

Because of being a part of the Empire, Christian leaders began to have the attitude that we were the champions, we were the winners, especially when it came to Jewish people who continued to do their own thing. I have to share a picture with you of something that I would bet you have never seen before, and you have never heard of this before. But everything is connected to everything, so what happened in 1300 is still connected to now. Let's turn down the lights for a moment and look at this picture: This is actually in a museum now in Europe. These two statues used to be in front of a huge cathedral in France. Why would these women be at the front door of the church, being the first thing European Christians would see when they came to worship in the morning? These statues were all over the place in front of huge cathedrals. These are two women, who represent two things, Christianity which is the champion, and Judaism, which is blind, broken, and defeated. Now, why would the church need to make statues to put at

the front door, that would glorify one group, and to belittle another? The same European Christian society 700 years ago passed laws that would not permit Jewish people to build new synagogues, or even to repair the ones they already had. Why no new synagogues? Because we are the champions, they were not. They needed to surrender. We can talk a bit more about some of these things in Sunday School. There are many.

It was around that same time that another big change came. It has a fancy name that I will skip, but it basically means that since Christianity is the religion of the Empire, that the leaders of the Empire would also be the unofficial leaders of the Church, the defenders of the faith. If you have ever studied about people like King Henry the 8th and others, these kings and politicians were seen as the heads of the Church in their areas. Thank God for America and the separation of the government from the churches! Thank God for taking the kings and politicians out of the mix, and out of leading and defending the Church!

Lots of historians look back at what the Roman Empire did to Christianity, by taking it over and promoting it, and owning it, and they look back at this as a time when something terrible happened to the Church. Instead of being the humble Body of Christ, peaceful and forgiving, in many ways it became a part of the government. It had control, and it had power. And it would use it. By the way, what does power often do to people?

The Roman Empire was not gracious and humble, it was built on brute power and control. It believed that it alone was the Light. But the Church of Jesus Christ was not built on brute power and control. It was built on “love your enemies and pray for them.” It was built on “do not repay evil for evil.”

Let's get to the good part here this morning. Again we find something so special in this Bible of ours, in this case the Letter to the Ephesians. It is a great book, and a book that should be a perpetual source of humility for Christians. Paul (or one of his disciples) writes

these ideas that need to be engrained within us, especially within us in our culture, which is a very dominant culture. We get a reminder in the previous chapter. Paul tells the people, who are GENTILES, non-Jewish people who have no idea who God is. Paul reminds them

“...remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world!”

Paul tells them “Hey... your ancestors used to howl at the moon, dance in the moonlight at Stonehenge, all sorts of crazy things. You had no idea about the One and Living God.” But then something happened to these crazy raggamuffin orphans, and they were raggamuffin orphans: The Living God made a way for them. That way is Yehoshuah (or Jesus as we call him), a Jewish man who is the connector for all the non-Jewish world to be connected to the God of Israel. They don't have to become Jewish. Paul explains in our words today:

“In former generations this mystery was not made known to humanity, as it has now been revealed...that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Jesus Christ through the gospel.”

So why does any of this mean that we should be humble in all our ways and doings? Because we were fortunate. We didn't earn it. We were blessed. We were picked last in kickball. We were raggamuffin orphans, and we were adopted into the family of God. And the last time I checked, when you are a raggamuffin orphan, you don't just strut around bragging about how great you are! You don't stand around judging everyone else. And you don't put up statues at the front of the church making fun of other people in the world who were the first ones that God chose and God promises to love forever!

Sometimes we have to slam on the brakes and just stop. Sometimes we have to go back to the beginning and ask “How did we

get here?” And sometimes we should ask “What is our actual past, and our background?” Well, every time I check the writings of Paul, I see the same thing: You are raggamuffin orphans, but God has always loved you, and God has always intended to find a way to reach out to you. And finally it happened with Jesus. Little Israel was far too small in the past to affect the whole big world. So God uses Jesus to connect all the rest of the big world back to God. And this alone is why we are in. And this is why we should be humble in all our thoughts, in all our interactions, and especially with our dealings with other people in the world. We need to remember that the gentle followers of Jesus ended up taken over by the Empire of Rome, and some of that empire rubbed off on them. We just need to be aware that this did in fact happen to us. But we can overcome it. How? Just by remembering where we come from, and the true nature of our family from long ago. We were on the outside looking in. We were without hope in the world, and without God. But by the blood of Christ we who were once far off have been brought near. Let us not forget this. AMEN.