

Do I seem angry to you? Because I recently have become aware that when I am scared, I act angry. One of the reasons I took on this responsibility of preaching six weeks in a row in Cornel's absence is that I want to be less scared of the daunting and overwhelming task of preaching consecutive Sundays. I wanted to face my fears. There have been a number of occasions that I have, unbeknownst to me, reacted with anger in otherwise peaceful situations, and realized later that I was not angry at all, I was scared. I had felt vulnerable. So if I appear angry, know that it may be a defense against fear. I'm working on this now that I have the awareness.

The reading from Ephesians today, along with many other New Testament passages, encourages Gentiles to honor their Jewish roots. "You have been grafted in," says Paul in Romans 11. Honor the heritage. Do not be divisive. "You were once without God," Ephesians says, "without Christ, and you have been brought into the fellowship by grace." Remember what you once were, hopeless, godless, knowing nothing of the covenants and promises of God to the ancestors of Israel. Don't take it for granted what you have now and how far you've come.

When I was a little girl, my family invited our friends, the Gans', who were Jewish, to help decorate our Christmas tree, and they invited us to Passover celebration. I continued this tradition with my family as an adult. I invited some of our Jewish friends to help decorate the tree, and we were in turn invited to celebrate one of the nights of Hanukah with them. Our friend told us the story of the lights. We told the story of Jesus. They had never heard it. I have always had close friends who are Jewish throughout my life. Best friends.

The letter to the Ephesians is a theological treatise that is believed to have circulated among the churches in Asia Minor in the latter 1st century. It is a letter of encouragement, and does not address any specific early church conflicts as some of the other New Testament letters do. As the prologue in the NRSV states, the Letter to the Ephesians "celebrates a vision of the universal church."

In addition to the theological and spiritual separation that the Gentiles once had with the Jews, they were separated physically from the Jews by a wall outside of the Jewish temple, where an inscription warned them they could be put to death if they passed. Jewish law demanded separation from the Gentiles.

Now, Ephesians tells us, Gentiles and Jews form one humanity, created in Christ and reconciled to each other and to God. This was the vision of the early church. Christ treated everyone as equals, with equal access to God and God's blessings. No separation, no dividing walls, no who's in and who's out. We were recreated into a new humanity through Christ's death, which caused us to embrace one another and dispel hostility.

Oh, that it were so. Somehow the church seems more divided today than ever before.

Last December, I was walking on the path behind my house with my husband. We ran into a neighbor, a friend of twenty years. "What's new?" she asked with a big smile, as she paused to take a break from jogging. "Well, Stephanie was ordained!" Bill said. "Oh, what denomination?" she asked. When I replied, "Presbyterian," my friend, who is Jewish, pointed her finger at me and said, "You need to change your position on Israel!" I was caught completely off-guard, and unable to find a suitable response at the time, we carried on a bit of small talk before going on about our individual ways. Though we passed on the path many times in the months that followed, she smiled and waved but did not take out her headphones as she jogged by.

Last month, in the *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, Moderator of the 221st General Assembly, Heath Rada, published a comprehensive article about PC(USA) policy in Israel. It highlighted the contentious issue of divesting funds from American companies who are conducting business in Israeli-occupied territories. Of 700 commissioners at the past two General Assembly meetings, the issue of divestment was defeated in 2012 and then affirmed in 2014, decided both times by less than 10 votes. It is an emotional issue and hotly debated. The position of the divestment advocates is that Motorola, Caterpillar and Hewlett Packard sell weapons and materials to Israel that are then used to attack and destroy Palestinians and their property. The divestment advocates believe the divestment of \$21 million from these companies will send a message that the inhumane treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli government – the building of a dividing wall, the mandate of separate highways, Israeli settlements on land designated to belong to Palestine, and disproportionate numbers of killings of Palestinians – is wrong.

On the other side of the divestment debate are those who feel that the PC(USA), by divesting in Israel, is betraying its bond with the Jewish community and forsaking Israel. They feel that the decision to divest represents a strong anti-Semitic stance, and that the under-laying agenda is the demise and annihilation of Israel. Israel is less than 1/10 the size of California, about ¼ the size of New York state. It is surrounded on all sides by countries that want it decimated.

Both sides are speaking from legitimate positions of fear. Both have been victims of injustice and misunderstandings, of discrimination and prejudice. Both want to find a way to bring about resolution to the injustices being perpetrated. Rada's suggestion is to seek restoration of trust. He asks, "Can we sincerely listen to all sides of these arguments? Might we look anew at how to stand up for justice by enabling agents to build trust? Isn't this what Jesus would want us to do?"

I copied the article by Heath Rada and put it in a card to my neighbor, the one who said I needed to change my position on Israel. In the card I wrote that I prayed for peace among and within all people, and left it on her doorstep. I hoped that by

reading the article, she would see that it is not necessarily a cut-and-dry issue in our denomination. We ran into each other on a trail on Mt. Tam a couple of weeks later, both of us with a hiking buddy alongside. I asked if she had received my card, and she said she had, and that she would like to talk about it in person at another time. Later that day, we emailed to set a date to meet to discuss the issue. But first, she expressed her concerns. "Our families have been friends for a long time," she wrote, "and I wouldn't want such an emotionally charged political debate to come between us."

"My concern," I wrote in response, "is that if we don't talk about it, it will have lasting consequences on our relationship." It was clear to me that not talking about it already had come between us; not talking about it had put up a wall between us and was most certainly affecting our relationship. We were divided by assumptions, preconceptions, and likely misconceptions. We met as planned, and after talking about our kids for awhile, we launched into the subject of Israel. She did most of the talking. I heard her fears and sadness. I heard her passion and desperation. I was grateful for the opportunity to learn, to share, to contemplate. And mostly, I was grateful for reconciliation that came from our time together. My friend sent me an email later that day saying, "Who knew contentious political discussions could actually be fun?" It occurred to me, that when she seemed so angry months ago when the issue first arose, that, like me, there was so much fear behind the angry façade.

I cannot attempt to tie up or even make good sense of the Palestinian/Israeli crisis in a 15-minute sermon. But I can suggest that we start by conversation. It is not easy to have these discussions, but the alternative – isolation and separation -- is much more difficult and tragic.

When a new member joined Redwoods Presbyterian Church recently, Cornel asked from the proscribed formula, "Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" He added, "In other words, do you trust in Jesus Christ's authority to live lovingly and compassionately, and do you trust in his ability to make you whole when seeking his healing?" As Ephesians tells us, Christ is our peace. As Christians, we are going to be challenged. Christ warned his disciples of this from the beginning. By taking Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are committing ourselves to the ways of peace. Christ is our strength when we are weak. Christ is our advocate when we are threatened. Christ is our shield when we are vulnerable. Christ is our protection when we are in trouble. Christ died that we would live, and that we would live with abundance.

St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words." Another way of saying this is, "They'll know we are Christians by our love." The 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous has a slogan, "Attraction not promotion," which is yet another way of stating the call to live according to principles of peace through positive action, through humble service to all and any in need. We are each a building block of the church of which Christ is the cornerstone.

On commentator notes that "The corner-stone was a stone of double size at the corner, which became a part of both walls (the walls of the Jews and the walls of the Gentiles) and joined them together."

When Ephesians speaks of the church, it is not the church as we know it today. Ekklesia meant the community of believers. It was not the building that mattered. In our Old Testament reading, 2 Samuel 7, David is so excited to build a house for God. "How is it that I live in a beautiful house of cedar, and you have nowhere to dwell?" David asks God. "I know, I will build you a house!" David says, so pleased with himself. "I don't need a house," God replies. "I will build *you* a house," God says, "and one that will last forever." It is not the walls that surround us that is the house of God. It is each one of us that houses God. When we come together in unity -- that is the place where God can dwell.