

Ephesians 2: 11-22 – The Message

But don't take any of this for granted. It was only yesterday that you, the uncircumcised, outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God's covenants and promises in Israel, hadn't a clue about what God was doing in the world at large.

Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything. The Messiah has reconciled us together so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the middle wall of the fences we built to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody.

Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone.

God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

At our house, we have many rules – as I'm sure all of you do. Rules like: tell Mama or Daddy before you go outside (and close the door behind you), don't go downstairs before 7:00am, let Mama nap on Sunday afternoon (that's my favourite).

I could go on: leave the sand in the sand-box, pee in the toilet, always wear a seatbelt... you know how it goes. Of course we have not yet come to a place where these rules are not first spoken and discussed every day – maybe someday we will – but I'm not holding my breath for all of them.

We have spoken and unspoken rules here too – respect each other, do your best, quiet down in the sanctuary ...dress appropriately, don't scream (oh wait, that's one of ours), sing and act with decorum, don't touch the organ pipes, give often and volunteer as much as you can, turn out the lights when you leave...and the list can go on.

We are all intimately acquainted with the consequences of breaking unspoken rules. Relationships can be tested or broken when one inadvertently breaks an unknown unspoken rule. Privileges can be lost when we test the limits too much. Even then, we usually learn rules best by experiencing the reactions when rules are broken or their limits tested.

Rules – love them or not, they are here to steer us toward a desired behaviour. But here's the deal with rules – what we might learn, in the end, can become more about the consequences than about the reason for the rules in the first place.

This is the way it was for the people to whom Paul was writing. Paul wrote to the Ephesians after a huge debate was held by the new burgeoning church – over whether to include people who were not circumcised as part of the body of Christ. After all, Christ was a Jew, and wouldn't it be better for the

newcomers to first become Jewish – and learn the Torah and complete the training – and only THEN begin to understand the changes and reform brought in by Christ? After a long debate, the council of disciples and apostles and church leaders decided to allow all people who came to know Christ and wanted to follow his way – regardless of their prior religious affiliation – to come into and be part of the Body of Christ.

This changed everything.

Because of their community's different religious backgrounds, the new Ephesian church was struggling. How can they know the way of Christ if they don't know or follow the religious rules or holidays? How can they know the new life in Christ if they are bound by the religious rules? How can ANYONE experience the grace of God if they're not agreeing.

Paul was right to remind the Ephesians that they were now a new building – a new creation. That the wall between the fences had been removed. That the only things that now separated the circumcised and uncircumcised were the fences they themselves built. In Christ they were one body – a new creation – one ruled by the Peace of Christ.

And isn't it that way with us too? Aren't we like the Ephesian church a little? When Bryce and I started pastoring – back in 2006 and 2007 in our different locals – we had NO IDEA what life as a pastor was really going to be like. We sometimes learned the rules and expectations the hard way and had to quickly and with integrity make amends as best we could.

I say this only to prove a point – perhaps even the point that Paul was making to the Ephesians – that those in the in – who know all the rules – and those in the outs – who don't know the rules but are eager to join the body – are equal now, through Christ. Christ repealed the law – the rules that became too stifling and picky – and is making, in the combined community, a new body – a building – a holy temple housing the Body of Christ.

We would all do well to become a little less rule-bound when it comes to our spiritual life and in our relationship with Christ and his beloved community. Rules do not have transformative power. Checking off your mandatory to-do list to “get into heaven” will make the point less about how we live now and more about getting to where we want to go. These kind of rules become more about me and what I want than becoming what God wants us to be.

The early church needed to change the way they thought about living a faithful life – they needed to let go of some of their ideals and rules so that the greater purpose of the new body of Christ would live in unity. They began to learn and practice the spiritual discipline of kindness.

What are spiritual disciplines? I also call these spiritual practices and I will use the two interchangeably. There are many examples of the classical spiritual disciplines, like prayer, scripture reading and reflection, silence and mindfulness and their effects on our relationships with God, ourselves and our neighbours. You know many of these – have practiced many of these disciplines because they are what we teach our children and each other through Sunday school, Bible study, sermon and song.

Spiritual disciplines are not rules. They are not a precise recipe for the spiritual growth and vibrancy. Our experience with spiritual practices will be unique to each of us, and also unique in different seasons of our lives.

Spiritual disciplines are NOT going to do you any good when they're led by guilt. They're at their richest when they're led by thirst for God's steadfast love.

Spiritual disciplines aren't a competition. It can be so easy to take our disciplines of singing, worship, prayer and scripture and showcase them before others – flaunt how good we are – and how poor others are...and even if we don't do it out loud, I know each and every one of us has at least once in our lives thought that the way that we do things is our way is obviously the best, or at least better than everyone else.

Similarly, we also compare ourselves to our neighbours, “they can pray better than I can, so their faith must be stronger.”

Richard Foster, in his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, says, “If we are to progress in the spiritual walk so that the disciplines are a blessing and not a curse, we must come to the place in our lives where we can lay down the everlasting burden of always needing to manage others. This drive, more than any single thing, will lead us to turn the spiritual disciplines into rules...”

In other words, when we genuinely believe that inner transformation is God's work, and not ours, then we can put to rest our passion to set others straight.

Silence and contemplation, bible reading and prayer are the classical spiritual disciplines. These are, perhaps, the most easy to accomplish. However, there are other practices too that help open us to the space for God to transform us. I have found that deliberate acts of hospitality, welcome and kindness push me to open my eyes to see what God is doing in the lives of others and in our world.

I first learned about the spiritual discipline of kindness from my father. From Dad I also learned the art of sneaking baskets of fresh apples onto other people's doorsteps, that listening and presence is more important than having lots of words, and that a genuine generous smile works miracles.

Kindness is definitely a spiritual practice for me – because it brings me back to looking outward and not inward – Through my deliberate acts of kindness Christ is redirecting me from self-preoccupation to beginning to see the spark of God in others - compassion.

I think that Jesus must have practiced kindness – or at least taught his disciples to practice kindness. We heard the story in today's scripture – before the children's story. When confronted with all sorts of noise and bother and absolutely no space for resting and eating and even just thinking, Jesus' choice to be kind changed the lives of those around him and brought many to healing and wholeness in God.

Jesus “had compassion for them because they were like a sheep without a shepherd” and then he taught and healed them – paying no attention to his or his disciple's need for food or for personal time and space.

The word that is translated into “had compassion” is *smogchmeezmeh* (transliteration) which basically means an utterly gut-wrenching sense of pity, love and tenderness. Jesus taught his disciples that God can transform us through deliberate acts of kindness to feel “viscerally” with one's whole being – the profound love of God for the world.

Practicing spiritual disciplines transform us. They open us up for God to move in. Spiritual disciplines point us to the reasons not the results. Spiritual disciplines are about God and not about us.

Just like the change from within experienced by the people gathering as community in the Church in Ephesus, the change within us is God's work. Through God we are a new creation.

Farmers, you know this. **You** can't grow grain. All you can do is provide the right conditions for growing the seed. You cultivate the ground, plant the seed, water the plants, weed the garden and at the end of the day – sit back and watch the grain sprout.

This is the way it is with spiritual disciplines. The disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground; they put us where God can work within us and transform us. By themselves spiritual disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God's watering and warm fertile earth; God's means of grace. That deep relationship that we seek is a result of taking root where we are planted... placing ourselves where God can bless us.

The seed cannot be forced...it needs to be put in the right environment and open itself for the great gardener to dwell in it richly. And when that happens – in those unguarded moments, that's when a spontaneous flow of love and peace and patience and goodness poured can pour through us.

And this brings us all the way back to the church in Ephesus. The Ephesian church was a miracle. It was growing and people from all over – men and women – Jew and Gentile were coming to hear the good news of God's love. But in order for the church to really work at being a community – a body of Christ who worshipped, read and interpreted scripture, and prayed and evangelized and lived Christlike together - they needed to work out how to worship God in a way that was inclusive to everyone in the group and put aside the rules governing their Jewish religious practices.

They had to decide to become something new.

Together they had to lay aside their regimented rules of worship intrinsic to their former life and take up Christ – working and building and weaving Christ into every part of their new life and community. They had to work at loving as Christ loved – and it was hard work. However, when practiced, this discipline of loving as Christ loved had the potential to transform the community.

Later, in his letter to the Ephesians, in chapter 4:22-32, Paul reminded them about what it means to love as Christ loved. These words are for us too – here at Menno and in the greater Church. To them, and to us, he said, “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

So then, putting away falsehood let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, *for we are members of one another.*

Be angry but do not sin;
do not let the sun go down on your anger,
and do not make room for the devil.

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths,
but only what is useful for building up, as there is need,
so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger
and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”

Friends, rules are important because they steer us to a desired behaviour. But our being will never be transformed unless we know – viscerally – the reasons why. This can only be achieved through practice in the presence of God.

Amen. May it be so.