

Romans 15:4-13      The People  
December 8, 2019

In 1995, I attended the 10th anniversary of my college graduation. I was there with a friend and we sat near the top of the bleachers in the old stadium for the football game and looked down on the crowd. They all looked the same to us. My friend said, without provocation, “we are all from the same gene pool.”

As you know I like history. One of my favorite stories from the “old west” is the story of Quanah Parker, the last Comanche war chief who was subdued around the same time as Geronimo and Crazy Horse in the 1870s. The Comanche had been fighting the Texans for more than 40 years by that time and there had been many troubling and violent encounters.

The irony is that Quanah was the son of Cynthia Ann Parker, a member of one of the prominent early Texas families, and founding members of the Texas Rangers. Though he didn’t so much look the part or live according to the same customs, he actually was from the same gene pool as his adversaries.

It seems every language has a word for the people outside the main gene pool. The Greek word is, “ethnos,” which means variously, “nations,” or “people,” and is the Greek word for those not Greek. It is at the root of the English word, “ethnic,” which means, “belonging to a social group that has a common tradition, either national or cultural.” In the

NT, this Greek word is the one used by Jewish writers to refer to all the people who are not Jewish.

The Hebrew word they are translating is goy, and is the Hebrew word for those who are not Hebrew. It is translated into the English, “Gentile,” which comes from the Latin, and is the Roman word for the non-Romans.

One can see that the first three letters in the word Gentile, are g e n, which are also the first three letters of the words, gene, genesis, genealogy, etc. One might say, the ones who come from a different gene pool, and that is very close to what it actually means.

### Paul’s Apostleship

A main part in the story of the New Testament at least, if not the entire bible, is the story of how the Gentiles came to be acceptable, as brothers and sisters, and came to be included in the group. We know that this discussion can lead to some distortions and contradictions that are not acceptable, because they break the command to love one’s neighbor, and they run against the grain of biblical thought from the very beginning, that on the 6th day, God made human beings, not Israelites or Germans or Kenyans or Americans or the Texans or the Comanche or any of the others.

At its heart the message of the bible is that “people” are acceptable to God because of Christ, and therefore should also be acceptable to us. We, all of

us, struggle to accept those from different backgrounds, even though we know better. And so it is not surprise that we find these words near the end of Paul's Letter to the Romans, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

We know from both the Acts of the Apostles and from St. Paul's letters that one of the early divisions of labor in the church is that Peter was the Apostle to the Jews, and Paul to the Gentiles. There was great controversy about this ministry because early on Paul decided that he did not believe that the Gentiles, who were mostly people of Pagan religions, needed to be Jewish in order to be Christian, and he didn't require of them devotion to some aspects of Jewish teaching.

Needless to say, Paul' ministry to the Gentiles has very profound implications for us today, because it means that we are acceptable to God, and that the way we view others must be changed, just as the way Paul viewed the Gentiles changed.

### The Message of Advent

The message of Advent and Christmas, with its journey to Bethlehem, and its angelic announcement to the shepherds, of all people, and the visit of the Magi from Persia, also of all people, all point to the idea that when the child was born, it was not for one group of people, but for everyone. And this is such an essential part of the story that sometimes we miss it as if we are lost in the trees, and can't see the forest.

### Confessions

For my own part, I was raised to be suspicious of people unlike myself. It was never spoken, but implied. So that, even the people I saw everyday and knew better than others, were held at a distance because of what I have now come to believe are superficial reasons.

Let me speak honestly about some of the people I grew up around, that were not a part of my religious tradition, who either directly or indirectly came under this suspicion. I did not hate them, as a matter of fact in retrospect, I loved them, but at the time I did not know it. I feared them, that is the way I would put it, I was afraid to let them become really close friends. I was suspicious they might pressure me into being or doing something I did not want to be or do.

1 - Catholics - only I grew up in a Catholic neighborhood and though my experience contradicted the suspicion, at the time the fear won out.

2 - People who smoked and consumed alcohol. These were very taboo in my upbringing.

3 - Girls who were not Baptist (I am both humored and ashamed of this one. I thought that I might end up with a girl of low moral character. I would never say this aloud to the girls I grew up around and I am sure they would be angry with me if they knew). It did not

matter much because I had a strong fear of rejection anyway.

Also:

4 - Liberals, Atheists or the irreligious, and people of other faith traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam mainly (I remember how strange we thought the Hare Krishnas were, like they were all brainwashed), also Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses) 7 - Yankees (I have come to realize I am one)

As you can see, I didn't even need racial issues. Just about everyone outside my tradition was on my list. And all the while, it was being drummed into me to read the Bible, read the Bible, read the Bible, which told the story of God's love for the peoples, all the ethnicities: the Samaritan, the Eunuch, the Centurion, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile.

The Bible presents the supreme revealing of God's true nature as Jesus, whose sacrificial death on the cross was God's solution for sin (and it is sinful that human beings ever came up with these words, goy, ethnos, Gentile), and it was done to redeem, to forgive, and to restore, to reconcile.

The last thing it should have produced in me was fear of people. Instead it should have produced interest in them, willingness to befriend them unconditionally even if they do not share my version of faith in Jesus, love for them.

Advent is the promise that the time is coming when the fear will be removed at last and love and mercy will have come completely, and we will all come to an inner realization that we are all from the same gene pool. The church is the place, or at least it ought to be, where all people can meet without fear.

I admit that we are not very good at this, but our celebration of Advent and Christmas mean that we strive to get better as we prepare for the Lord's arrival, and by God's grace, we see the miracle accomplished among us, to the praise of God.

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