

“One Table, Many Cultures”

Romans 10: 1-13
Ellis Island Interview
From *A Patriot's Handbook* by Caroline Kennedy

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Eastminster Presbyterian Church
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Unless your name is Running Brook or Falling Leaf or Little Bear you are an immigrant or at least a child, grandchild, or past descendant of immigrants. In this heightened time of anxiety around immigration issues it is important to remember that every one of us here come from immigrant families. I am actually 1/32nd Cherokee Indian and the other 31/32^{nds} of me is full-blooded immigrant from Scotland, Germany, England and a few other countries I have yet to discover. In other words, I am your average American immigrant mutt!

I bring this up today because it seems like it is the issue that never goes away. It's like a story that keeps repeating itself over and over again—only the dates and the names seem to change. I read the story of Manny Steen earlier, an Irish immigrant all the way back in 1924. Today, of course, if you go to Kell's Irish Pub downtown we no longer think of those who have red hair as being immigrants. But, back in 1924 when Manny was passing through Ellis Island he would have stood out as an immigrant with his Irish accent and possibly red hair.

As I said it is like the story that never goes away or just keeps repeating itself over and over again. In our epistle reading today the apostle Paul is addressing a similar issue with the early Christian church. The issue is not quite the same as it is today. They weren't concerned with whether a person had red hair, or dark skin, or a foreign accent. They were concerned with people who claimed to be followers of Christ, but who weren't Jewish. It might be akin to person who claims to be American but doesn't speak English. “Can a non-English-speaking person be an American” is our question? Can a non-Jew be a Christian was their question?

To this Paul writes to the church in Rome, **“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.”** There is no distinction. People may look different, dress differently, and even have different accents, but to Paul when it comes to belonging to Christ, he says, “There is no distinction.”

I like the translation of this same passage from *The Message*. In that modern translation Eugene Peterson translates Paul's words this way, **“Scripture reassures us, “No one who trusts God like this—heart and soul—will ever regret it.” It's exactly the same no matter what a person's religious background may be; the same God for all of us, acting the same incredibly generous way to everyone who calls out for help. “Everyone who calls, ‘Help, God!’ gets help.”**

Our pew Bibles read, “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek.” Eugene Peterson says it this way, “It's exactly the same no matter what a person's religious background may be; the same God for all of us.”

Sociologists tell us that by the year 2048 America will be a country with no majority ethnicity. They say that by the year 2048 Caucasians will be the largest group in America, but a minority nonetheless. California already passed that threshold more than a decade ago. And East Portland where we live and practice our faith is a community largely made of various minorities and recent immigrants. In fact, in the school system only 44% of the students are Caucasian non-immigrant. The other 56% are made up of Russians, Eastern European, Asians, African-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and more. David Douglas school district has over 40 languages spoken in their school.

This sermon is not meant to scare you. Actually, all I really want to say today is that we have been here before. Paul had a time of it in Rome and in Corinth where he had to convince the early followers of Christ that there was no distinction between Jew and Greek. Everyone who called upon God's name could count on God's presence. He made it his life's work to bring both Jew and Gentile together around one table.

But, we don't have to go all the way back to the time of Paul to remember that we have been here before. My first church out of seminary was an old Bohemian church in Racine, WI. Most of the members were descendents of Czechoslovakia. Not too many blocks away was a Lutheran church that had its roots in Scandanavia. In the next town was an old German Presbyterian Church. And in our own Cascades Presbytery we have the Old Scotch Church in Hillsboro.

I think we know exactly what Paul is talking about when he says, "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek." Look around you. The fact of the matter is every one of us descended from immigrants from a variety of countries. And 100 years ago that mattered in America. There were German parts of town and Polish parts of town. There was the French Quarter and the Greek part of town. If Manny Steen was walking and talking in his Irish accent we noticed. But, today look around you in the pews. You know without asking that we have people with German blood and Spanish blood and even Filipino blood. Most of us have a mix of Irish, Scottish, English, and even a little French thrown in just to add culture.

But does that matter to us even one bit? No. While it may have mattered 100 years ago, it doesn't matter today because we learned that there truly is "no distinction between Jew and Greek." We learned that our ethnicity and our culture doesn't really matter. God is going to love all of us.

We've been here before when Jews and Gentiles were trying to figure out how to worship the same God. We've been here before when Germans, Poles, English and Irish had to figure out how live together and worship together. And today we all sit in the same pews and worship the same God and don't even give it a second thought.

Today East Portland is a community of immigrants. We come from all over the globe and live in the same community. What will be the story 50 years from now? We will still be separated by language, culture, and religion? Or will we be many cultures gathered around one table? Let us all gather around the Lord's table this day!

Amen.