

Sermon by Bishop Joel Martínez,

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Boundary Crossing Ministry

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

May 11, 2000

Thanks be to God. I am the arch bishop of Nebraska. *(Applause-laughter)* There is no other bishop there so I can call myself that.

But you'll notice as you look at my colleagues up on the platform that all the clergy shirts are gone. They're at the laundry. There's a song by Willie Nelson, "Sunday Morning Coming Down," has a line in it that some of you know and probably have experienced this week. If not yet, maybe tomorrow, where he says, "sometimes you go and find the cleanest dirty shirt to put on." So I'm wearing my shirt again today.

I praise God, I thank God, for the privilege of being a part of the worship service this morning and thank all of you who have been promising to pray and hold me up to God in prayer for this hour.

Buenos días.

Buenos días.

Good morning.

Good morning.

Bon día.

Bon día.

Anyo haseyo.

Anyo haseyo.

Guten morgen

Guten morgen.

Abari asebuti.

Abari asebuti.

Ina kuana.

Ina kuana.

Holy tee chuk mu.

Holy tee chuk mu.

Dubroi dutro.

Dubroi dutro.

The morning greeting was spoken in Spanish and English, Portuguese and Korean, German and Swahili, Chotaw and Russia. With varying degrees of adequacy in pronunciation, to be sure. But think for a moment with me this morning, about the lands and the people, the cultures and the histories represented by the persons who speak those languages among us this week. Have you caught your self this week in legislative committee or in the hallways or here on the floor using the word "we?" Who is we? Some of our speakers from time to time have made references, in the course of the week, that presupposed that we are a U.S.

church rather than who we are—a global community of faith with nearly global representation but certainly a commitment to global mission and a vision of all of God's people as we seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Dr. Justo González reminds us in one of his books that, while it is true that the nations need the gospel, it is also true that the gospel needs the nations. González makes the point that the fullness, the catholicity of the gospel is manifested only as it is expressed and shared by all of God's people, in all of God's cultures throughout the earth.

Charles Wesley, one of those who taught us to sing and challenged us to sing God's grace, longed to have many tongues to sing the great Redeemer's praise. So he wrote, "Oh for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise, the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace!" No hymn of the Wesleyan movement summarizes better the joyful, grateful spirit which inspires boundary-crossing ministry, border transcending mission, among United Methodists to this very day. And it is as we have been faithful to the great commission and its re-statement in the 18th century by John Wesley, "the world is my parish," that we have been blessed by the singing of the theme of grace in more and more languages throughout the world. Dr. González' assertion that the gospel in the nations, about the gospel and the nations, echoes the earliest struggles in the church and it's reflected in its primary document such as the letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians in some ways is one of the earliest commentaries about the theology in the church. We might see it as a summary of Pauline theology dating to that last decade of the first century. The particular reading from chapter 2 this morning, which was shared with you—there are two important affirmations that are at the center of the early church's struggle. First, you do not have to become a Jew to become a Christian because something so new and radical is happening in Jesus Christ that the previous categories and barriers no longer define the future. But also, that you, the church, we together, are nothing less than the dwelling, the living temple of God's presence in the world.

Earlier in the letter in Ephesians, especially the first chapter, the emphasis is on the individual and the cosmic dimensions of Christ's mission, but now, in the second chapter, the focus is on the social community. It centers on the community called church and on its mission and ministry to the nations, to Gentiles. It uses social-political categories like citizens and aliens and strangers and commonwealth and members of the household. But, more importantly, it

underscores the theme of covenant as the underlying central idea, which explains Israel and explains us. Ephesians' theology of the power of Christ that unites all things in heaven and on the earth is a theology of grace, unbounded grace, universal grace that reaches the whole cosmos that is at work everywhere, everywhere.

Beginning with chapter two, the grace of God in Jesus Christ is described by the writer to the Ephesians with the power to unite, to bring together people in community, both Jew and Gentile, because both Jew and Gentile, both slave and free, both women and men—in all the categories you can imagine—all needed Jesus Christ equally. Both Jew and Gentile have been blessed by the same Spirit. And, the writer says, those near and those distant from the tradition of Abraham and Moses and Sarah and Miriam have been reconciled, brought together in one body, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our theme of General Conference this year has been "We Who Are Many Are One Body." My colleagues previous to this morning have been lifting up the call to unity among us. They have reminded us that while we celebrate our diversity, we are called to affirm our unity in Jesus Christ. They have urged us not to despair in our differences but to embrace them and grow stronger and more unified, not by insisting on uniformity, but through the offering of our diverse gifts to the service of the one Lord who has gifted us through the one Spirit and marked us through the one baptism. Our diverse gifts do enhance and enrich and deepen our understanding—but also our practice—of the gospel. They do not diminish it or threaten it, my sisters and brothers. Is there any person from whom you have nothing to learn? Is there any person from whom you have no gift to receive? Any group? Any nation? Any race? Any culture?

Dr. James Cone has written and spoken eloquently about the struggles of African-American people. He has offered powerful theological insights from the re-reading of the gospel from the Black experience. Nearly 15 years ago he wrote of the challenge facing people of color in coming to the table of trust and dialogue, and I quote: "In our efforts to accent our particularities, we must be careful not to limit God to them or to remain enclosed in them ourselves" (James H. Cone, *For My People*, NY; Orbis, 1984).

Cone reminds us that asserting our unique giftedness should not blind us to the variety of God's gifts in others, especially in those most victimized by racism and exclusion. We are not whole without the gifts of all!

Let me put it another way: Does Mother Teresa of Calcutta belong only to the European culture where she was born or the Roman Catholic tradition where she was nurtured? Does she not belong to all of us? Do not many of you here claim her as your spiritual guide? Martin Luther King Jr., does he speak only to the African-American people and out of the Black Baptist tradition? Does he not teach us all? Does he not belong to the whole of God's people? Oscar Romero, does he belong to the Central American people and the Roman Catholic tradition? Of course! He's rooted there, but he also belongs to the whole Christian family. Why do we

claim people like those and others, who are very different from us in experience and race and location? Is it only because they cross political borders or because they travel widely or wrote many books? Not really. They spent most of their ministry in particular settings, addressing specific challenges in the places where they were set. But it was rather the depth of their love and the breadth of their vision that broke through the language and the culture and the racial barriers and draws us to them as brothers and sisters whom we love and respect and learn from. It was their faithfulness in the place where they were set to the baptismal covenant—the one baptism—that made them boundary-crossing saints in ministry way beyond their time and space. If baptism is our commissioning into mission, then it is by implication the globalizing sacrament. It makes us sister and brother to the whole family of God. You see, there are local gatherings of Christians, but no local Christians. Teresa, and Martin, and Oscar—all understood and lived this out in their life. They showed us the way to larger worlds; their lives challenged us out of isolation into encounters beyond the walls and barriers that seem some times so impenetrable and so limiting.

Over the last five years I have worked to support *Encounter with Christ in Latin America and the Caribbean*. This is an initiative to join hands with our brothers and sisters in the Latin American church in seizing mission opportunities for witnessing to Jesus Christ from the Mexican border to Tierra del Fuego, from Chile to the islands of the Caribbean. I have sought to raise funding, and I've tried to be present and tried to be encouraging of the initiative. But what have I received? Part of the gifts shared with me—among many gifts—one: the recurring stories of the faithful and courageous witness of the church when dictatorships of the right or the left have sought to silence the voices of those who defend human rights. The church of the Methodist family in Latin America and the Caribbean has refused to be silent and has risked its life for the poor and the Indian and the Black and the street children and the nobodies of that continent, and we need to love and appreciate that church.

What gifts of God, not in dollars, but in grace or hours, when we dare to venture beyond the boundary!

Joan Puls, in her book *Every Bush Is Burning*, reflects insightfully about her own personal experience of boundary-crossing when she writes, and I quote, "Those who love cross boundaries and histories, heritages and careers. We live limited lives until we cross over into the concrete world of another country, another culture, another tradition of worship. His story comes alive and what is foreign becomes familiar. Understanding and appreciation grow. I have left forever a small world to live with the tensions and tender mercies of God's larger family."

Is not this what conferencing in Cleveland this week and last has been about? Have we not been experiencing both the tender mercies and the tensions of God's large and diverse family?

The tender assurance that we're in one another's prayers?

The tension of multiple and competing visions for a global church?

The mercy of an affectionate handshake and hug by new friends from distant places?

The tensions of principled debate where discernment does not always lead to consensus but to voting and to perceived winners and perceived losers?

The mercy of the hopeful enthusiasm of youth who see visions and the reassuring witness of elders who have dreamed dreams and are still dreaming them among us?

We are God's family, called to encounter, invited beyond the familiar and the known to participate fully—as Ephesians would express it—as citizens, no longer as aliens; as members of the one covenant family, no longer as strangers.

Ephesians further affirm in that second chapter that all social/political/racial/cultural categories are relativized forever by the category of covenant. Covenant. Implications for us? Skin color and racial category do not diminish or enhance our sacred worth. God's creative act does. Green cards and visas and passports do not confer or deny human dignity. God does that. Neither does gender; neither does sexual orientation, nor physically or mentally challenging conditions. Folks, brothers and sisters, United Methodists from around the world, we are part of one *diaspora*, originating in the Garden of Eden, if you will, or originating in Southern Africa from one single female. As you will, we are one family. *Una, una familia*.

The gospel calls us to large commitments. It challenges every small attachment by enlarging the boundary of our community until it includes every single one of God's children. I am here to day because somebody, somebody, loved the promises of the gospel more than their secure and comfortable circumstances. Somebody had to cross a boundary in history to reach my maternal grandmother in northern Mexico in the late 1870s. The family embraced the gospel preached by the Methodists. She was baptized and by and by immigrated to the United States at the turn of the century. She would later marry into the Roman Catholic tradition of her husband, baptize all her children in that tradition, and live the life of a sharecropper's wife in south central Texas. But she returned to the Methodist fold of her childhood three

years before her death, just in time for my mother—one of her two children who joined her, at *La Trinidad, Iglesia Metodista en Seguin*, in membership. And two years later the baptismal waters were sprinkled over me as she had received so many years before, across the border and beyond the boundary.

My grandmother was born poor. She was an immigrant in a land dominated by another culture, another language, and different ways of life. She had to survive in the midst of circumstances slightly above indentured servitude. She lived out her hopes and her dreams in the midst of poverty and racism and exile from the home of her childhood. But in the midst of all of that, the church of Jesus Christ continued to offer the gospel of grace, the gospel that we preach about and teach about, and we read about this morning. And she was taught the songs of the faith, and we learned them, and she had the support of a community, in a language and a context and a style that affirmed who she was. She didn't have to become anybody else. She was fully a member of the body of Jesus Christ. She was sustained on the journey. So I celebrate this church, my grandmother's church. She loved this church, and she sang some of its hymns to me during the first 11 months of my life before she died. She never went to annual conference. She never voted to elect bishops at jurisdictional conference. She never sat where you sit. But she believed in Jesus Christ, the power of Christ to redeem and unite and bring life anew. She was blessed by the church.

But the church was also blessed by my grandmother. She gave this church gifts, just like you have gifts to offer. She gave this church the capacity to weep and laugh with poor people. She challenged it to speak in new languages and accents. She shared with it the reality of cultural ways and values that were different—not superior or inferior—but different from those of the majority. My grandmother was one of the Gentiles.

So this morning, I say, Thank you, Paul. Thank you, editor of the Ephesian letter. Thank you, saints of all the ages who preserved the letter to the Ephesians. Thank you, United Methodists, for being willing to live in larger boxes—one of our speakers alluded to early in this General Conference—to hold larger visions, and to dare to journey across all the boundaries and to ward the wider horizon of the reign of God. Amen.