

## Opening and prayer

We are continuing in our series about our identity. What does it mean to be God's people? Who are we at Lendrum MB Church? Today I want to explore one aspect of our identity: our diversity. We are a diverse people.

But first, let us pray: "O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable in your site, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer." Amen.

## A mingled people

This fall we've been drawing some lessons from the book of Exodus. As Christians, we read these stories and they tell us something about who we are, and who we are meant to be. So in the first week of the series, Carol reminded us that we are a "heard" people – a people whom God has heard. But God has not only heard us, we are a delivered people. Last week, Carol reminded us that God is working to set us free. And so this week we continue to look to Exodus. And as we go up out of the land of bondage, we are reminded that we are a diverse people: a mixed multitude.

As I was thinking about our scripture passage for this morning, I wondered if the phrase for "mixed multitude" is ever used in the New Testament. I thought of some of the scenes where Jesus is interacting with the crowds: feeding the 5000, preaching the sermon on the mount, or even when he was crucified. So I looked up the term "mixed multitude" in a commentary. But what I found was, I think, even more interesting than what I went looking for.

The phrase that is translated in our Bibles as "mixed multitude" or "mixed crowd" is based on two Hebrew words *`ereb* (עֵרֵב) and *rab* (רַב). The word *rab* means multitude or crowd. And the word *`ereb* means mixed. But this word *`ereb* is interesting, because it is primarily used to talk about clothing. Of the 14 verses in which it appears in the Old Testament, the word is used in 9 verses to talk about garments. In Leviticus chapter 13, the priests are given instructions to look for rot or disease in the "warp and woof" of linen, wool, and leather garment. If you are weaving cloth, the warp (שְׂתִי) (*shēthiy*) is the threads that run lengthwise along the material, and the woof is the threads that run transverse to those, the threads that are woven into the warp. This word for "woof" is the same word *`ereb* that means "mixed." The woof is the mixed thread, the *`ereb* is what ties the fabric together. Without it, the fabric would just be a bunch of strings lying in parallel lines, with nothing holding them together.

But this word *`ereb* has another meaning. In the other 5 verses, the word is used to refer to people.

*Exodus 12:38*

"A **mixed** (*`ereb*) crowd (*rab*) also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds."

*Nehemiah 13:3*

"When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of **foreign** (*`ereb*) descent."

*Jeremiah 25:20*

"all the **mixed** (*`ereb*) people; all the kings of the land of Uz; all the kings of the land of the Philistines—Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the remnant of Ashdod;"

*Jeremiah 25:24*

"all the kings of **Arabia** (עֲרָב) (*`Arab*) and all the kings of the **mixed** (עֲרָב) (*`ereb*) peoples that live in the desert"

*Jeremiah 50:37*

"A sword against her horses and against her chariots, and against all the **foreign** (*`ereb*) troops in her midst, so that they may become women!

A sword against all her treasures, that they may be plundered!"

When the word *`ereb* is used for people, it means the "mixed people," especially outsiders or foreigners. In every case, when the word (*`ereb*) is used to refer to people, there is a negative connotation. The (*`ereb*) are considered to be polluting Israel.

But here's the surprise. Originally, the Hebrew language didn't write down the vowel sounds. Many years later, copyists began to add the vowel sounds in to help readers. But most times those copyists were making educated guesses. What we do know for sure is that the letters of the word that was written, *`ereb*, are the same letters that are used for the word "Arab." So in Jeremiah 25:20, one way to translate this would be "the kings of the *`ereb* (or mingled people), and the kings of the *`ereb* (or mingled people) who live in the dessert." At some point, the word *`ereb* became a proper place name, Arabia. But originally it came from a word that meant "mixed."

"Mixed" (*`ereb*) is an apt description for the inhabitants of the Sinai peninsula. The region that is now claimed by Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Lebanon, was at that time a crucial trade route. It was a narrow point of land at the intersection of three huge continents. Many people traveled through this land, and many nations wanted to control it. And so, like trade regions throughout history, this region became a mixing

place for people groups. Its inhabitants became a mingled people. Arabia.

"Mixed" is also an apt description of us here at Lendrum. The name on our building says "Mennonite Brethren," and some of us come from families that have deep roots with the Mennonite Brethren. But many of us do not.

I was raised going to an Alliance church. My dad grew up in Mexico, and my mom grew up in Manitoba. Both grew up in Mennonite homes, but not Mennonite Brethren. I myself didn't know what a Mennonite really was until I went to graduate school. Sherri wasn't raised in a Mennonite family. And many of us at Lendrum weren't either.

We gather here for lots of different reasons. Some people come to this church because it's in their neighbourhood. Others come because a friend brought them here, or because they tried it out and enjoyed a Sunday school class. Some come because this is the church they grew up in, or raised their families in. Some of us have studied theology and have strong convictions about what we believe. Others aren't sure about their faith and want to learn. We vote for different political parties, if we vote at all. Some of us work in offices and stay clean all day. Others of us build offices, or repair boats, or plant gardens. Some of us go to school, or would like to go to school, and some of us aren't able to work at a job that pays, but contribute to our community in important and necessary ways. I could go on and on about all the diversity in our church. The different homes we have. The different families. The different faith background. But I'm not allowed to stay up here that long.

We are a mingled people. We are *`ereb*.

And this is good news, because in our scripture reading from Exodus this morning, we heard that, as God was freeing the Israelites, "a mixed multitude (an *`ereb* crowd) also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, [and] a very large number of livestock." That's us!

### **The challenge of diversity**

Of course, being a diverse people does come with its challenges. How will we work together, how will we build our houses, harvest our fields, or worship our God, if we don't speak the same language? If we don't hold the same beliefs? If we don't share the same history? It can be very difficult. Our ideas and values seem to clash with one another, and we don't know how to move forward.

There is a temptation to separate into like-minded groups. Blue collar workers in one church. Academics in another church. The wealthy and the powerful in another church. Conservatives over here. Liberals over there.

There are also those who desire purity. Ethnic purity. Moral purity. Theological purity. For them, diversity is intollerable.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the writers speak about the mixed people as a "rabble" and they blame the "rabble" for all kinds of social ills. So we read that it was the mixed people who started complaining against Moses. It was the mixed people who introduced idolatry into Israelite society. It was the mixed people who led Israel away from God.

Indeed, a large part of Israelite religion was about separation. It was about "un-mixing" the things that are mixed up. Do not wear clothing made of mixed fibres. This food is clean. That food is unclean. Do not marry outsiders. Do not worship any other God alongside the LORD. Those are the practices of the mixed people, but don't you know that you are a holy people, a separate people? Do not get mixed up with the wrong sorts of people!

It's a tension that has existed throughout history, and it's one we face today. Things seem to go easier when everyone is just like us. So we only want to let in the people who are just like us. And if we do meet people who are different from us, then we do our best to make them become more like us. I believe there is a real need for Christian missionaries. But sadly, much of what has been done in the name of missionary work has been an attempt to reproduce ourselves in other people, to make them more like us. It has been a movement toward homogeneity rather than respect and delight in diversity.

### **The clean and the unclean**

In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, we read a story about the apostle Peter and a man named Cornelius. (I'll be paraphrasing, but you can follow along in the Bibles in your pews.) Peter was a good Hebrew, a very zealous and religious man, and he loved Jesus very much. Peter understood from his tradition that the way to please God was to keep things separate. But one day, while Peter was waiting for lunch and getting hungry, he had a vision. In it, he saw a great sheet descending from heaven, and on that sheet he saw all kinds of animals. Mammals. Reptiles. Birds. Things which definitely didn't belong together. And I'm sure Peter thought this was odd, until he heard a voice telling him, "Get up, Peter. Grab a bite – eat whatever you like!" At this point, Peter didn't just think this was a strange dream, he was scandalized. "By no means, Lord," he said. "Don't you know that I am very devout, and that I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean?" But the voice said to him, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean." And because he was so stubborn, Peter had this vision three times. It took a lot of repeating for the message to sink in with Peter! Sometimes, we are a bit like Peter.

At the same time, there was a man named Cornelius, who was a ranking officer in the Roman army, a gentile, one of the "mixed" people. Cornelius loved and feared God, and he prayed constantly. One day, as he was praying, he also had a vision, and he was told to invite Peter to supper. So Cornelius invited him to supper. And Peter said to him, "you know that it is against my religion to associate with or visit someone from your religion. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." And so Peter went along with the man, and ate with him, and told him all about how God had sent Jesus to make peace throughout the world. This was the beginning of the spread of the gospel to the gentiles, which is what most of us in this church are.

Acts 10:31 says that God heard Cornelius, who from a Jewish perspective, was one of the mingled people. God *heard* Cornelius. Just as God heard the cries of the oppressed in Egypt, both the Israelites and the *ereb*. And God *delivered* Peter to Cornelius, just as God delivered the Israelites and the mixed people from Egypt.

We too are a people because God has heard us. And God has delivered us, and is delivering us, and will deliver us. And when we go up out of the land of our bondage, we will find that we are a diverse people – a mixed multitude.

We may be tempted to grumble about this. I expect that when I see whom God has forgiven, I'll be very surprised. "Oh, I didn't expect that type of person to be saved." But I think God knows that we need both the warp *and* the woof to make a garment. Far from being a danger, the mixed thread is what holds the fabric together.

So, Peter's vision reminds us: what God has made clean, let us not call unclean. Acts 10:34-35 says that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God." This is the beginning of Peter's sermon to the gentiles, and it is the basis of our hope and trust in God. We are a mixed people, but God shows no partiality. This is good news for us.