

“Upcycled by God”

Ephesians 2:1-22 (*The Message*)

June 21st, 2020

Oak Forest UMC

Thesis: God is actively upcycling our messes and brokenness and transforming us into a new creation.

What is upcycling? – new name for an old practice ---

Story of Sophia Grace and rummaging through the trash- upcycling the trash for recycling for crafts.

Ephesus certainly had its share of walls and boundaries. It doesn't matter what book you turn to in at least the New Testament, you will quickly discover the recorded tensions between Jew and Gentile. The Gentiles were those who were not of Jewish/Hebrew descent. The designation between Jew and Gentile were so rigid that they became encoded in law. For Jews to dine with Gentiles was scandalous and vice versa. Gentiles thought the Jewish people were so ethnocentric that they were thought to have a hatred for humanity. Even the Temple had pretty tough laws around who was allowed in and who was kept out. Josephus, a Jewish historian around the time of Jesus, writes about the signs placed along a dividing wall just inside the Temple complex that read: “No outsider shall enter the protective enclosure around the sanctuary. And whoever is caught will only have himself to blame for the ensuing death.”¹ In the book of

¹ www.kchanson.com/PTJ/templewarning.html (link from textweek.com)

Acts we know that Paul was almost killed by Turkish Jews visiting the Temple when he aided and abetted the entry of an Ephesian man into the Temple complex. (Acts 21) Apparently, the attack was so brutal that the only that saved him was when the Roman police came and arrested him. As we look at this passage in Ephesians know that we are diving into centuries of division. The task was great to bring unity between the Jews and Gentiles who had been divided since the time of Abraham.

Paul calls out to them “once you were called the uncircumcised by those who were circumcised.” Once you were called outsider, unwanted, unclean, alienated, and hopelessly unworthy to be connected to God. These No matter what walk of life you come from but these words of Paul are personal. Those characterizations are some pretty powerful walls- As painful as it is to hear those words Paul does not leave us there. He says that once you were an outsider but now Jesus has come to our world and you are different. He offers us a different reality. It is Christ Jesus who brings those who were far off near through his work on the cross. He brings those who were near closer to see the kingdom work of God around us. Jesus entered this world filled with division and walls and poured out his peace to all who would receive it. And now we are being formed into a new humanity, one where God upcycles all of us by taking our messes, the

mistakes we have made, the divisions we have constructed to keep some people in and others out, and constructs us into something new.

While I was in divinity school, I studied the racial relationships in Durham. It didn't have to go very far in the history of the city to discover some of the struggles blacks and whites endured and continue to endure today. I had the privilege to interview a woman by the name of Ann Atwater about her leadership in the civil rights movement in Durham.

In the early 1970's, Durham city schools were forced by the court to desegregate. You can imagine the outrage and the anger in the people, the parents, the teachers and administrators who now were tasked with the challenge of making the integration happen. Bill Riddick was the school superintendant at the time and after a particularly contentious community meeting decided to form a steering committee who would meet for 10 days to find a solution. He decided to appoint two people as co-chairs: Ann Atwater, African American civil rights leader but also a welfare mom who lived in one of the worst areas of the city and CP Ellis, a segregationists and the Exalted Cyclops of the Klu Klux Klan for the Durham area.

The first five days of the meeting were rough. Ann and CP were interviewed by NPR saying that they went into those meetings hating each other's guts. CP

hated the demonstrations, he hated the boycotts, he hated Ann because she was a really great boycotter of the stores downtown. The only reason CP agreed to be on the committee was because the KKK thought he could tear it all apart. But as Ann Atwater says in an interview on NRP, "I tell everybody, God had a hand on that because in the meetings C.P. had a machine gun, and he would show it to the city councilmen in the trunk of his car every morning. And when I'd walk up to the school building, I had my white Bible in my hand. So I told C.P. we would see whose God would be the strongest, my God or his God. I always said if they'd said something to me, I was going to knock the hell out of them with my Bible."

Over the course of the ten day meeting things began to change. They brought a gospel choir in and as they sang together, Ann noticed CP started to clap along with the music; except he wasn't clapping along with everyone else because, according to Ann, "white people clap to an odd beat." So she took his hands and showed him how to clap to the Gospel music and the barriers between them started to come down. They talked over the next many days, talked with the children of Durham and discover that "the children was the ones suffering." Although Ann and CP were mad at each other, they were not helping the children of Durham. At one point, it was like an Epiphany- they cried together and God took their pain, the divisions that they were born into and began to rebuild, to use

the brokenness and racism and upcycle them into a new creation. At the end of the ten day meeting, CP stood in front of the entire gathering and held up his Klan card and tore it up. He moved from being a segregationist to a civil rights activist. When Ann was asked about the change that occurred between them she just says, "If I look back at it through my Bible, through God's work, God had a plan for both of us. And that plan was to put us there to make sure that this school integration would be done peacefully, and that's what happened. It's just a strange thing, but it really happened."²

What happened between Ann and CP is the embodiment of this passage. You don't get more separated in Durham North Carolina than a black civil rights working woman and a white man who lead the Klu Klux Klan in the 1970s. We know that we still have a lot of work to do today. What brought them together was nothing short of a miracle- at the heart of what they did was the hope for a different life. They wanted a different life for their kids, a hope that they would have quality education in a world that had told them no over and over again. The very brokenness of racism, the very thing that kept them separated for most of their life was ultimately brought healing. And it was a necessary step towards healing in a city that still feels the pain of racial inequality today.

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That reality is present still today. "Upcyclers" can see something good, something beautiful even, in the things we throw away. Christ, we have a different reality at work within and around us.

More information about CP and Ann's relationship

Claiborne Paul Ellis (8 January 1927 – 3 November 2005) was an American [segregationist](#) turned [civil rights](#) activist and [trade union](#) organizer. Ellis was at one time [Exalted Cyclops](#) of a [Ku Klux Klan](#) group in Durham. He was born in [Durham, North Carolina](#).

In 1971 there was a great deal of turmoil in the Durham NC City Schools because of a court-ordered desegregation. [Bill Riddick](#), motivated by fears of violence among the students organized a ten-day community meeting called a [charrette](#) where the whole community came to try to solve this problem. The first step was to create a steering committee that was representative of the whole community. Riddick identified [Ann Atwater](#), a poor African American welfare mom and civil rights activist and Ellis to co-chair that meeting.

After 10 days of talks the two became the unlikelyst of friends and Ellis came to believe that whites, especially poor whites, could prosper more from the civil-rights movement than from segregation. Atwater and Ellis came to know each other as individuals instead of as stereotypes. They came to see how they, as poor people, were both oppressed and that their children had many of the same issues. It was during this time that they cried together.

During the charrette, gospel music was performed. Ellis could be seen clapping his hands and stomping his feet to the music. Atwater told how she had to teach Ellis how to clap because "white folks clap on the odd beat". At the last night of the charrette, 1000 people participated, including Ellis' fellow klan members. At the microphone, Ellis held his Klan membership card up and said: "If schools are going to be better by me tearing up this card, I shall do so". Ellis thus renounced the Klan that night and never returned. The remaining klansmen threatened his life and never talked to him again for the next 30 years.

Ellis and Atwater formed an enduring friendship. He went on to organize black and white labor unions in Durham, and Atwater continued to empower poor people. Ellis' conversion to desegregation is documented in the book *Best of Enemies* (1996) and a documentary [An Unlikely Friendship](#)

C.P. Ellis died of [Alzheimer's disease](#) in 2005. Ann Atwater eulogized his funeral.