

This Amazing Place

Sunday, July 18, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Ephesians 2:11-22

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

In just a day the Vacation Bible School children will gather here in our sanctuary. To some this place will seem familiar from previous summers or other visits, and to others it will be an unfamiliar place, but I am sure that to all it will be a place of amazement. Some may be impressed by the size of the sanctuary and the high ceiling as well as the fancy decorations. Others may look and quickly conclude that their school auditorium is bigger. But soon they will discover what an amazing place this is. Wonderful stories will be told and sung. There will be friends, new and old, and interesting crafts and snacks. Yes, there are more dazzling displays to be viewed on the television at home, but they will soon see that this is truly an amazing place. After all, Jesus lives here.

Do we share that amazement? Most of us have been around here a long time, which is good, but there is the problem of familiarity blinding us to the wonder of this place. We take this place for granted! We seldom think of Churches as exciting places, in fact, our thoughts are usually opposite to that. Can we hear afresh the words of the Apostle as he reminds us all just how glorious this place is? Consider the Church.

In his Ephesian letter Paul is explaining the Church, and in our lesson, he begins by delighting in the home that the Church has become for all people. Paul delights in God's bringing together Jews and Gentiles into the same household. Speaking to his primarily Gentile audience in Ephesus he rejoices: *remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.* The Gentiles were once hopeless, not being a part of God's chosen people and little interested in seeking God, but God did a wonderful work of reconciliation. *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.* Not only did Christ's atoning death pay the penalty for our sin and bring us back to God, but it also brought all of us together! It is hard for us to imagine just how much most Jews and Gentiles despised each other in those days, so when Paul tells of these two groups being brought into the same family, he is telling us of something amazing. We have heard this message of unity for so long that we grow immune to its full meaning and splendor. "Of course, we are all God's children," is the common refrain, and we give it little thought.

But our unity as Christians is a truth longing to be re-discovered. Sadly, we are not nearly as united as we like to think that we are. Christians are very much in the habit of joining congregations which fit their many tastes and desires and, having joined such a faith family, we then gravitate toward those most like ourselves. There is hardly a better example of niche-marketing in our land than the Church! Even as we use the word "inclusivity" in the Church which would seem to align with Paul's teaching, it is usually an appeal to give particular favor to a certain group in the Church. We still have much to learn about being a Church for *all* people. In the past I have been envious of the Roman Catholic Church of earlier years. There was a time when Catholics were obligated to attend the Church in their neighborhood. No Church shopping was allowed. The wonderful part of this arrangement was that when differing ethnic groups lived in the same neighborhood they were forced to deal with that multi-cultural situation in a Christian way. We Protestants would claim boldly that we loved all people, but also be sure to start our own congregation for our particular group, and would seldom, if ever, mix with others. This is not the Church we are called to be! Paul writes: *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God*" We are all to live as one family. We have a long way to go in making this claim of unity a reality, but we should also be glad for the unity we have attained.

At Vacation Bible School our children will get a taste of unity. The event will include men and women, boys and girls, of all ages. There will be familiar friends as well as the unfamiliar. For a number of years our curriculum focused upon young believers from around the world which is a wonderful lesson of the truly united Church. Our congregation is thoroughly white and middle class, but there are still lessons in unity to be learned. To join a Church is to force oneself to try to get along with all kinds of people. As Church members we must learn to live in cooperation with people of differing opinions, tastes and interests. Many of us rub each other the wrong way! Properly met, this challenge is an opportunity to learn real Christian love. Church is where we may experience music from different cultures and other Christian traditions. A few years ago, we had the Friendship Community Worship Team lead us in worship, and what a blessing that was! As we have come to Vacation Bible School, we are challenged with trying to engage a neighborhood which keeps changing and to which we may feel like strangers. Reaching out to those outside of our immediate circle of friends is always challenging, but here is where the real blessing begins! Here is where we come to more deeply experience the love of God, and this love may not be a warm feeling directed toward us, but may be the challenge presented to *us* to love others!

The Church, this household of God, is built with Jews and people of all nations, gathered as one to be God's special place. Every building requires a strong foundation, and this is Paul's next concern. This Church, Paul tells us, is *built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone*. As a rule, we do not get excited about foundations. Then there occurs a tragedy as we experienced a month ago in Florida when a large apartment building with a faulty foundation collapsed, and we are reminded just how important a solid base is.

Paul assures that all is well as we are built upon a foundation of *apostles and prophets*. God began building the Church years ago with the ministry of the prophets. For over a thousand years, God was calling and inspiring special messengers to announce God's plan. One of the compelling evidences of the Bible's authenticity is the way it came to be. Over so many generations and changing times God was sending prophets, and though times changed, their message was always consistent. If one were to go to a bookstore and gather sixty-six books about God one would have themselves a library of confused and contradictory teachings, yet God's word, the Bible, is made of many books, evolving over many centuries, yet a remarkably unified message. When Jesus came, as the prophets had predicted, he left many apostles to tell the Gospel story for the generations which would follow. Our New Testament has many authors, yet one strong and single message of life in Jesus Christ. This is an amazing foundation on which we can stand strong and secure. We stand upon this Word of God which continues to shine the truth and to change lives.

I don't suppose that the little ones will echo any of my fascination with the multiplicity of human authors of God's one great Book, but I do know that the children will be amazed. The stories of Jesus will be heard and remembered by these young listeners, for they are like no other stories. Some of my earliest memories of learning of Jesus go back to Vacation Bible School and felt-board stories about Jesus. Though I remember few details of those times, I do remember being fascinated by and attracted to this special, wonderful man—Jesus. We have heard the Good News told many times. May we always remember just how wonderful this news is, and let us remember to be amazed.

Paul speaks of the Church as God's people from all nations, being joined together into a great structure and firmly planted upon a strong foundation. This we know, but the best is yet to come, and this final teaching is one which we most commonly ignore. As we gather, we become the Temple of God! *In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.* We become the place where God delights to live and move in power! How does the title St. Luke's Temple sound? We are not familiar with the word temple and usually associate it exclusively with the Temple in Jerusalem. God's Spirit lived in that Temple, and God's plan was that with the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church this same Spirit would come and live among all assemblies of believers. I have long found it interesting how certain Churches in the Baptist tradition have named many of their congregations temples. This is a sound practice. As we gather, God delights to dwell among us. Perhaps I have become a broken record on this matter, but I will say it again. It is so important that we gather, for God delights to move in power where His people assemble. This is the place where we come to be transformed, and as we walk faithfully with Christ over the distance, we find that we are changed more and more into the divine likeness.

When we speak of God's Spirit transforming us, we are not speaking primarily of mystical and exciting experiences. These do happen, and they are wonderful, but the majority of the Spirit's life changing work is accomplished through the hard work of faith practiced within a body of believers as we submit our lives to the basic disciplines of the Christian walk: worship, prayer, forgiveness, Bible, service and fellowship. The Church is a laboratory of cooperation where we learn to work together and overcome differences. It is a place of worship where we draw near to God in praise. Here we discover divine truths communicated through Sunday school lessons, sermons, songs, discussions with others, and through moments of enlightenment. Here is where we do the hard work of faith, and in that work the Spirit of God is very much at work!

Christ is mentioned as the cornerstone of this grand structure, and there has been debate as to the precise meaning of this. At very least it means that Jesus is knit

together with us into this wonderful Temple. Not only does God come to dwell among His people, but we, God's people are knit together with Christ as we gather together.

This truly is an amazing place. Here we gather, different as we may be. Here we stand upon a firm foundation. We stand upon God's truth. Here we find ourselves in the very presence of God. The Covid shutdown may have taught us that life still goes on even when we are kept from meeting together, but we need to hear God's Word reminding us that real and fuller life is found as we actively join in God's House.

The kids will come and be amazed. Let us be glad for the children, and let us not miss out on this crucial lesson. May we remember to be amazed and to always cherish this special place.