

Members in the Family of God
United Church of Broomfield
November 14, 2021

Ephesians 2:11-22 (CEB)

¹¹ So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called “uncircumcised” by Jews who are physically circumcised. ¹² At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God’s promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. ¹³ But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. ¹⁵ He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. ¹⁶ He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. ¹⁷ When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. ¹⁸ We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. ¹⁹ So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God’s people, and you belong to God’s household. ²⁰ As God’s household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. ²² Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

Howard Rutledge, a U.S. air force pilot, was shot down over North Vietnam during the early stages of the Vietnam War. He spent several terrible years as a P.O.W. before being released when the conflict ended. He shares a testimony of something God taught him during that time.

"During those longer periods of enforced reflection, it became so much easier to separate the important from the trivial, the worthwhile from the waste. For example, in the past, I usually worked or played hard on Sundays and had no time for church. For years my wife had encouraged me to join the family at church. She never nagged or scolded. She just kept hoping and praying, but I was too busy, too preoccupied to spend one or two short hours a week thinking about the important things.

Now the sights and sounds and smells of death were all around me. My hunger for spiritual food soon outdid my hunger for a steak. Now I wanted to know about that part of me that will never die. Now I wanted to talk about God and Christ and the church, but in ... solitary confinement, there was no pastor, no Sunday school teacher, no Bible, no hymn book and particularly no community to guide and sustain me. I had completely neglected the spiritual dimension of my life. It took prison to show me how empty life is without God and my church family."¹

[Your purpose, one of many, is to be a part of God’s family, to be a loving, beautiful, vibrant, flourishing, and participating member of creation. Beyond biological family, your purpose is to be a part of God’s family, which includes a diverse spectrum of tribes, households, broods, clans, groups, dynasties, and communities.

¹ Cited by Gordon Macdonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, pp. 125-126

Ephesians 1:5 says, "God destined us to be His adopted children through Jesus Christ because of Her love. This was according to God's goodwill and plan..." God has been and is right now building a family that is going to last, not just here on Earth, but forever.

When we experience God's love for creation we desire to share it. In I Peter 2:17, we read that as part of God's family we are to, "Treat everyone [we] meet with dignity. [We are to] Love [our] spiritual family."

One of the reasons why the church can be so important is because it is in the church that we learn to love our spiritual family -- those who desire to be in community for no other reason than a shared belief of respecting, caring, and helping to uplift all of creation, unconditionally. We learn about and choose to be in fellowship with others.

Fellowship is more than having a cup of coffee together, chewing the fat or going to a ball game together. Fellowship is loving God's family – ALL of God's creation – especially when we disagree. Learning to *appreciate and welcome* differences because it all comes from God.

It says in I John 4:21, "...Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both." The church is a family. It is not a building. It is not an organization. It is not a club. Church is not a place you go to. Church is a family that you belong to and with whom you choose to fellowship.

>> God wants us to connect with one another...

This is sometimes referred to as membership. It is when you choose to belong to a local body of believers as a part of God's family and declare it. This is the most basic level of fellowship. You find a church family and you choose to get connected to that family.

From our reading today it says, "You are no longer wandering exiles. This Kingdom of faith is now your home country. You are no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home." The Christian life is not just a matter of believing, it is a matter of belonging. You choose to belong to God's family.

Your relationship to God is personal, but God never intended it to be private. It makes little sense for a Christian to not to want to belong to a church and be involved in all that community is and does. That would be like saying, "I want to be a football player, but I don't want to be a part of any team." It would be like saying, "I want to be a tuba player, but I don't want to be a part of an orchestra." You belong in God's household.

The Christian life is more than just commitment to Christ and his teachings. It is commitment to other Christians. Through the sacrament of baptism, we celebrate that commitment and the belief that we belong together.

In fact, being a part of a local church is so important, God even gave us a symbol of the fact that we belong together. It is a picture called, "baptism." Baptism is the picture that we belong together in the body of Christ. I Corinthians 12:13 says, "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink." Membership and baptism are public declarations, "I am a part of a group of believers, and I am excited to belong to the family of God."²

² <https://sermons.com/sermon/all-in-the-family/1372635>

We just got through another political cycle and yet again it seems to fan the flames of otherness and division. As Americans we seem fond of our divisions, even if we growl about them. Political ideology, denominational squabbling, and race are high and hard walls that are too often insurmountable. But division grieves Jesus' heart, and we keep crucifying him over and over with our cocky other-ing of "those people." If we're reconciled to God, it's not an option to refuse to be reconciled to others. We are meant to be connected with each other – in love, kindness, compassion and respect. Our disconnectedness and resulting "othering" are based in fear.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann has said that everybody's afraid. Some are afraid the world they've treasured is crumbling around them; others are afraid the world they dream of will never come to be. If we are all indeed afraid, then what is there to do?

Our text in Ephesians helps to guide us, because it is a celebration of the elimination of a wall that hindered God's purposes in extending grace and blessing to the world. In bringing us all together as one family. When we are afraid, we have God and Jesus, who have taught us that those barriers, walls and "othering actions" are not the means to eliminating fear, but rather openness, benevolence and unity are – "So that they may all be one."

In our text, Paul declares that this former division is now past. "[Christ] has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances," Paul writes, "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." In place of Israel's governing precepts, God has revealed a person who through his life, death and resurrection from the dead served to explode the former categories. Jesus did not so much do away with Israel's precepts as he fulfilled them in his person. In God's family of love, there are no spiritual exclusions. In Jesus, there is no insider or outsider. Persons are neither far nor near.

Twice in our text, in verses 13 and 17, Paul uses the language of "near" and "far off" to describe the state of humanity before the coming of Jesus. The world consisted of static, unbridgeable divisions between Jew and Gentile. There were other walls in the ancient world as well: male and female, slave and free, rich and poor. In one of Paul's most powerful statements in the New Testament, he testified to Jesus' power in deconstructing all of these divisions: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."¹

In his person, Jesus forged a new humanity. The Gospel does not call for persons to meet "halfway" in an attempt at compromise and reconciliation. Through the person of Jesus, the former categories are annulled. All persons are called to align themselves under a new banner: "in Christ." Persons are no longer "near" or "far off" on the basis of birth (or gender, or race, or sexuality orientation, or nationality...). Their new identity — *our* new identity — is found through faith in Jesus. By making us human in a new way, Jesus unleashes us to live the lives for which we were created: genuine community with one another while doing God's good work in the world. As Paul said, "For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

There is a story of a Christian farmer who raised sheep. But he had a serious problem. His neighbor's dogs would, from time to time, get into his sheep pen and injure or even kill one of the sheep. The farmer went to talk with his neighbor, but his neighbor didn't do anything about it. So, the farmer thought, the next dog that attacks my sheep will be a dead dog. But he knew that was wrong. His next thought was to sue the man. But

this troubled him also. He was a Christian man, and he knew his neighbor to be a Christian, as well. Paul makes it clear in the 6th chapter of 1st Corinthians that Christians don't sue Christians. "I'll build a wall," he thought, but that would have been expensive. He didn't have that kind of money. And besides, walls are such ugly things.

Finally, he prayed, "Lord, what should I do about my neighbor's dogs?" Then that night the answer came to him. The next morning, he went out to his sheep. He selected two baby lambs and he took those lambs to his neighbor's house and gave them to his neighbor's daughters as pets. The girls were thrilled because there is nothing cuter than a baby lamb. His neighbor was thrilled also because his daughters were happy, and since he now had sheep of his own to protect, he started controlling his dogs.³

We must remember God's purpose for us, which is emphasized in the gospel message. Christ came to tear down walls, not build them. We are meant to be together and connected, in a new humanity ... within these walls and extending beyond to the farthest reaches of the universe. We all belong to one family – descended through the breath of God which is the Spirit of our souls.

You are my brother and my sister, but so is the man working long hours in a factory in China and so is the tired woman in the Sudan carrying her starving child across the desert, as well as the teenager in Pakistan seething at what he perceives as an unjust world. We need to be reminded of that regularly, and where will that begin if not in church? We are all one, universal family, members of the family of God. Let us continue to celebrate this through community, through membership, through fellowship and love.

Amen

³ Rev. John Fitzgerald, https://booneumcevents.org/uploads/Sermon2009_09_20.pdf.