

## Let Us Build a House – Ephesians 2:11-20

There's a certain irony in our gathering hymn today, isn't there? I didn't really notice it when I picked it out. Let us build a house...and here we are in a time when we aren't even using the house we have.

But of course in the end, the song isn't really about a building. And this household of God Paul writes to the Ephesians about isn't either.

But I do love the hymn. I love the words of unity and welcome for outcasts and strangers ...words of love...forgiveness...grace. It's a nice fit for this reading from Ephesians.

I sincerely hope that as this pandemic goes on, it gets ever more etched in our hearts that we can be the kind of church we sang about, whether we're meeting in a building or not. Honestly our main work as Christians is outside the building or outside of Zoom anyway.

This passage begins with divisions and hostility. Can anyone relate to that? I mean, even in normal times we know divisions and hostility are all too much a part of our lives. Everything that's gone on lately is just building on that more and more.

All too often, the world we humans create...the houses we build...don't look too much like the song, or like this household of God in the letter to the Ephesians.

If you want a sound byte of this sermon, here it is...sin divides, Christ unites. We'll use this same metaphor Paul used – of a house.

First, just a brief comment or two about the historical situation here, because this business of circumcision and uncircumcision pretty much means nothing to us. Remember that circumcision was the mark of God's covenant with Israel...with the Jewish people. It still is.

The Ephesians to whom this letter was addressed were not Jewish. The earliest Christians were Jewish, but as time went on, Gentiles, or non-Jews, became the majority in the church.

Until Jesus, Gentiles were not part of the covenant. That covenant with Israel was still God's choice for all humanity - the whole world was to be blessed by God's covenant with Israel. But Israel was the people God specially chose to carry that mission.

And frankly, much of Jewish law was specifically created to set the Jews apart from others. Jews weren't supposed to eat meals with non-Jews. There were certain foods they weren't supposed to eat that Gentiles did and food preparation had to be done in a particular way.

Gentiles couldn't go into the inner court of the Temple. The law, Torah, created a barrier between Jews and Gentiles.

So when Paul's letter says Jesus abolished the law, it means Jesus smashed the barrier between Jew and Gentile. Non-Jews' became a part of God's covenant...a new covenant in Jesus that drew in the whole creation.

The Gentiles who had previously been outsiders were no more. In place of previous distinctions between people, one new humanity was created.

Let us build a house where love can dwell....

The major difference between the hymn and this passage is that in the hymn, we are building the house. In the letter, it is Christ who is building us into the household of God.

So let's talk about how we humans have done building our house over the centuries.

Very early on, the Christian church started running into trouble. Christ knocks down walls and we build them back up.

The division between Jews and Gentiles proved to be stubborn. The earliest fight in the church was probably 30 or 40 years before this letter. It was the fight over whether Gentiles who became Christian had to be circumcised or not. So, in that early house a wall was built between the circumcision faction and the uncircumcised faction.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries, there were all sorts of fights over the true gospel. Church councils convened to decide what was heresy and what was true. More walls.

Then comes the Middle Ages and the Reformation and 100 years of religious wars. And oh yeah, the Inquisition, which put people to death for not believing the right thing. More walls went up.

New Christian denominations sprang up as one group decided another had things all wrong. More walls.

In the name of God, terrible things have been done to people. In our country there were church people who justified owning other people with the Bible. More walls.

There were Christians who believed that God's destiny for our nation was to settle the entire land, pushing the people who had lived here for centuries off the land...or just killing them outright.

More walls and divisions...

In our time we've got walls between the left and the right, walls between different Christian groups, walls between whites and people of color, walls between police and anti-racist activists...walls between masked and unmasked for heaven's sake.

We've got a house where some people are given tiny, drafty and poorly furnished rooms while others have a grand suite.

Human sinfulness has built a house with so many walls that you can all too easily find yourself in a room by yourself. Fighting over the internet with the person in the next room.

Sin divides, Christ unites.

But Jesus does it, not by forcing either side of the wall into the other's ideology. Instead, Christ unites by making us a whole new people. Those divisions nailed Jesus to a cross and in Christ's resurrection those divisions were smashed. And God started building a new household.

So let's look at this new household of God we are being built into. First of all, Jesus is the cornerstone. A cornerstone is what orients a building. You lay the cornerstone, then the rest of the construction is oriented from there. Now they probably use GPS or something, but that's not a bad metaphor either.

But to say Jesus is the cornerstone and how our building is to be oriented means what exactly? You have to think about what Jesus was about.

If we're going to deal with divisions, our gospel reading is a pretty good orientation. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And if there's any confusion about who we're to love, Jesus also said we should love our enemies. Love is the material the cornerstone is made of.

What Jesus ultimately was about was breaking down not just the walls between people. He also broke down the walls we build between us and God.

Open to us through Christ's death and resurrection is the free flowing love that overwhelms our walls...that makes us realize that it's too much love for us to just sit with in our little walled off room.

So we sit there, with all that love, flowing from God, feet up in our recliner, staring at our walls, reflecting on our last facebook argument, and think you know, I've been kind of a jerk.

That is the beginning of Christ's love bringing about transformation. But then what? How does this work out in life?

Well, let's start with our cornerstone...Jesus...and his command to love our neighbor as ourselves. There are things everyone who has truly been changed by the gospel of Christ's love and forgiveness can agree on. We can agree that we're to love people.

Here's one example...if you've read scripture and listened to sermons....and not just mine...you know that we are called to care for the poor.

If political ideology is our cornerstone, we'll never get anywhere. But with Jesus and his command to love as our cornerstone, we can come together on our call to help the poor.

Our political ideology will influence what we think is best way to do that. But when love is the cornerstone material, we don't have to dig our heels in and side with whatever our politics tell us. We can actually look at facts, listen to the stories of the poor, and listen for what might be legitimate in the other party's view.

And the more we practice that, the more Christ is breaking down those dividing walls – bringing us closer, not only to each other, but ultimately to God.

God blessed us with far too much love for us to just sit in our little walled off room by ourselves keeping it to ourselves. Christ has made us all members of the household of God.

And even now, Christ is busy breaking down the walls that divide us. We may keep trying to build them back up, but that's a battle that's already been won. Maybe we should try to live like we believe it.