

Sermon Transcript
July 11, 2021
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Ephesians 2:11-22 (Inclusive Version)

Bear in mind that at one time the men among you who were Gentiles physically—called the “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcised”, all because of a minor operation—had no part in Christ and were excluded from the community of Israel. You were strangers to the Covenant and its promise; you were without 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 Christ is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart. In his own flesh, Christ abolished the Law, with its commands and ordinances, in order to make the two into one new person, thus establishing peace and reconciling us all to God in one body through the cross, which put to death the enmity between us. Christ came and “announced the Good News of peace to you who were far away, and to those who were near”; for through Christ, we all have access in one Spirit to our God.

This means that you are **strangers and aliens no longer**. No, you are included in God’s holy people and are members of the household of God, which is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus as the capstone. In Christ the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple to our God; in Christ **you are being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place of God in the Spirit**.

Beloved church, it is good to be together. If you’re here in the sanctuary, please take a moment and look around at the people sharing space with you this morning. And if you’re watching online, please say hello and where you’re joining from in the comments.

Last year when it became clear that places of worship were going to have to shut down in-person services, many pastors started talking about focusing on the epistles, the letters section of the New Testament. The epistles, as David reminded us last week, were often written to specific communities who had communicated with the apostle Paul, asking specific questions about their ministry context. Want to know how to understand government laws vs. religious laws? Check out Romans 13. Need a treatise on love because your community is lacking compassion? 1 Corinthians has got you covered.

This care for context should make a lot of sense to us Baptists, as one of our “Baptist freedoms,” the principles that make us who we are, is that we have local church autonomy. This means that each church has the right and responsibility to consider their needs in their locale and make decisions that are right for that community in that place and time.

Over this last year, we chose not to gather in person for worship because we have taken this local autonomy seriously, electing to worship virtually so as not to expose each other to a global pandemic! We care about each other’s health and we made difficult decisions as a church family, and we persisted through this hardship. Our epistles over the last year, in the form of sermons and articles in

our church newsletter, have been filled with hope, challenge, encouragement, joy, sorrow, outrage, wonder and more.

The Biblical Epistles were written to communities in diaspora, scattered far and wide across the Mediterranean, Middle East and North Africa. The letter we consider this summer, the letter to the Ephesians, is thought by some scholars to have been written by the apostle Paul while he was imprisoned, several years after he spent time in Ephesus in ministry with the people there. However, other scholars suggest that the letter to the Ephesians was actually written to be a broader apologetic for faith in Jesus the Christ, a letter that would have wisdom for many people following the Way of Jesus at that time in the first century of the Common Era.

And, though we find ourselves a long way off from the first century in modern-day Turkey, where the ruins of Ephesus are located, we, too, may find resonance with the main theme of the letter to the Ephesians.

Throughout the 6 chapter letter, the author emphasizes the transformative power of communities unified by their commitment to Jesus and to each other. Though the communities may contain people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities, the author wrote that God brought different people near to each other to unite them as one family---God's family.

Now, a word of caution to Christians reading this letter today: When the authors of the epistles, and even of the gospels, talk about "the Gentiles," that means people who were not of Jewish ancestry. With our Christian privilege that is seen as the norm in the United States of America, we may be tempted to read ourselves to be the center of the stories, the characters who are the heroes, the insiders, the ones who belong. Many modern Christians read about the Jewish people being the family of God and think, "ah! That's me!" And perhaps that is true for you, if Judaism is the tradition in which you were formed. But for many Christians, reading in this way is not honest to the history of Christianity, a history that includes anti-Semitism and supersessionism that seeks to replace Judaism with Christianity. In fact, some Christians use language from Ephesians, that "Christ abolished the Law with its commands and ordinances," to place Christianity over and above Jewish religious practices. That movement of Christian supremacy is not true to the values of this church. Further, the history of Christian supersessionism over Judaism is a history that those of us who identify as followers of Jesus today are responsible for changing as we move into the future.

So let's return to our passage of Scripture with our cautious reading goggles on. As we go through chapter 2, we shift our focus from the ethnic identity of the believers to the action that God works through people: "in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near." Those who were "without hope and without God," those who have acutely experienced human-made social divisions, are "strangers no longer." The author writes, "you are included in God's holy people and are members of the household of God."

Most humans have had the experience of sometime in their life being an outsider in some fashion. Sometimes we are told by others that we do not belong, that we are not "in" with the right people. We may experience exclusion in situations from not being welcome at our middle-school lunch tables to not being paid equitably to having our intimate relationships be unwelcome with our families. Other times, we tell ourselves we are not good enough or smart enough or rich enough or cool enough to belong somewhere or with some group of people. Take a moment to remember a situation where you felt excluded. How did these experiences shape you? Did you find a way to eliminate the boundaries, whatever they were? Did you make your peace with them? Did others tear down the walls for or with you? In a commentary on this passage of Ephesians, Karen Chakoian wrote, "Eliminating boundaries does not in itself create peace. Peace comes only in eliminating the hostility behind the dividing walls."

According to Ephesians 2, *this* is where God dwells. Not only tearing down walls, but eliminating the hostility that led to the walls and fences to be erected in the first place.

Friends, today, as some of you return to the sanctuary for in-person worship after so much time away--nearly 500 days of physical separation from our worshipping community--and as some of you remain online, hear the Good news: God has brought us near to Godself! Not only those who are physically closer to each other, sitting side by side with distance in these pews--but God has brought us near to Godself in that God has given us the opportunity to be church together. No matter where you are located geographically or what time you are worshipping by viewing the video of this service, each of us are brought near to God because we have been called to be followers of the Way of Jesus. Because you have found some meaning in the stories of Jesus' life, because you have found spiritual peace in contemplating God's mind, because your heart has been lifted by the good news that resurrection is real and that death is not the end of the story--you have been brought near to the Holy!

Over the last seventeen months, some have voiced sentiments like these "when are we going back to 'real' church?" and "I'm just going to wait to worship until we're back to normal." And I understand the emotion in these statements, I truly do. I, too, have missed that something special that happens when bodies gather in a space together, when voices are raised in song together, when I can see and hear you reacting to the words our preachers are bringing before you, when we get to look into each other's eyes as we pass the bread and cup. But I also know that what we have done for the last seventeen months is real. We have been church to each other in Zoom Happy Hours and congregational meetings; through Facebook and Instagram and TikTok and seattlefirstbaptist.org; through letters written and phone calls made and packets dropped off at doorsteps; through the work of our Music Minister Ben and the singers who used technology to combine their voices in praise; through the volunteers who kept up birthday cards and feeding ministries and the staff that provided building upkeep; through the walks in parks and virtual birthday parties and wonder at Christmas decorations and singing our elders on through their transition from this life. And yes, we have been church worshipping online, made possible with the incredible skills of Kellie and Katie and our Communications team, and connecting for Zoom coffee hour, all of that has been real church. And we will continue having real church, through virtual prayer time and Bible study, in-person sanctuary worship and, eventually, coffee hour; hikes and parties and meals shared and meetings with multiple methods of access. Anytime when we have the opportunity to respond to God's invitation to relationship with the Divine and with each other, this, too, is real church.

Ephesians reminds us of what we sometimes forget: church is not a building with a stained-glass laden sanctuary and a pulpit and pews; church is not a parking lot. Church is the congregation. YOU are the church. We have felt that even more these past many months, as we are the church sitting in our pajamas and watching on Facebook; driving through the mountains on our way to a camping trip; viewing with our family over brunch; watching the worship recording during our work breaks. Beloveds, YOU are the church, whether you are worshipping in person or virtually, because God has called you near and you have said, "Here I am!" You have been brought near through the peace of Christ that enlivens us to work for justice; and the Holy has been there with you all the way, and will continue being with you throughout the rest of your days.

Ephesians says "In Christ the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple to our God; in Christ you are being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." Today, let us know that we have not only the opportunity to respond to God's invitation to be brought near to God's self and to each other through the peace that Christ makes possible, but also to be brought near to the kin-dom of God. From these words from the ancient apostle, we receive the good news that God dwells with humanity in the places that have experienced distance and that are now coming joined together in unity. God makes God's home in places that have moved beyond borders, and are no longer strangers to one another. In a community that follows the Way of Jesus and embraces the peace of Christ, identifiers such as "insiders" and "outsiders" lose their meaning.

So today I ask you, beloveds, what does this mean for our work in the world, Seattle First Baptist Church? What does it mean for us to participate in bringing the nearness of God front and center in our individual lives and in our congregational life? How can we become co-conspirators with God in uniting groups who have been separated by humanity's prejudices so that we live God's dream and make possible the kin-dom of God brought near among us?

Friends, even though these are big questions, they are not too big for you. They are not too big for us. Sometimes it can feel like overcoming human bias and hostile differences is an insurmountable challenge, only possible for the superhuman leaders of the faith, the Dr. Kings and Bishop Barbers and Mother Therasas. But as the pictures and stories of people in the Peacemakers Room show us, and as the names we call out every All Saints Day show us, God's kin-dom is brought near by everyday people, people like you and me, who have even walked through this very sanctuary. Each of us can choose to respond to God's call to pursue justice over enmity and division. Our responses to this call don't need to be gigantic miracles or make the front page of the news or go viral on Twitter. Our responses must simply be honest, true, and just. Sometimes it is the hardest to root out the insidious ways division has been knitted into our being. It is hard work, but worth it, and in doing it, God dwells with us.

One example of how this congregation is creating space for God's nearness is through our antiracism work. I extend a special gratitude to the people of color members of our congregation and to the AntiRacism Task Force who have shared, vulnerably and prophetically, that individual and systemic change is needed in our church to pursue true unity through justice for our Black, Indigenous and People of Color siblings. After hearing from over 120 people in the Long-Range Planning focus groups last summer, the call for this congregation to work towards becoming antiracist was clear. Now, we are blessed to have the AntiRacism Task Force leading us by examining the pieces of congregational life that perpetuate systems of white supremacy and calling us all to do better, together. This is sacred work, not only recognizing the barriers to full inclusion in our institutional life, but also as individually, church members reckon with how we have been complicit with upholding anti-Black racism and white European American supremacy.

And if we're really honest, there are more places of hostility within our own selves, within our own thought processes and behaviors and norms--racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and more. Each of us has our own set of -isms to wrestle with, and it can be unsettling or even frightening to do this work, searching out the ways we have been taught to divide ourselves from those we label "other." But we are called to break down these barriers by the God who wants to dwell with us, who seeks to make a home within our church, made up of beautiful, flawed, perfectly imperfect humans. And friends, there's more good news--none of us has to do this work alone. We can be the church together by leaning into the opportunity God has given us to be more like the kin-dom of God, to bring the kin-dom even nearer to us in this time and in this place and with these people.

If you are worshipping in the sanctuary today, please take a moment and think to yourself about when you have felt like you were witnessing or participating in the kingdom of God brought near. If you are worshipping with others sitting next to you, feel free to share your thoughts with them. And if you are joining us virtually, please write in the comments when you have felt like you were witnessing the kingdom of God brought near.

pause

Friends, to what are we being brought near today? When and where and how and through whom do we witness a glimpse of God's kin-dom?

I remember when I got to see baby Steffi when she was two days old, at Sam and Nimi's invitation. That is a glimpse of the kingdom of God, brought near.

Dancing with Beth and Bah and musically-inclined neighbors at the 2019 4th of July picnic in the parking lot. That was a glimpse of the kingdom of God, brought near.

Karen's willingness to host Brave Space, a place for white people to consider their own complicity in racism.

Nathan teaching the Godly Play class a meditation technique.

- Visiting each other in the hospital
- Asking how each other are, and truly listening
- Sharing the invitation to show up in solidarity with our Muslim and Jewish siblings
- Listening with the intent of learning about challenging topics
- Harvesting food to share with hungry neighbors
- Being an open and affirming church and marrying all couples since the 1970s
- Marching downtown to demand corporate responsibility for pollution that enables climate change
- Offering a bright and welcoming smile to whoever comes in the door

All of these moments are glimpses of the kin-dom of God brought near.

Beloveds, let us go forth from this place to be the church. Wherever we are, let us recommit to tearing down barriers of hostility, even within our own selves. Let us recommit to having each other's backs, to showing up for each other, to advocate for each other when some of us are too tired to go on. Let us lift each other up and encourage each other and hold each other accountable so that we can be our best selves and love each other as best we can. As we go forward in this new time of re-gathering and multi-access worship, let us each embrace the opportunity we have to be brought near to the Holy by being near to each other.

May it ever be so.