



Southwestern Minnesota Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹So 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—

¹²remember 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. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵He 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, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over; they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Sermon by Bishop Jon V. Anderson

July 18, 2021

Grace to you and peace, former insiders and outsiders being built up into the household of God by Christ Jesus. Grace to you and peace, siblings in the generous wide embrace of God through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

When was the last time you felt hopeless?

Was it a lot of things all stacking up....and then there is one more thing that broke your courage and heart....and you felt overwhelmed?

This summer reminds me of times in my childhood when we would have great crops on the farm, but then the rain did not come. The days of hoping turned into weeks of watching our crops struggle and fail.

Literal droughts can break our heart but there are droughts of other kinds that make us feel like outsiders.....and we wonder if somehow God is punishing us for the lack of rain, business or whatever is not working. Even though we know better, we wonder.

Or maybe it happened as you tried to connect again with a friend, child or parent. You are trying, but it is not working, or something always slides sideways into a ditch....the dividing walls are too high and strong.

Or maybe it was when you made a huge mistake and were blind to what was happening, or perhaps gambling it would be okay. And you slide into the slough of despond, unsure of how you can ever recover.

Maybe it is something in your town, schools, church, or community. Just when we thought we would be breaking free from this fog of COVID we slide back into new forms of trouble. People are tender, worn out and needing healing of many kinds. As one pastor said, "We are going to need a whole lot of forgiveness to get out of this."

Maybe you are losing hope for our country as things are spiraling downward into more intense disagreement, trouble, increasing tension about the problems or probable solutions.

For our staff, we have been laboring with something we have not seen in 18 years. We don't have enough interim pastors to care for our congregations – both small and large. We are beyond our denial. We are so concerned for these congregations that we are making these video sermons available. We know congregational leaders and members of these congregations are even more concerned. We can imagine how scary it is for our lay leaders and people. We recognize

there is no quick fix. We are trying to figure out how to do church in many places without a pastor or with very little pastoral time. We are figuring out how to train and equip people to carry parts of the work of a pastor. We are grateful for the support of sister congregations who share their pastor's time and gifts. We trust God will redeem this experience and grow us stronger in the struggle.

Today in the lesson from the Gospel of Mark we find Jesus in a moment where he is surrounded by people who need to be made well, who are struggling in their relationship with God and one another like we do. The Gospel says that Jesus had compassion – literally “his guts churned.” because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Whenever you have lost hope remember our gracious and loving God's whole being churns with concern for you and me.

In the second lesson it is clear in the early church there were insiders and outsiders. We often think the early church had no tension or conflict, but just like our time people were people. We are alienated from each other. We believe we are better than others. We look down on people who are not like us. In this case it centered on the practice of circumcision which Jewish people did to their sons and the other nations – the Gentiles did not. It seems strange to us, but we have our own intercultural and interfaith challenges in our time and in our communities.

People are as tribal today as they were back in Jesus' and Paul's time. I wonder if in some ways if this is getting worse with our social media and tribal news sources to agitate and make us look at others with disdain. Jesus does not look at us and see women are less than men or better. Jesus does not look at those with little melatonin and think they are worse than people who have a lot, Jesus sees us as sheep without a shepherd whether our skin is white or dark. Instead of getting angry with us, Jesus looks at us with compassion when we want to think we are better than others.... or worse than others, too. Jesus does not see how much stuff or money we have.... Jesus sees our broken hearts, minds and lives, and has compassion on us and longs to heal us. Jesus sees us like we are sheep without a shepherd, lost – wandering and unprotected from the wolves of our time.

There is a lot of power in dividing people. One teacher, Brian Peterson, noted how people focus on our divides, our differences. But he says, in Christ *“we have been made part of a story which moves from exclusion, hostility, and deprivation to welcome, reconciliation, and God's overflowing gift.”*

That is what I thought as I watched my most recent grandson, Eamon, baptized this last weekend. He is a beloved child of God and citizen in God's rule or reign or kingdom. As he was washed with water and the Word, I was reminded that we are not saved by our faith, but rather we are saved by what Christ does on our behalf. He was grafted into the work and life of Christ. He became part of the Body of Christ. Eamon is not able to make many decisions at this point. In our spiritual life it is not our decisions that matter most – It is God's decision to be for us and with us that is decisive. It is God's decision that reconciles us to God, and in the process one another. And as we walk through the seasons of our spiritual lives we keep coming back to the font to remember that it is not our belief in this group of doctrines or those right actions that save us, rather it is God's gracious – undeserved love

and what God is doing in Christ that makes all the difference. We see the passion and compassion and commitment of our God most deeply in Christ going even to the cross to break down the walls and start building a new future.

Jesus breaks down the dividing walls between us. Jesus has compassion and brings God's healing grace into our lives, and our communities, and our world. Jesus works to break down the walls, like the old one between Jewish and Gentile people, or the current ones like young and old, city and rural, wealthy and poor, new immigrants and people who came from immigrants arriving a hundred and sixty years like my ancestors. Jesus breaks down the walls between those who want to move fast and change things as well those who struggle to move fast because they like things the way they are. Without him we are often hopeless. In Christ, we experience God's resurrecting grace and are built up into a new creation.

Let me conclude with Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the second chapter of Ephesians from the Message –

16-18 Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

19-22 That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.