

## + Ephesians 2:13-22 + God Builds a Church + Ninth Sunday after Pentecost + 2 August 2009 +

There are few things quite as breathtaking as a church. Think of some of the great cathedrals of Europe—the rich hues in the gigantic stained-glass windows, the careful detail of the stonework, the soaring heights of the spires, the awesome size of the entire structure. Think of some of the grand churches here in the United States—built with fine craftsmanship in stone or wood, with ornate windows filled with color as they depict familiar Bible stories or clear-paned glass making the beauty of God’s ever-changing creation visible, with finely carved altars and pulpits and fonts, with rich banners and paraments depicting the colors and symbols of each season of the Christian church year. Breathtaking, right?

Now think of our own church nestled here on a little corner in Clay, NY. It’s much smaller than those churches and the truth is, some don’t always realize it’s a church. At first glance it might not seem quite so breathtaking compared to those grand cathedrals and finely-crafted churches elsewhere, but there’s still a certain breathtaking beauty that’s sadly missing in many of those churches. For many, their beauty lay only in the architecture, but in the Second Lesson this morning, the Apostle Paul shows us the beauty of a church like ours and like so many all over the world, whether in big, beautiful facilities, small non-descript structures, rented meeting space, or a family home. You see, the true beauty of a church doesn’t come from its architecture, though architecture could certainly reflect it. Rather it comes when our gracious **GOD BUILDS A CHURCH**.

Right before our lesson, we find Paul reminding the Ephesian Christians of what they once were. Some had been Jews, while many others at one time had been pagan Gentiles, followers of other gods, and therefore excluded from citizenship among God’s Old Testament people. That meant that not only did they not follow the one, true God, but they were excluded from all the blessings and benefits from the promised Savior—basically **“without hope and without God in the world”**.

Suddenly everything changes with one little word—**“But...”** Everything that follows is then the great turnaround from what they once were. **“But...now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.”** “Ah! Before you were without hope and without God and far away from him and his promises, but now you have been brought near through Christ. Now through the blood of Christ, you have become part of something breathtaking, something holy and beautiful.” With this verse, Paul prepares us to go out to God’s construction site where he is building his Church. So we put on our hard hats and follow the apostle for a little tour to see how God builds a church.

Paul first shows us how God has to do some demolition work. He takes down old walls and clears the site to build. Paul explains, **“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.”**

As I said before, in the Ephesian church, there were two cultures—those who had been Gentiles and those who had been Jews. There was a mutual hostility between the two groups that originally separated them. That separation came from the Law of Moses that governed the civil, ceremonial and moral aspects of Jewish life and set them apart from the Gentiles. To break down that barrier and unite the two different groups, Jesus had to step in, not to make the Gentiles subject to the Law of Moses, but to make himself subject to that law for them, to fulfill all the Law’s commands for them, and to suffer for all the sins both cultures had committed against God’s holy Law. By carrying all that out **“in the flesh”**, Jesus removed the barrier between the two cultures and cleared the way for him to build one, united Church. At the same time, Jesus removed another even greater barrier. The barrier of God’s holy Law kept all these sinners separated from the holy God, but by fulfilling the Law and taking on all their sin on the cross, Jesus reconciled sinful mankind with God.

Jesus didn’t just clear the site for his church by reconciling Jews and Gentiles. He also does it today as he continues to overcome cultural and racial and social and generational and gender barriers to clear the way for one, united Church through his perfect life and innocent death on the cross. We see him do that in our own congregation as people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures and aptitudes are brought together as one through the blood of Christ. This is only possible because Christ has brought reconciliation between God and man as Paul wrote, **“He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.”** By proclaiming that true peace with God, Jesus prepped the site to lay the foundation and be placed as the cornerstone for his Church. Paul mixes some metaphors as he explains, **“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”**

All that barrier-dropping peace and reconciliation are fine, but won’t make a real difference unless the firm foundation of the Word of the apostles and prophets is laid and Christ is the cornerstone from which all the

subsequent building takes place. Here at Cross of Christ, we've learned all too well the impact that a poor foundation can have on a church building. If the foundation is laid poorly, major cracks and collapse can follow years later if it's not fixed soon enough. The same is true of the Church God builds. If the Church is not built on the firm foundation of his Word, if it does not remain firmly built on the bedrock of Holy Scripture, major cracks and collapse will eventually take place. Cracks develop as the rot of error and compromise creeps in and grows until either the church collapses on itself or is ruined. With the Word, however, as the foundation, the Church withstands even the worst storms and gales Satan and the world can throw at it.

At the same time, on that foundation of the Word of the apostles and prophets, Christ is placed as the cornerstone. A cornerstone was used to measure and mark all other stones that followed so a building would be built properly with straight lines and proper sizes. When God builds a church, Christ has to be the cornerstone. If anything else is placed there—money, programs to fix society, self-centered teaching, selfish desires, whatever—the church will again be in danger of collapse and ruin. If every teaching, every practice is not measured against the perfect cornerstone of Christ, soon the church will be without direction and will stray far from Christ ruining it. With Christ as the cornerstone, however, the Church grows straight and true, piece by piece.

Once God places his chief cornerstone on the firm foundation of the Word, then he starts building Paul goes on, ***“In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”*** God gives breathtaking beauty to his Church as he builds it living piece by living piece, believer by believer here and throughout the world. Christ makes us into ***“God’s house of living stones”*** as we sang before—***“living stones”*** that are continually built up in his Church on the firm foundation of the Word one on another and soaring into the sky. Every piece is important to the Builder. Every piece is known by name and fulfills an important purpose in the construction of God’s Church. Each piece, each believer is a ***“living stone”*** only through the work of the Holy Spirit using his tools of grace to transform dead objects of wrath into living saints.

How are all these different people made into one breathtakingly beautiful church? Look inside the Church God builds and see how he has furnished it. Inside we see three items that remind us of how the Holy Spirit transforms us into a living Church—the font, the altar, and the pulpit.

At the font, Christ changed your life forever. He transformed a hostile, disobedient slave of sin into a reconciled, obedient child of God when you were baptized at the font. Through water and the Word, you were set apart as a member of God’s family, as a forgiven child of God, and as an important piece in the building of God’s church. There you were made alive in Christ.

As we look at the altar, we are reminded of Christ’s sacrifice once for all. We see the way is open and the barrier between God and man has been removed through that sacrifice. Paul wrote earlier, ***“For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Both Jews and Gentiles have the same access to God through Jesus.”*** We have access to our gracious God through Christ and his cross, but that’s not all!

At the altar, we also see the elements of Christ’s Holy Supper. We see bread and wine prepared and consecrated for a holy purpose. From the altar Christ gives himself to his people as he makes his true body and blood present with the bread and wine for the forgiveness of our sins. He has not only made us alive, but he strengthens us to do his will as ***“living stones”***. He shares with us all the blessings that come with his real presence there.

From the pulpit, the Word of God—the very material for the foundation of the Church—is proclaimed to God’s people. That Word of God cuts you to the heart as God’s holy Law is proclaimed and you hear how you have fallen short of God’s holy standard. That Word of God then heals you as you hear once again the good news of Christ Jesus our Savior. With God’s help, that Word is proclaimed faithfully from the pulpit and elsewhere for the sake of God’s people and to call others to be part of God’s church.

It’s all a breathtaking sight, but God hasn’t finished building his Church yet. In fact, he continues to add new living stones every day as his Word goes out through us to our neighborhoods and communities and workplaces and playgrounds. It’s all a breathtaking sight, because it’s a “living” church God builds or as Paul describes, ***“a holy temple”, “a dwelling place for God”***. That means that when we see each other walking together and working together in Christ, we really see the dwelling place of Christ. God makes each of us and all of us into his holy dwelling place through Christ Jesus. When we understand that, then we understand how breathtaking God’s Church really is no matter whether we meet in a cathedral, a WEF unit, or a firemen’s hall. May God grant us his grace and favor as he uses us to build his Church. Amen.