

**+ Ephesians 2:13-22 + Christ Builds His Church + 11th Sunday after Pentecost +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 20 August 2017 +**

We live in a time of demolition. We see statues being torn down and violence in the streets that threatens to destroy the fabric of society. We hear threats of destruction from faraway dictators armed with nuclear weapons and blustering threats from our own leaders. We see terrorists attack crowds with whatever they can weaponize against innocent people, but we see more than just physical demolition on our TV or computer or mobile screens.

We see talking heads and academics and legislators of every stripe and people hiding behind their screens try to demolish anyone who speaks or thinks differently than them. We see people of different races, different cultures, different generations, different genders, different economic or social strata, different backgrounds, different whatever vehemently attack each other. Why? They're different. You see, deep inside every human heart is a self-centered desire to put yourself up on a pedestal, so you can look down on everyone else without realizing that anyone on a pedestal can fall off.

Common ground seems to be all torn up. Level-headed, peaceful dialogue seems to be a thing of the past. What makes it even more challenging is you're shamed if you don't engage vocally in the issues, but what happens if we participate in all the demolishing, all the tearing down going on in our country? What's left if everyone joins in? Anyone who has paid any attention to history will know that it leaves a burned-out and devastated landscape littered with broken and demolished souls.

We live in a time of demolition, and it makes our hearts hurt. What will bring healing? What will bring unity and forgiveness? Who will calm troubled hearts seething with emotion? Who will change minds filled with prejudice and hate? Who will build us up with real peace for our souls, peace that lasts?

The early Christian church struggled with similar issues. Most were small gatherings of God's people just getting their house churches off the ground. Their survival was fragile always threatened. The people they knew and loved, even their own community leaders, began to get suspicious when those followers of Christ stopped joining in the local religious practices. As more became Christians, others felt threatened and pushed back out of misunderstanding or rejection. So they faced pressure to give it all up, to return to their old lives.

Yet they faced an even greater challenge within their congregations. You see, the good news of Christ first went to the Jews. They had the Old Testament Scriptures, and Jesus was the fulfillment of those Scriptures. There were exceptions, of course, like the Canaanite woman in the Gospel lesson (Matthew 15:21-28), but Jesus' original followers were primarily Jews, but then the gospel went out to the world.

Apostles like Paul took that good news to new places, and they went to the Jewish synagogues first. Yet in almost every instance, there was a point in time when a sizable number of Jews rejected Jesus. So the gospel went to the Gentiles—the pagan non-Jews who worshiped other gods, pretty much everyone else in Roman society. They did not have the Old Testament Scriptures. They ate pork and bacon and non-kosher foods. They offered sacrifices to idols and participated in immoral pagan worship practices. They were excluded from the heavenly citizenship of God's Old Testament people, ***“foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world.”*** (Ephesians 2:12) They were as different from the Jews as anyone could be.

So you can imagine how shocking it was when Gentiles sat down beside the Jewish Christians to hear God's Word. The Jewish Christians were tempted to look down on those Gentile believers, to treat them like second-class Christians because they didn't have the Law of Moses or the Old Testament. They were different—and those differences led to all kinds of arguments and division and heartache. For a young, fragile church, you can see the threat. Would there ever be lasting peace and unity among such different people?

The Apostle Paul had that in mind as he wrote to a group of Christians in the city of Ephesus. Some were Jews, but most were Gentiles. They faced those very real cultural issues that could tear them apart. Paul didn't want those issues to blow up in Ephesus, but he didn't make them talk it out or hug it out or fight it out. He didn't tear them down or force his will on them as an apostle. No, Paul took them to Christ, whom God sent to build them into one Church.

After reminding those Ephesians Christians of what they once were—***“without hope and without God,”*** Paul made them sit up and listen. ***“But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”*** Everything about them changed with that one word ***“But.”*** “Yes, before you were without hope, before you were far away from God and his promises, but now you have been brought near by Christ. By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus has made you his own. By the blood of Christ, you have become part of

something bigger, something holy, something beautiful.” With that, Paul rolled out Christ’s plan to build his Church with souls from every race, nation, culture, and background.

First, Jesus has to do some demolition work of his own, but he doesn’t just demolish anything that gets in his way. No, Jesus tears down to build up. Jesus demolishes what stands between us and others and between us and God. **“For he is our peace, who made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility. In his flesh, he made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations, so that he might create in himself one new man from the two, resulting in peace.”**

As I said before, there were two very different cultures—Jews and Gentiles. The Law of Moses that governed Jewish life also 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 wall of hostility dividing the two groups, clearing the way for him to build one Church.

Yet in order to do that, Jesus had to remove an even greater barrier. The dividing wall of God’s holy Law kept all those sinners separated from God himself. So Jesus took care of that too. **“He did this so that he might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by which he put the hostility to death.”** By fulfilling the Law and taking all that sin on himself on the cross, Jesus demolished that hostility and reconciled all of us to God.

Jesus didn’t just clear the site for his Church by reconciling Jews and Gentiles. He still does that today as he demolishes all the hostility of cultural and racial and social and generational and gender barriers to clear the way for one, united Church through his sacrifice on the cross. By his own blood, Jesus brings together so many different people to build them into one, united Church reconciled with each other and, above all, reconciled with God.

That’s good news of peace proclaimed 2,000 years ago and good news of peace proclaimed today! Through that good news of true peace with God, Jesus clears the way to our heavenly Father. **“For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.”** That means not a single one of us is on the outside looking in as Christ builds his Church, not a single one of us is a second-class citizen in God’s eyes. **“So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”**

With the way cleared, Jesus can now build his Church. He chooses the location—a location near him and his love. He clears the way between us and others and between us and God. He gives us full access to God and changes how God looks at us, which changes how we look at each other. Yet all of that peace and reconciliation won’t make a difference unless Christ gives his Church a firm foundation with him as its cornerstone.

Over the years, our congregation has learned how important a solid foundation is for a church building. If the foundation is laid poorly, major cracks and collapse will follow years later. The same is true of the Church Christ 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 the church is ruined. Yet with the Word as its foundation, Christ’s Church can withstand even the most violent attacks, the most challenging storms that Satan and the world can muster.

At the same time, on that foundation of the Word, Christ needs to be the Church’s 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. Christ has to be the cornerstone of his Church. If anything else is placed there—money, programs to fix society, self-centered teaching, selfish desires, whatever—the church will be in danger of collapse and ruin. If every teaching, every program, every mission and ministry effort is not measured against the cornerstone of Christ, soon the church will be without direction and will abandon Christ to its ruin. With Christ as its cornerstone, however, the Church can grow straight and true.

“In [Christ] the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.” Christ gives breathtaking beauty to his Church as he fits us together soul by soul, believer by believer. Every piece is important to Jesus the Master Builder. Every piece he knows by name. Every piece fulfills an important purpose in the construction of Christ’s Church. You are those bricks and stones and wood and stained glass. You and a world full of believers are being fitted

together and built up with the glorious diversity that only Christ can accomplish—a sight we will see in full someday in heaven.

Yes, we live in a time of demolition, but we have a Savior who came to build us up. We have a Savior who brings healing to the hurting. We have a Savior who calms troubled hearts seething with emotion. We have a Savior who changes hate-filled hearts and minds with true peace and self-sacrificing love. We have a Savior who brings us near with his good news and brings us together by his blood. We have a Savior who includes you and me with saints of every race, every culture, every background, every nation to build up his eternal and united Church. When we see our Savior, we see the people in our neighborhoods and communities through his eyes. May Christ's love and peace, then, flow from us to every soul as he builds his Church. Amen.