

How God Builds His Church

- I. He breaks down walls
- II. He lays a foundation
- III. He joins people together

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

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²²And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Over the past 3 weeks, our worship services have focused on the theme, “The Church that God Wants.” In other words, rather than focusing on what we want to see at a church, you know, a little more legroom, a little brighter lights, (hey, a little brighter lights!)—rather than focusing on what we want in a church, we're focusing on what God wants in a church. And we've learned, for example, that God wants a church that is quick to forgive, a church that is willing to say hard things, and a church that takes up its crosses. Today we see that God also wants a church that is for all people.

The question is, where does God find such a church? Does God go out, shall we say, church shopping? Does God visit various congregations to see if they have what he wants? Maybe God is scouting out Mount Olive right now. No, actually, God doesn't shop for the church he wants. Instead, God builds the church he wants. And how does God build his church? Well, that's what our sermon text for today is all about. Our theme today is simply this:

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Our text for today is a portion of a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christian congregation in the city of Ephesus, in what was once called Asia Minor and now is called Turkey. Like many of the Christian churches that St. Paul helped plant throughout the Mediterranean world, this congregation had some people who were of Jewish descent and some who had a Gentile background. You know, I sometimes wonder if you and I can fully appreciate how difficult it might have been to belong to a church with both Jews and Gentiles in it. I mean, you realize, for centuries, Jews wanted nothing to do with Gentiles. They considered them “unclean.” The Jews called them “dogs,” or “the uncircumcised,” in part because they were not

keeping the laws that God had given through Moses. And so, even in a congregation where there were Gentile converts, it would be very easy for those of Jewish descent to kind of look down their noses at those Gentiles. And for the Gentiles to feel judged or excluded or even condemned by those of Jewish descent. In fact, if you remember from our epistle reading a couple of weeks ago, that's what the Apostle Paul had to confront Peter about, namely, shunning the Gentiles when he was in the presence of fellow Jews.

And you can see why this friction might develop. I mean, one group was coming from very religious background with lots of Biblical rules and ceremonies, and another group was basically pagan, living a lifestyle that was very much contrary to God's law. And so It's not hard to imagine that there might be a certain amount of suspicion or tension or even animosity between the two groups. One group was thinking, "Those people don't belong here in God's house with us." And the other group was thinking, "Yeah, maybe we don't here in God's house with them."

Now these days, we probably don't struggle much with a difference between Jews and Gentiles. So let me give you a more modern parallel. What if you're sitting here in church and a lady you don't recognize sits down next to you. And so, you introduce yourself to her and she introduces herself to you and you realize, by the depth of her voice, that she is actually a he. You're sitting next to a someone who's transgender. How would you feel about that? Would you think to yourself, "Man, what is he, or she, doing here? That's person doesn't belong here," as you put up that mental wall to kind of separate yourself from that person. And how long do you think it would take that other person to feel your wall go up, to feel like they're being judged, feel like they don't belong in this church? My friends, that's what Saint Paul is writing about here in our text. He's writing about how God can take two very different kinds of people, from different backgrounds and unite them together in God's family. How does God do it? He does it first, by having Jesus (I.) Break Down Walls.

In reference to the wall that once separated the Jews from the Gentiles, Paul says this about Jesus. *For he himself (namely, Jesus) is our peace, who made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations (Ephesians 2:14-15)*. Hmm. What does that mean? Well, you maybe remember that in the Old Testament, God gave to Moses a set of laws designed, in effect, to build a wall around the nation of Israel, to keep them separate from the influence of the heathen nations all around them, until the Messiah would arrive on the scene. For all those years B.C., the laws about what to eat and not eat, and how to worship and how you need to be circumcised—all were designed to drill home the point, "you Jews are different from everybody else, because you are God's covenant people."

But when Jesus came into this world as the savior of all nations, that wall to separate the Jews from all other nations was no longer needed. So, Jesus tore it down. How did he do that? Paul tells us that Jesus did it by *setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations*.

In other words, when Jesus took on flesh, when he became a human being, he allowed himself to be circumcised, he observed the Sabbath Day, he celebrated the Passover. In fact, he fulfilled every Old Testament civil and ceremonial law perfectly. And once he had fulfilled them all, he could then say, "Now, they are no longer in effect. They no longer apply." That's why Saint Paul could write to the Colossians, *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. (Colossians 2:16)* In fact, that's also why Paul he writes to the Galatians, *There is neither Jew*

nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

In other words, the barriers that once separated people from each other, that left Jews feeling like they were better than the Gentiles or for that matter, that sometimes leave men feeling like they're superior to women or whites feeling like they're superior to blacks—Jesus has torn all those walls down and now says, “You’re all equal in my eyes. I’m bringing you all into one body.” That's what Saint Paul means when he says here in our text, *Jesus' purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. (Eph. 2:15)*

But notice, that passage goes on to say, *and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross. (Eph 2:16)* That's an important point. You see, the way that Jesus puts people at peace with each other is by first putting them at peace with God. Or to put it another way, Jesus breaks down the walls that separate people from people by first breaking down the wall that separates people from God. And what exactly is the wall that separates people from God? It's our sin. Isn't that what the Bible says? *Your iniquities have separated you from your God, your sin has hidden his face from you. (Isaiah 59:2).*

And so to relieve that separation, what did Jesus do? He absorbed all of the sins of everyone in the world. He brought them into his body and allowed himself to be punished by God in our place on the cross. In so doing, Jesus destroyed the barrier that once stood between us and God. Now, instead of being separated from God, we are reconciled to God. Or as Paul puts it here in our text, *For through him (namely, Jesus), we both (that is, both Jews and Gentiles, which is basically everyone in the world; we all) have access to the Father by one Spirit. By one Spirit. In other words, when the Holy Spirit calls a person to faith in Jesus Christ through the word of God or the sacrament of holy baptism, that person immediately gains access to God, in prayer, 24/7. In fact, here in our text, Paul expands on that access we have to God when he writes, Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers (in other words, you are no longer outsiders. You are no longer people who don't fit,) but (rather you are) fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household (Ephesians 2:19).*

You might say that's the first way that God builds the church that he wants. He has Jesus break down the walls that separate sinners from God and sinners from each other. But after God breaks down the walls then (II.) He Lays the Foundation.

Notice what St. Paul says. *You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:19-20)* What does that mean that God builds his household on the foundation of the apostles and prophets? Does it mean that there are a lot of saints buried under the walls of ancient churches? No, God is not building his church on people. He's building his church on what the Holy Spirit had people write down in the pages of Holy Scripture. That term, “the apostles and prophets,” is simply a synonym for all the Old and New Testament Scriptures. In other words, God builds his church not on personalities or programs, not on popular opinion or political correctness. He builds his church on the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

You realize what that means, don't you? It means that God's church is going to speak what God says in his Word. Yes, what God says about sin, and the destruction it brings to human lives on both sides of the grave. But even more important, God's church is going to speak about what God says that he's done about sin, in the person of his Son, Jesus. In that sense, Jesus is the true cornerstone of the church. It's his grace, his mercy, his righteousness that covers all our sins, and gives us the confidence that we stand redeemed, restored, and forgiven in the eyes

of our Father in heaven.

In fact, isn't that fact, that God builds his church on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief cornerstone, isn't that why this congregation places such an emphasis on keeping people fully grounded in the Word of God? This week Mount Olive will start four different Bible studies led by pastors who are trained in the original languages of the scriptures. Over the next month, there will be dozens and dozens of small group Bible studies, where people will gather together to dig into God's Word and better apply it to their lives. This week we start two different Bible reading programs to give people a bite of the Bread of Life regularly throughout the week. All these are part of the blueprint that God has How He Builds His Church. First, (I.) he breaks down the walls. Then (II.) he lays down a solid foundation. And finally, (III.) He joins people together.

Isn't that what Paul says here in our text? *In him* (namely, in Christ) *the whole building is joined together and rises* (literally, the Greek there says, "it grows") *to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him* (namely, in Jesus) *you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.* Isn't that a beautiful picture? This picture of God building this temple, this holy temple, this dwelling where God himself lives. And you, dear Christians, are that temple. Paul says that that whole temple is "joined together." The Greek word for joined together is also used to describe how the stones of the temple in Jerusalem were carefully drilled and fitted with bronze dowels and sealed with lead so that they could be joined together, so that they in turn could provide support for additional layers of stone. Each and every stone helped support the other stones in the temple.

My friends, isn't that what God wants his church to be? God wants this church, Mount Olive Lutheran Church, to be a place where people are not only built on the rock solid foundation of Christ and his Word, but are also connected to each other. God wants this church to be a place where we support each other, through the ups and downs of life in the real world, yes, life in a broken world. Sometimes that means picking up a brother or sister when they've stumbled or lost their way—it could happen to any of us. Or bringing God's promises to someone who's hurting or when death strikes close to home. Sometimes it means just laughing and celebrating the reasons God gives us to rejoice as members of his family.

My friends, these are the things that happen when God builds his church. He breaks down the walls that once stood between us and God. He builds us on the foundation of Christ and his Word. And he connects us to each other as members of his family. In fact, you might say that God builds his church by making us A Family, Growing, in Christ. God Grant it, for Jesus' sake. Amen.