

You are the Church, God's Family

I. Built upon Christ

II. Growing by the Spirit

Did you hear the news story about the 60 year-old homeless man in Utah? He was living in abandoned storage sheds and sleeping in city parks. All of his earthly possessions filled one shopping cart which he pushed around wherever he went. He ate his meals at a local soup kitchen. He had no health care. His closest relatives tried to correspond with him, but they lost track of him last September. They even provided a phone number for the man but he refused to call them. Does this sound like a family? Hardly...

It's hard to imagine living this way... with no family. For some of us we may feel that way, because our family is small, or most of them are gone, or they live far away. But even so, you have friends who are like family and you have a church family. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians wrote, "**You are no longer foreigners and aliens...** which implies that at one time we were strangers, vagabonds, people with no home, no family.

Our lesson this morning is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christian congregation in Ephesus. In this particular section of the letter he is speaking primarily to Gentiles, non-Jewish people. Gentiles understood this concept of being strangers. Gentiles could live in the nation of Israel, but they could not enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. Take the temple in Jerusalem for example: the entire Temple compound was considered holy, but it became increasingly more holy as one entered farther in. In Jesus' day King Herod had enclosed the outer court with colonnades and it was referred to as the "Court of the Gentiles." Gentiles could walk within the temple area but they were forbidden to go any further than the outer court. Signs in Greek and Latin were placed that gave warning that the penalty for such trespass was death.

How would that make you feel, if you came to church and a sign on the door said that unless your skin is this color or you're wearing these types of clothing, or you speak this language, you have to sit in the back and watch the service on the TV?

Jews themselves understood segregation. The temple building itself consisted of two rooms; the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The Most Holy Place was the inner room of the temple, which housed the ark of the covenant, a box of wood overlaid with gold, covered with two gold angels spreading their wings over the box. The ark of the covenant was symbolic of the presence of Jehovah himself, and so no one was allowed to enter that room. In fact a thick curtain separated the two rooms. Only on one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, could the high priest enter, and as he entered he had to have in his hands the blood of an innocent animal that had been sacrificed for his sins and for the sins of the people. If the high priest did not sprinkle the blood on the ark as he walked into that room, the LORD would strike him down. If any of the Jews did not observe the Day of Atonement, he would be cut off from God's people forever.

This is what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Ephesians. At one time we were foreigners and strangers. But he wasn't talking about being a minority in a country. He was talking about being foreigners and strangers before God. That's a scary place to be.

By nature, we were born into this world separated from God. We were not part of his family. The cause was our sinful nature. The cause of this separation was our sins, like the court that separated the Gentiles from the rest of the temple, like the curtain that separated the Jews from the presence of God. Our sins stood between us and God. And there's nothing we could do about it. In order for that curtain of sin to come down, God demanded that a blood offering had to be made; blood of an innocent man who was holy and perfect in every way. How could we ever provide such an offering? Our sins continued to stand between us and a relationship with

God that we so desperately need. No relationship with God means no peace for a guilty conscience, no hope for life after death, no comfort in this life, no purpose for living.

Perhaps this is the way the homeless man in Utah felt. The story continues... the family hired a detective to track their relative down. After a two month search the detective found him in a park. The detective sat the man down on a bench and informed him that his brother had died of cancer, and that he had left his homeless brother a considerable inheritance. The detective did not disclose the amount, but said, "He'll be able to buy a home, a car, put food on the table and find a job." Someone died to give this man a new life, and perhaps, at least I'd like to think, a new relationship with his family. Someone had to tell him that this inheritance was his.

Someone had to die to bring you into God's family. What God demanded, God also provided through his Son Jesus. By his death Jesus entered the holy place of God's presence with a blood offering, his own blood, innocent and holy, the complete and perfect payment for all sins. He also offered to his Father his perfect life of obedience; two offerings that you and I could never afford to offer to our God. But Jesus did for us, so great is his love for you, so great is his desire that you be a part of his family.

So great is his desire for you to be a part of his family that he sought you out. God needed no detective to track you down. He knew where you were. He wanted to tell you what his Son had done for you; that he had forgiven your sins, that he had the inheritance of heaven to give to you. So he sent someone to share that news with you.

The Bible tells us that, "**Faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.**" The gospel, the good news of Christ, is the message the Holy Spirit used to create faith in you. Faith receives, or grabs hold of all that Christ had accomplished; the forgiveness of your sins, salvation from death and hell, and the gift of heaven. Because of faith in Christ, Paul says, Vs19 **you are fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.** It doesn't matter if you're a Jew or a Gentile, slave or free, male or female, child or adult, Paul says, that through faith in Christ you are members of God's household. And as members you enjoy all the rights and privileges of being part of that household. If you were a son or daughter of Warren Buffet that would mean something, wouldn't it? Your inheritance would be more money than all of our net worth combined... and then some! But because you are a member of God's household, your inheritance is more than you can imagine. The blessings of sins forgiven, the peace of guilty conscience washed clean, peace with God, peace of knowing not alone, but that you belong to a family, peace of knowing you have a permanent home in heaven.

Not only are we members of God's household, Paul says that you are the house, specifically, you are the Church. We're not talking about the wood and brick and mortar at 377 E Lincoln Trail, nor this building at 549 N Wilson Rd. The Church is God's family, all believers; all who put their trust in Jesus as their Savior from sin. They are the Church. You are the Church. Paul describes the Church as a building. He tells us how the Church is built. How appropriate and timely for us, members of God's Church, who are looking forward with eager anticipation for the dedication of our new church building.

I walked through the church on Wednesday. The builders are framing the walls of the interior rooms, installing the windows and doors, constructing the steeple. This week the electrician and plumber and masons will be in. Before all that could take place, the foundation had to be poured. Everything rests on the foundation. With no foundation, the walls would crack and crumble to the ground.

Paul says that God's Church **was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.** But those guys are dead! How can we, the Church, be built on these men? Remember what Jesus said to Peter in our Gospel this morning, "**You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church.**" The *rock* that Jesus referred to was Peter's confession, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.**" (Matthew 16:13-20) All of the Old Testament prophets pointed ahead to Christ as the Savior of the world. All of the New Testament apostles pointed back to Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world. Christ has built his Church, all believers, on their

teachings, and these teachings all rest on the truth that Christ has been crucified for sinners. That's why Paul called Jesus **the cornerstone**.

We will have a cornerstone on our new building, but it has nothing to do with the structure. It will be a simple plaque installed on the front wall at eye level. In Jesus' day the cornerstone was the most important part of the construction process. The cornerstone was set and leveled first. It had to be perfect because the foundation and the rest of the building depended upon the cornerstone. If the cornerstone was crooked or cracked, the foundation and the rest of the building would not be secure. Christ is the cornerstone on which the Church, which is you, and the faith of all believers, is built. Your possession of the inheritance of heaven, the forgiveness of your sins, the peace with God, all rests on Christ Jesus. As members of the Church, you have something that is concrete, something that neither tornado nor earthquake nor thieves and robbers nor Satan nor death itself can neither destroy nor take your inheritance from you. You are the Church, built on Christ Jesus.

Our general contractor is predicting that we may be able to start moving furniture into our new building as early as the middle of August. God-willing we will be able to worship for at least a month in our new building before the dedication and grand opening to the community. It's all very exciting, but one thing that we must remember is that the completion of the church building is not nor ever was the end purpose or final goal for our congregation. An important question that we must ask ourselves as the Church, as the family of God is, "We're moving – now what?"

With our new building it would be very easy to get sucked into this mindset that our sole purpose is to grow and with growth we will have more income to provide more services to the community and offer great programs to the youth and elderly. Those things are good, but they are not our sole purpose. Paul tells us, **“In [Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”** Did you catch it? The purpose of the Church is to allow the Holy Spirit to do his work through the proclamation of the good news of Christ to the nations. He will build the Church. He will do it through you taking the gospel to your friends, relatives, acquaintances and neighbors. He will build the Church through you taking the gospel to your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

You are the Church, built on Christ Jesus. You are the Church, growing through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Church cannot fall. She cannot fail. That's what makes ministry exciting. That's what motivates us to go out and tell the world about Christ Jesus. You are the Church. You are God's family. Built on Christ and growing by the Holy Spirit. I pray that you remain firmly planted on the Church's one foundation: Jesus Christ her Lord. Amen.