

“Gathered In”
Texts: Isaiah 2:1-4, Ephesians 2:11-22
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“So he came and proclaimed peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near.” Ephesians 2:17

The theologian Karl Barth once wrote that when the angels in heaven go about their official task of praising God, they play only Bach. But when they get together as a family with the door closed, they play Mozart and, Barth wrote, “Our Lord listens with special pleasure.” According to the New Testament scholar Charlie Cousar, in a similar way, when the church goes about its official task of doing theology, it leans heavily on the letters to the Romans and to the Galatians. But in, quiet moments, when the church wants to praise God with joy and delight, it reads aloud Ephesians and, “our Lord listens with special pleasure.”¹

The reading today from the letter to the Ephesians is one of the most lyrical and stirring passages in this powerful letter. It traces the journey of Gentile Christians (that would be most of us) from their pagan roots to their remarkable acceptance into the body of Christ, the church. The Ephesian Christians were an unusual collection of people from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds. Some enjoyed attending the Greek festivals honoring pagan gods. Others observed the Jewish Sabbath and memorized verses from the Torah. Some just loved a hearty dinner of meat and potatoes, even if the meat came from a sacrifice to a Greek god. Others strictly kept kosher, obeying the ancient commandments found in the book of Leviticus. Some were deeply rooted in the tradition of monotheistic faith, dating back to the call of Father Abraham and Mother Sarah. Others were still getting used to the worship of *one* God, selling their shrines and idols at yard sales and accidentally driving to the wrong temple on Sunday mornings. And there they were, all together in the Christian community at Ephesus. Jews and Gentiles. Strangers to one another, an odd mix of custom and ritual, gathering together each week to worship and break bread.

Naturally, this unusual and awkward communal gathering in Ephesus made me think of Thanksgiving. With the busyness of our schedules and the geographical distance of our relatives, many of us gather with extended family only once a year, at Thanksgiving. On that day, sibling rivalries that should have disappeared years ago take center stage yet again. On that day, we are re-united with aunts and uncles and cousins who are strange, and often little more than strangers to us. But on Thanksgiving, there they are, at the table, breaking bread together. It is an odd custom that we Americans share, getting together with in-laws and out-laws, old and young, Republican and Democrat, Falcons fans and Cowboys fans, vegetarians and meat-lovers, and sharing a meal and fellowship and conversation. It is, I think, the sense of unity transcending the awkwardness of it all that keeps us coming back year after year. Whether or not we like it (or them!), these people

are members of our family, and we are united to them by something far stronger than politics or football.

This is the kind of message that the writer of Ephesians repeats again and again in his letter to an odd collection of Christian believers. You are united by something more fundamental and foundational than all that divides you. For this community, the source of unity is not family ties, but faith. "In Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near" to one another. Christ has made you into one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that has kept you separated. What unites the church, then as now, is our faith in Jesus Christ. And his faith in us. He proclaimed peace to those far off and those quite near, and in him we have become something brand new. It is not that some of us have been conformed to the ways of the others, but rather a new humanity has been created through Jesus Christ.

In 2001, concerned with the amount of division and discord within and among our churches, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) appointed a task force to study the hot button issues facing the church. A note for you new members: this is what we Presbyterians tend to do best, study issues until they are resolved in some other sector of society and then hitch ourselves on to the caboose of change. But this task force was different. It was as diverse as our denomination, elders and ministers from all over the country and opposite ends of every spectrum. They were charged not just with studying our division but with providing a roadmap forward that could be embraced by the vast diversity of the denomination. The following year, the Peace, Unity, and Purity task force, as they were called, released their initial report. It was quite simple, and unanimously endorsed. Here is what it said: there are many individual issues about which the church cannot agree--that is clear. But the source of our peace, and our unity, and our purity is not one of those disagreements. As a denomination, as the Body of Christ, we can all say together that the source of our peace is Jesus Christ; the source of our unity is Jesus Christ; the source of our purity is Jesus Christ. It is our faith in Christ, and his faith in us, that gives us the unity we could not achieve on our own. He has done what we could never do, broken down walls that divide us.

Does it sound too good to be true? Overly optimistic? Pie in the sky by and by? Many in the church all across the country thought so. Frustrated that the task force had not given us a final answer, they ignored this stirring call to unity and dismissed the report. Is it too naïve, this proclamation that we who are so utterly different have been made one in Christ Jesus?

Consider yourselves, Morningside. Consider this gathering of Christian believers in this time and place. You are as diverse as the community in Ephesus. Some of you have been attending church since before you can remember, and you have the children's Bible and perfect attendance pins to prove it. Others were not raised in the church and even a few years ago could never have imagined yourselves in a pew on Sunday morning. Some of you know the Book of Order and our Confessions like the back of your hand, and others are still wondering what this book is that I keep mentioning from the pulpit. Some of you have been at Morningside for decades, weathering the difficult years when choir outnumbered congregation and the burden on your shoulders was too heavy. Others have come in recent months and discovered a church filled with Holy Spirit, warmth and

hospitality, and a sense of mission in the world. Some of you visited twenty churches before discovering that this was the place for you to encounter Christ. Others happened in some Sunday almost by accident, and found yourselves drawn to this community. Still others were only looking for a preschool, or a place to pray, or following a friend's invitation or a Google search or a pastor whose excellent sermons you had experienced before somewhere else. Some of you have always felt at home in the church, and others have been cast aside, locked out, or turned away because of who you are. Some of you like traditional sacred music and others...well, never mind.

The point is this; you have all been gathered in here. The walls of separation have been dismantled brick by brick and you have come and joined the demolition, building in a church in place of a dividing wall. You are as different and distinct as those Ephesians in the first century. And certainly as odd as them. But you are drawn to this place not by its politics and certainly not by the bells and whistles that many churches boast. You come here because you have heard the gospel, that in Jesus Christ all that divides us fades into deep background, and we see only fellow worshippers called by the same God to worship and to serve. You have been gathered in here. You have found a place that nurtures your soul and challenges your mind and enlivens your heart. You have found a community of prayer and support and acceptance and authenticity.

I am grateful for the ways in which you have gathered me in to this community. In many ways, you have taught me what a church is, or better yet, what a church does. A church offers hospitality to those living with HIV/AIDS and to those left homeless by natural disaster and personal circumstance. A church elects and ordains those whom God calls to serve regardless of who they were created to be, even if a denomination obsessed with rules can't get it right yet. A church celebrates milestones together, rejoicing with those who rejoice at new births, baptisms, relationships, accomplishments, and goodbyes. A church grieves with harmonious voice, weeping with those who weep and caring for those who struggle in body, mind, and spirit. A church worships with excellence, bringing our very best to the God who is sovereign over all the earth, and focusing not on ourselves, but on God almighty. A church rallies to support those who need casseroles and cards and phone calls and hugs. A church leaves no one outside the circle of grace. In ways large and small, and often without conscious effort, you have shown me what a church does, how a church gathers all people in, just as the prophet Isaiah envisioned many peoples climbing the mountain of God.

There is an earthiness to our faith. When we talk about the church, we must not be more spiritual than God. Church is a place. Church is people and relationships. Church is getting up on Sunday morning and passing by the coffee shops and golf courses and dog walkers and joggers and sunbathers, and even Alon's Bakery and Murphy's brunch, and showing up in this building to worship God and get your bearings for the week ahead. My mentor and pastor, Joanna Adams, constantly reminded us to ask this question: who is being left out? Who does not feel welcome? Go find them, gather them in.

After worship today, we will hear an exciting and monumental recommendation from our Pastor Nominating Committee. Together with them, we will prepare to gather a new pastor in to this community. The church will be blessed by this new leader, but that person will

also be blessed to serve a congregation that knows how to be the church. Exciting days are ahead.

This morning's passage from Ephesians closes in an interesting way. When we are united, when we are gathered together, the writer says that we become a dwelling place for God. When we are united, God comes to dwell among us.

This is what the season of Advent is all about, preparing ourselves for the coming of the kingdom, waiting with baited breath for the birth of the Messiah that will surprise us yet again on Christmas morning. Advent is a time of preparation. We clean out the messy places in our hearts and minds and we gather together and we wait. And our gathering becomes a dwelling place for God, just as surely as the manger held the Savior. When we are all gathered in, when no one is left out or behind, when the dividing walls of hostility and hatred have been deconstructed and bridges of understanding have been built, then God will come and make a home among mortals. I have seen it happen right here, where strangers and aliens become friends. Where a worshipping community somehow becomes a family. Where the needs of others evoke prayer and acts of compassion and love. Where all are welcomed and gathered in to the diverse and united body of Christ. In the midst of the worship and ministry of this congregation, I have seen it happen. I have witnessed the words of the prophet come to life here and now:

And he shall be called Immanuel. God is with us. These words are true. Make ready the celebration. Amen.

ⁱ Charles B. Cousar, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Witnesses to God's New Work*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. p. 81.