

A Gathered Church

Ephesians 2:13-22

May 14, 2023

What kind of community do we want to build? What kind of church stands a chance of capturing the imaginations of emerging generations and serving the profound needs of our cities? These and other provocative questions brought together a group of twenty-two parish pastors from all around the country, hosted here at Second this past week. From a wide variety of geographies—from the Pacific Northwest to New England to South Florida—from a variety of congregational contexts of every type, we found many common threads connecting our realities. The fissures in our churches exposed by the stress of pandemic and unrelenting political polarization. Our ambivalence about virtual gatherings that both bring us together and keep us apart. The competition with scores of other activities that keep our folks occupied and make claims on their time. The constant struggle to make faith a core part of identity in a rapidly unwinding cultural moment. The rise of institutional distrust and the collapse of communal bonds that we've known about since Harvard sociologist Bob Putnam observed that Americans are bowling more even as bowling leagues disappear and gave us that wonderful title *Bowling Alone* to crystalize this era of eroding community. This, my friends, was a *partial* list of the challenges we face.

But we also found common cause in the stirring of hope in our congregations. Green shoots of new life and possibility. A renewed desire to serve our neighbors. A felt need to reconnect with each other. An urgency about weaving those loose strands of community back together in a way that might hold us. And, at the deepest level, a need for meaning and purpose beyond the daily grind and brunch on Sunday. In a time of unraveling, we need something sturdy, something to which we can anchor our lives.

Baylor University professor Dustin Benac, whose 2022 book *Adaptive Church* has given me energy and hope, puts it this way. He writes, "While Scripture speaks of Christ as the cornerstone of the church, this building block functions more like the mortar that holds together other misshapen blocks. It structures Christianity...by combining the cohesion and inspiration required for imagination to form and flourish." Christ is our foundation *and* the glue that holds us together.

In the coming weeks, as we conclude a program year focused on speaking the truth in love, we're going to explore the nature and purpose of the Church in this moment of profound challenge and opportunity. It should come as no surprise to you that I believe Christian community has something to offer—something unique to give—in an age of individualized isolation and pernicious polarization. Community is foundational to our faith. You cannot be a follower of Jesus all by yourself. We are a gathered people. And *how* we gather matters. Building genuine community is more complicated than occasionally occupying the same physical space. It involves sharing a common purpose, deep commitment, vulnerability before others, an openness to newness. *It begins with a radical redefinition of our primary identity.*

This morning's reading from the letter to the Ephesians traces the journey of Gentile Christians from their pagan roots to embrace of faith in Jesus Christ. The Ephesian church was an unusual collection of people from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds. Some enjoyed attending Greek festivals honoring pagan gods. Others strictly observed the Jewish Sabbath and memorized verses from the Torah.

Some just loved to eat meat, even if that meat came from a sacrifice to a Greek god. And others kept kosher, obeying ancient commands 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, and others were still getting used to the worship of only *one* God. They were selling their shrines at yard sales. They were accidentally driving to the wrong temple on Sunday mornings. And there they were, all together in the Christian community at Ephesus. Jews and Gentiles. Young and old. Wealthy and poor. Long-timers and newcomers. Strangers to each other, an odd mix of customs and rituals, gathering each week for worship and a meal.

And here is what happened: Dividing walls crumbled. Bridges of understanding were built. A whole new community was created. Isolation overcome. Purpose discovered. A new identity built that transcended what the Ephesians thought mattered most. *It began with a radical redefinition of their primary identity.* Listen again: "In Christ you who were far off have been brought near...he is our peace."

Now, in the imperial context of Ancient Rome, these words do not only describe a spiritual reality. Peace—the Roman brand of it, *Pax Romana*—was enforced by military dominance and subjugation. To declare peace apart from the emperor bordered on treason, and to suggest that this peace came from one whom the state had executed was revolutionary stuff. The letter goes as far as to say that our citizenship is in the household of God. This is a political claim because it questions every marker of identity. If Christ is our peace, our gathering must reflect this reality. Everything else must be subordinate to the faith we share.

Such an understanding of communal identity is as out of place in our time as it was in Ancient Ephesus. In our isolated, individualized context, the idea of locating our identity in Christ is truly strange. We are far more familiar with the lines of division we draw around our constructed identities. We tend to sort ourselves out in ways that make us comfortable.

We tend to associate primarily with the people we understand. We tend to gather with those whose lives look most like ours. Even in the Church. Perhaps you don't know, but most congregations in our time are entirely sorted by political ideology. And that makes sense, for we have been led to believe this is our most important constructed identity.

Here, we are trying to do something different. In this place, we seek to dismantle walls of separation brick by brick. And I pray that you are here to join the demolition work. I hope that you are here to build a church in place of dividing walls. I know that you are as different and distinct as those Ephesians in the first century. And, as I approach five years as your pastor, I can testify that you are certainly as odd as they were.

What if the One who has gathered us is God?

What if we have been gathered, called together, called to create a place of belonging in a time of carved up tribalism, painful isolation, collapse of community?

What if we—in our worship and in our work—could allow ourselves to be built into a dwelling place for God?

Now, here's the hard truth about that. It means we're going to have to let some things go. Some dismantling must be done. Perhaps we should start with our need to be constantly reaffirmed in our opinions—to live in like-minded echo chambers, reinforcing our preexisting convictions. Perhaps it's our comfort in assuming the people with whom we worship think like we do (they don't). Or, our settled beliefs about who is included, who needs to change, who needs to leave, what Church should look like—any identity marker that has crowded out the core conviction that Christ is our peace, that we are not strangers but siblings, part of the same family of faith. The wall between us has come down.

In fact, the letter uses the strongest possible language to describe what has happened through the cross of Jesus Christ. God has put our hostility to *death*. If this is true, then hatred and division must have no home here. The household of God must be not an abstract

spiritual reality we briefly visit once a week to pretend that we are at peace. Here we must practice a whole new way of living.

So, what kind of community do you want to build? What kind of a church stands a chance of capturing the imaginations of emerging generations and serving the needs of our city? *It begins with a radical redefinition of our primary identity.* Amid the rubble of community collapsing all around us, disease and death that disclose desperation and despair, we must build something beautiful, something sacred—nothing less than a dwelling place for God.

Second Church, this is why we gather. Amen.