

## “Living Stones”

The verses that we just heard from Ephesians were used as a beautiful hymn of reconciliation in the early church. They follow on the heels of Paul's description of the world into which the church had been born – a world of conflict and hostility, a world of different traditions, backgrounds and languages. A world torn between right and wrong, death and life, sin and grace. Does **THAT** world sound familiar?

However, Paul is also dealing with hundreds, if not thousands of years of exclusivity, when he addresses the subject of reconciliation to the church at Ephesus. A church made up of both Jews *and* Gentiles who claim Jesus Christ as their savior. Paul uses terms like "uncircumcised" "alien" and "far off" to describe the Gentiles who did not belong. He does this to give credence to the covenant that God had established with the Jews through their father, Abraham, and to emphasize that he is not discrediting or disregarding their history. But he is trying to say that today is a new day in which all of God's children are called to live as one.

So Paul is not dealing with a new problem but one that is a couple of centuries old. To add complexity to the issue, Paul knew that when God chose the Israelites, he also called them to be a light to the nations. However, instead of fulfilling this call, the Jews built walls of exclusivity around themselves that only added to the problem that Paul is addressing now.

So in order to help the church at Ephesus really understand what God had done for them through Christ, Paul eluded to the barriers within the Temple of Jerusalem, a

place they all knew and loved. The inner sanctum of the Temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, was called the Holy of Holies. It was separated from the rest of the Temple by a dividing curtain that only the High Priest was allowed to enter. This was the barrier that separated God from all but the highest servants.

But there was another barrier to consider as well. Outside the Temple was a wall that barricaded the place of worship from the Courtyard of the Gentiles. THIS is where the aliens, the uncircumcised, could stand to hear about God. And the Jews felt so strongly that non-Jewish people should be kept out of the Temple that an inscription on this wall actually read, “Let no one of any other nation come within the fence and barrier around the Holy Place. Whosoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows.” This wall was a barrier separating the children of God – one from the other.

But once Paul summarizes the problem of the separation between the Gentiles and Jews, he then enters five very important words into his letter – “BUT NOW IN CHRIST JESUS”. Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection changed hundreds of years of tradition when he tore down both of these barriers.

Jesus, in his life, demonstrated time and again that all were invited to be a part of the kingdom. He ate with sinners. He made a hated Samaritan the hero of one of his stories. He welcomed children onto his lap. He spoke to women and touched them IN PUBLIC. He even included them in his ministry. Jesus Christ made it clear that he had come to preach the Good News to the WHOLE WORLD. And by doing so, Jesus tore down that barrier that had been built *outside* the Temple. The barrier that divided God's people from one another.

I believe that the Holy Spirit included these stories in our Scripture because God knows that it will ALWAYS be our human nature to be exclusive, in some way or another. And while we may not ask for circumcision as a way of showing that we are in the accepted crowd, we have other, subtler ways of being exclusive today.

Like the young mother who decided to have a dinner party for quite a few guests. The dinner seemed to grow and grow with people that she didn't really want to include. When the time finally came to sit down, she decided to spotlight her daughter, as many young mothers do, by asking her to say the blessing. "But Mommy," the little girl protested, "I wouldn't know what to say." The mother replied, "Just say what you've heard Mommy say." So the child bowed her head, folded her hands and said obediently, "O Lord, why did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Today is World Communion Sunday. The day when we remember that Jesus Christ invited all these people to dinner because he loves us all! And that is the message that Paul makes clear in our passage this morning. We are to be hospitable, welcoming and caring to every child of God. Even those who come from different backgrounds and different ways of living. Christ taught us this by his example.

But what Christ did in his death and resurrection is the most miraculous thing of all and the part of this story that is most important to us today. You see, by dying for us, Jesus tore down the second barrier too – the one between humankind and God. Our Gospel lesson tells us that at the moment of his death, the curtain outside of the Holy of Holies LITERALLY tore in two. Humankind had been alienated from God by our sinfulness since the fall of Adam and Eve. Jesus Christ's death erased that alienation and

his resurrection gave us all direct access to God through him in the form of forgiveness and redemption.

Paul tells the Ephesians and us that this powerful legacy is the foundation of the church today and goes on to say that there are no longer strangers and aliens but that we are ALL citizens of the household of God together. When I read this, I got a picture in my mind of a Temple made with living stones.

You all have seen a house made of stones. It is so different from a house made of brick where all the bricks are exactly alike and lined up perfectly, or a house made of wood where each plank is the same width and color. A house made of stone has stones that are different shapes, sizes, and colors just all piled in there together, forming the walls.

This is how it is with the living stones of God's temple today – US. We are of different shapes and sizes and colors and we have different functions within the walls of the Temple. Some serve in one way, some another. But the most important thing to remember is that we are placed into this great structure and are chosen and shaped for our position by the call that God has made to each individual life here and throughout God's earthly kingdom.

GOD is the architect and GOD determines how each of us will play a part in spreading the Good News. Yet because Jesus death and resurrection brought about reconciliation for all, we are placed in the wall side by side. So I like to think that the mortar that surrounds the different stones and holds us altogether is the love and grace of God. We are linked together to be a part of a long work that will glorify God and bring others into His Heavenly kingdom.

I have always loved World Communion Sunday because it gives us a joyful glimpse of the day when we will all come together to the table of the Lord as different and yet the same. As children who are ALL created in the image of our God. Yet different because of our different strengths and weaknesses. One table, filled by the faces and languages and traditions of the many that will all live out the new covenant that Jesus Christ made possible. All the same because each of us is a sinner redeemed by God's grace.

I actually think I got a taste of that banquet when I was privileged to visit the Holy Land several years ago. I would like to share a special memory that our group experienced that is another picture of how the living stones of God fit together.

We were visiting the Church of Dominus Flevit near the Garden of Gethsemane, built to commemorate the place where Jesus wept for Jerusalem. Our group went inside and discovered another group sitting in the pews, concluding a time of worship together. So we stood quietly inside the church, around the outer aisles, awaiting our turn.

As we listened respectfully, it was clear that they were participating in a litany in what sounded like one of the Slavic languages – and none of us understood it. And as they finished they began to sing, of course in their native tongue. All at once, we realized that they were singing, “Fairest Lord Jesus”. And as if we had rehearsed it, we spontaneously joined them in English. There we were - two groups of Christians from opposite parts of God’s world singing praises to the one Savior, each in our own tongue, divided and yet united. We were the living stones of God’s house.

That day remains in my heart as a picture of what the world will be like when every day is world Communion day. Can you see it too? Christians in the Washington

National Cathedral with its great arched chancel and shining wooden pews eating the wafer and drinking the wine. Christians in Africa, sitting on simple benches on a dirt floor with a thatched roof, perhaps using crackers and Coke for communion. Christians in the coffee houses in Germany where Shalynn and Tyler Crawford share the body and blood with students, wearing their jeans. A Christian in a hospital bed, taking the small piece of bread and plastic cup of juice from the hand of her minister who has come to share the Holy Meal. Christians in a beautiful church in upstate South Carolina, faithfully seeking God's will for the future as we celebrate the gifts of past and present. The Living Stones of the Temple of Christ wherever his faithful are gathered.

So as we eat the bread of life and drink the cup of salvation, let us remember that this meal is offered because we are created and loved by the one God, redeemed by the one Savior Jesus Christ and sustained by the one Holy Spirit in all the world. Whatever place people gather in today and whatever elements that are available to us all, we gather to worship and praise the God of all times and places. There is no right way or wrong way. The meal is Holy because God has called us and made us one. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

