

“Let Us Build a House...”

Ephesians 2:11-22

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This morning we turn to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians 2:11-22. Written in the school of Paul’s thought (probably not by Paul himself), “the powerful poetic language [from Ephesians] is drawn from early Christian hymns and the Jewish scriptures” celebrating the author’s vision of the church; a vision of a united people, where the divided are reconciled and united and the dwelling house of the Lord stands whole and open to all. The writer celebrates the reconciliation between God and God’s people that occurs from the brokenness of the cross. In Christ a new humanity was born, one in which “Christ’s death brought together both Jews and Gentiles into a new unified community.”¹

In this chapter, the author asks the Ephesians to recall how once they were strangers to God, outcasts who did not know Jewish law and labeled “the uncircumcised” (a derogatory term used for Gentiles). Remember how you were strangers from God, but now rejoice that Christ has demolished those laws. No longer are there any strangers to God! You now are welcomed into God’s covenant of promise and the community of Christ. Let us build a house where all know Christ’s peace. From Ephesians 2:

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

One of my favorite memories of our church family was our trip to the Forks of the River a couple of years ago to explore the remains of Samuel Carrick’s first church. I’d never been before and was excited to see a piece of our history I was unfamiliar with. We loaded up with picnic dinners on a warm Wednesday night and headed into eastern Knoxville, where our Presbyterian history started in this region. We descended upon the Lebanon-in-the-Forks cemetery and site of the former church, still nicely maintained, to remember the Presbyterian church that was started there by Samuel Carrick in 1791. Not long after establishing the Lebanon-in-the-Forks Presbyterian Church he moved into what would become Knoxville, planting the first meeting house in town in James White’s garden, which became First Presbyterian Church. Carrick became the first pastor of this turnip patch church.

¹ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, introduction to Ephesians, page 320 New Testament.

We started in the graveyard, and wandered among the gravestones, but eventually moved to the water's edge right on the site of the confluence of the French Broad and Holston Rivers, one descending from the north, and the other from the east, to flow together to become the Tennessee River. Nothing impeded these two rivers from joining; nothing could stop them from flowing into one river to become something new. There was a rushing feeling of freedom to see and witness two enormous bodies of water merge together, to join paths. But "it isn't just as though one stream merged without trace into the other. Nor is it just that the new river is simply a combination of the two. It is as though, from that point, the whole river takes on a new and different character."² It becomes the great Tennessee River, bearer of barges and the Vol Navy. Perhaps it's easy to forget that its roots come from two other rivers converging to create a new one. And later on in the Tennessee River's own life of 652 miles, it becomes the largest tributary that flows into the Ohio River.

This is Paul's hope for those in Ephesus—for two very different peoples to claim God and therefore claim each other and become something new—a new humanity that comes as our gift from God who is the river of our lives.

It is easy to think that we are each individual little streams or brooks, separate from others, bubbling along on our own individual lives. It is easy to build dams that protect our borders and halt the flow of water into other streams. It is easy to become fearful to think we will lose out on something if we open ourselves to something we don't know or are frightened of. The beauty that we too often forget is that we all flow from the same place, and end in the same place: that is, in God's hands. In God's hands, we are no longer prisoners to the world, but united with God in Jesus Christ. Those walls we built around ourselves and each other no longer bear any authority. Our being is grounded in God's grace, and that grace is not contained to one tribe or another. The grace offered us is the same grace offered to those we fear and have yet to call neighbors...even those beyond our Christian faith; all people are God's neighbors, therefore they are also our neighbors. God is calling us to open our lives to the possibility of something greater than ourselves if we embrace Christ's redemption and allow it to extend beyond our reach; and not just through our purse strings by donating things to inner city schools. That new humanity is discovered in relationship. In allowing our flesh and blood to mingle with others, seeing their eyes, hearing their voices, greeting them by name, our new humanity is found.

About a month ago a temporary interactive art installation was installed on a wall; a contentious wall, a wall called for by some and not by others. Whether you believe this wall is needed or not, the lasting effect of this art piece is holy and sacred. On this wall, between the Mexico and US border, children played on pink seesaws. You remember seesaws, and the thrill of going up and down in the air? Laughter rang out, children shouted as children do, and parents stood close by, supervising or helping the smaller children push up and down on this Teetertotter Wall. The wall was the anchor, or fulcrum between the seesaws; one half in one country, the other, just a few feet away, in another. It was more like a large fence, with giant beams constructed together, but could easily be seen through. So the children could see each other, see who they were playing with, and depended on each other to make the seesaw work. This provocative piece was created by architecture professor Ronald Rael and design professor Virginia San Fratello in Sunland Park, New Mexico, near El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Though they didn't know each other, may not have spoken the same language, these kids came together to create something new, yet old—joy in being together, even though a wall separated them.

"The wall became a literal fulcrum for U.S.–Mexico relations and children and adults were connected in meaningful ways on both sides with the recognition that the actions that take place on one side have a direct consequence on the other side," Rael said.³

² N.T. Wright. *Paul: The Prison Letters for Everyone*, page 27.

³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/07/30/wall-pink-seesaws-appear-us-mexico-border-kids-play/1864976001/>

The author of Ephesians shows us this coming together of Jews and Gentiles, the coming together of two tribes whereby “one family is achieved...through the cross of Jesus the Messiah.”⁴ They are no longer strangers and aliens. In Jesus Christ, the dividing walls are broken down. The tribalism, divisions, and barricades that we build up no longer have to define us; they no longer have the power to keep us separate from God or from each other. Instead, God’s house becomes a dwelling place for all people.

Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection create a single humanity in place of two or six, or the thousands of tribes we create to divide ourselves. The point is to build a house where all can dwell. “This passage trumpets the good news that God has brought uncircumcision and circumcision together [Jew and Gentile]. One radical element of this message is that God’s unification of the two groups does not mean “uniformity.” One group does not fall under the power of the more dominant group. Rather, Paul says that God in Christ has made one humanity of the two. Gentiles do not become Jews; Jews do not become Gentiles. Rather, both Jews and Gentiles become united in Christ *as Jew and Gentile*. The uncircumcised are welcomed into the story of God played out through the people of the circumcision, to play their own part in the continuing story of redemption.”⁵ We don’t have to give up ourselves in order to welcome this new humanity. In fact, we become our truer selves when we do let down those walls that we build up around us.

Growing up in Atlanta, the capital of the South, meant knowing certain things: you always ordered Coke (you were disowned if you ordered Pepsi); the best hot dogs came from the Varsity followed by a frosted orange shake; the best Southern fine dining came from Mary Mac’s Tea Room; you always rooted for the Braves; almost all directions in Atlanta include the phrase: ‘Go down Peachtree;’ and of course you made an annual pilgrimage to Stone Mountain. The home of an enormous engraving of those Confederate heroes of the Civil War, Generals Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee and President Jefferson Davis peer over you from atop Stone Mountain, just east of Atlanta. I have fond memories of hiking up and down that mountain with my brothers and grandfather to the top, always wondering how they managed to carve that scene into the stone. In the evening, the laser light show would attract multitudes of people.

As a child, I knew these men were important, historical figures from a war, and we should be proud to remember them. It wasn’t until later that I learned about the south’s dark history of slavery, and I understood that this monument was troubling. In the birthplace of the Civil Rights movement, the largest monument in town created a great dividing wall in the minds and hearts of black and white people alike. I’m sad to say it wasn’t until I was 27 years old that I made it to Sweet Auburn Road, to Ebenezer Baptist Church, and the home of Martin Luther King, Jr., the father of the Civil Rights movement.

On August 28, 1963, towards the end of his “I Have a Dream” speech, Dr. King proclaimed “Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.” In my new adoptive state, he named us too: “Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!” Dr. King knew that our destiny lay in the God of freedom for all people; that the dividing wall of race and bigotry were not of God’s kingdom and had to come tumbling down. His life reflected the new humanity that he knew God desired for us all.

The last time he hiked to the top of Stone Mountain before embarking on a new life in South America, longtime Atlanta writer and novelist Charles McNair saw a ghost, had a dream and found a new, pure heart in the old mountain. Here is that dream for us:

I had a dream.

The Georgia General Assembly funded a memorial for Martin Luther King Jr. and his top aides to be carved on Stone Mountain.

⁴ N.T. Wright. *Paul: The Prison Letters for Everyone*, page 27.

⁵ Kyle Fever. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2598

The lawmakers commissioned a bas-relief [sculpture] of MLK and John Lewis and Andy Young, this to be beveled into gray granite beside Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. (A half-century ago, the Georgia General Assembly maneuvered to have that holy trinity of notable Confederates, along with their horses, carved onto Stone Mountain.)

At dream speed, hundreds of stonemasons dangled by rope down the side of the most famous ... and infamous ... pluton in the South. They lit the fuses on sticks of dynamite. They pounded chisels. They swung picks and fired up thermojet torches. In no time, they sculpted a brand new Stone Mountain monument.

When the artisans stood back to admire their work, they beheld the great black generals of the Civil Rights Movement. They stood side-by-side with the great white generals of the Civil War.

Here stood a New Stone Mountain.

Many felt the fresh sculpture symbolically represented a start and a finish. Here, a single mountain face held the profiles of Southern men of greatest prominence at the start and the true finish of our century-old American Civil War.

A century of Civil War? It can certainly be viewed that way. The fighting between the blue and the gray ended in 1865, but the ongoing battle for equality under the law between black and the white lasted another 99 years, culminating with the 1965 signing of the Voting Rights Act.

So the new Stone Mountain stood for something. And, of course, the Georgia General Assembly wanted to make the attraction even better.

Lawmakers funded a new laser light show, twice as bright and dazzling. (Astronauts could see it from space.) They tripled the parking space to accommodate overflow crowds of visitors. Whites and blacks tailgated in racial harmony, knocking back Coca-Cola (with shots) and swapping recipes.

Stone Mountain Park sold MLK and Jeff Davis bobbleheads. Elvis sang over tinny loudspeakers, then James Brown took a turn. High school bands played Dixie and marched the five-mile path around the mountain. Then they marched around the mountain the other direction playing "We Shall Overcome."

Mass media fell in love. Social media fell in love too. Facebook buzzed like a billion bees. Twitter grew twitterpated.

Stone Mountain came to be an American version of the hajj, the trip to Mecca every able-bodied Muslim makes as an act of self-renewal. Every U.S. school kid grew up knowing he or she would visit Stone Mountain at least once in a lifetime.

All over the South, and then all over the world, lions lay down with lambs. Armies hammered swords into ploughshares.

People all just got along.⁶

God's new humanity was here.

⁶ Charles McNair. <https://bittersoutherner.com/charles-mcnair-go-tell-it-on-the-mountain#.XWgIN-NKiM8>