

Ephesians 2:11-22 (Acts 2:1-4 / Pentecost)  
“We Are the Church”  
May 31, 2020 [Pentecost]  
Rev. Lou Nyiri

We continue our sermon series through the New Testament book of Ephesians.  
Today we’re looking at Ephesians 2:11-22, listen now to God’s word for us this day...

***[Read Ephesians 2:11-22]***

**Let us Pray:**

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.  
Come as the fire and burn,  
Come as the wind and cleanse,  
Come as the light and reveal,  
Convict us, Convert us, Consecrate us...until we are wholly thine.

And now, Lord, my prayer is simply this:  
That the words of my mouth  
And the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to you,  
for you are our rock and our redeemer...Amen.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I am reminded of Avery & Marsh’s, 1972 hymn – “We Are the Church” – perhaps you recall the words:

**The Refrain:**

I am the church!  
You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus, all around the world!  
Yes, we’re the church together!

**Verse 1:**

The church is not a building,  
The church is not a steeple,  
The church is not a resting place,  
The church is a people.

**Verse 2:**

We’re many kinds of people,  
With many kinds of faces,  
All colors and all ages, too,  
From all times and places.

**Verse 5:**

At Pentecost some people received the Holy Spirit  
And told the Good News through the world  
To all who would hear it.

Long before Avery & Marsh put to music the words:  
I am the church!  
You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
*[[All who follow Jesus, all around the world!  
Yes, we're the church together!]]*

The Apostle Paul had similar thoughts in mind when writing to the church in Ephesus, he recognized a crisis was occurring with the church. Some congregations then, and perhaps now, required certain ethnic, political, or theological credentials before one was granted entrance or full acceptance.

Racial and cultural divisions between the Jewish Christians and the many Gentiles now flocking to the church had reach a critical – even breaking point. Jewish Christians did not recognize Gentile believers as having full citizenship in God's kingdom.

They argued that a physical identifier was necessary – without such a mark, the Gentiles at best...could be second-class citizens by comparison.

Paul speaks into this situation – and he does so as one with a sound curriculum vitae – Paul's credentials allowed him to understand the dilemma for he spoke as:  
A Jew – and a former Pharisee at that [a group known for their strict adherence to tradition and ecclesial law]...

AND

As an Apostle to the Gentiles [whose culture he knew quite well]...

This understanding not only allowed Paul to better understood the dilemma – it afforded him insight into a solution.

Paul proposed that the old standards held separately by Jews and Gentiles were now invalid.

As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free."

Old connections to a previous life have been replaced by a new common citizenship where the only qualification is faith in Christ and the only necessary mark is God's grace – freely offered through Christ's life, death & resurrection; and gratefully received by us.

At one time, Gentiles were considered to be "aliens & strangers" who were without a home; without hope; 'without God in the world' (2.12).

Paul, however, declares, those who were once ‘far off’ have received a new identity along with God’s covenant people – an identity which has been brought near in God’s redemptive action through Jesus the Christ.

We are all one in Christ Jesus!

What does this new identity mean for the body of Christ – the Church – Christ’s hands & feet at work in the world?

It reminds us there are no longer to be boundaries and borders separating us – our identifying agent is Jesus Christ – the One who breaks down, as Paul reminds, “the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (2.14).

Paul wrote this letter from prison having been accused of bringing a Gentile into the Temple in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 21.28) an unconscionable act according to Jewish law.

The Ephesian church knew where Paul was & why he was there when this letter was written; and they also knew that the barrier between Jew & Gentile was best symbolized by the “dividing wall” of the temple (2.14).

In what must have come as quite a shock to his readers – Paul announces this dividing wall has been shattered in Christ – the One who takes the place of the temple and enables all people to come together in him.

Like the Ephesians, we still have some “dividing walls” among us – both inside and outside the church.

Divisions of race, politics, practices, and doctrines – to name a few.

Paul gets us to begin thinking about what it might look like to be bold enough to cross boundaries – even if it costs us something – Paul gets us to ask of ourselves what are the ways our faith in Christ empower us to transcend artificial boundaries.

Paul gets us to consider, as well, how Christ has “abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances that [Christ] might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” (2.15).

Paul saw this law as already fulfilled in Christ. Jesus death & resurrection made peace between God and humanity – AND – between Jews & Gentiles. Citizenship in God’s Kingdom is marked by faith in & obedience to Christ – not by what we eat, what we wear or how we worship.

As Pastor Dave highlighted last week in Ephesians 2:8-10, <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has

made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Paul, also, re-focuses how we commune with God – we have direct access to God through Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The old covenant was mediated by priests in the temple who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people for forgiveness of sins.

Now, Paul says, through Jesus “both [Jews & Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father” (2.18).

Instead of a gatekeeper who chooses to allow someone in based on credentials – Jesus enables us to bring ourselves directly to God.

On this Pentecost Sunday, Paul’s words to the church in Rome come to mind, we have been given the Holy Spirit, who “indeed intercedes for us” in ways beyond our understanding (cf. Romans 8:26-27).

The Spirit not only intercedes for us & gives us access to God – the Spirit also gives Jesus’ followers direction.

Because we have access to God – no matter where we are – we have an opportunity to share God’s love.

There is no border or boundary the Spirit cannot cross.

Think about Jesus’ words to the disciples at the end of Matthew’s gospel – just before the ascension - “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ... And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Mt. 28.18-20)

*[[The church has always been called to move beyond the borders of her walls – outside the building.*

*I’ve been thinking lately what if Jesus, Peter, Paul, or the early church had access to today’s technologies.*

*What would those disciples have done that first Pentecost when they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim God’s Good News – if they had zoom / livestream / facebook / smartphones / or even land-lines – how would they have utilized these tools in facilitating the Great Commission?]]*

The church – from her inception – has been called to go beyond the building – into the world to share the Good News.

The church – from her inception – has been sent – into the world to bring help, hope, healing and wholeness into impoverished areas – this takes many different forms:

Food to those who hunger;

Drink to those who thirst;  
Clothing to those who are naked;  
Shelter to those who are homeless;  
Medical aid to those who are sick.

That is also, why amid this Pandemic, I include:

Wearing a mask;

Using hand sanitizer;

Maintaining safe social distancing;

I believe, we do these things, not because we want to rain on parades – rather because we care about each other – how we treat one another shows the world who we are and what’s important to us...when we do these things we are saying, ‘I care about you.’

Even during this stay-at-home time, the church has continued to be the church.

Through our local mission team, this church has been:

Making, collecting and delivering homemade masks to: Fruitbelt Farmworkers Christian Ministry / Office of Aging / Wellspan Health / Gettysburg Borough.

Compiled a list of ways to help and ways to get help from local groups – which have been posted at the doors of the church building / on our website / on our facebook page / shared via email.

The blessing boxes at our parking lot and the corner by The United Church of Christ have been overflowing with donations.

The church is not a building...The Church is a people.

What might such actions say to a watching world?

Perhaps, just perhaps they say, “We know they are Christians by their love.”

How did Jesus say it, “Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your mind and all your soul, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

The church is not and has not closed during this time when we cannot gather in-person – the church has continued & will continue to be the church by how we love one another.

From her inception – the Church has also been called to go beyond the building – into the world to care for – AND – to speak up for the vulnerable – the marginalized – the people often overlooked.

As God’s people we are called to speak into the injustices revealed through the “isms” we see around us, both local & global: racism / ageism / sexism / cynicism...

In a world where divisions seem to grow deeper every day, it’s time for the church to renew & reclaim what we have been given in Christ Jesus.

It's time to be bold enough to break down the walls of racial, ethnic, social and political divides – divides that can be seen in the church and in the world – so that we can demonstrate to the world what citizens of God's Kingdom look like.

I close with a quick story - Wally Triplett's story.<sup>1</sup>

Wally Triplett was born in 1926 in suburban Philadelphia – in his words, “America was black and white.”

Triplett and his brothers all played football.

In 1944, he had, as he describes it, “An unusually good year.”

In 1945, Triplett was sent a letter from the University of Miami trying to recruit him right out of high school & offering him an athletic scholarship.

At the time, Miami University and City was segregated.

Wally Triplett writes back to them saying, “Do you realize I am a black player?”

The University rescinded their scholarship offer, closing the letter to Triplett with these words, “A thing like this must be reasoned, not fought out. Do not be bitter against a group of people that have nothing to do with the present conditions.”

In a documentary interview, Triplett recalls, “I was then given the opportunity and I took it to go to Penn State.”

Wally Triplett and one other player were the only two black players on the football team that season – with only about 25-35 black students on the whole campus.

The 1946 Penn State Football is informed their final game of the season is to be played against Miami in Miami – it was stated the only way the game will be played is if Penn State leaves its two black players at home.

So, they have a *players only* meeting about how the team is going to handle this – do they boycott the game? Do they leave their two black teammates behind? –

Keep in mind this meeting took place in 1946 in a small room on the Penn State campus – this is almost 10 years before Rosa Parks & almost 20 years before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have A Dream.”

“This was,” the documentary puts it, “simply a small group of students in the middle of Pennsylvania looking at the faces of their two black teammates.”

In the midst of the meeting, team captain, Steve Suhey, says basically, “We Are Penn State. It's all or none.”

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<sup>1</sup> This story taken from the ESPN 30 for 30 Shorts We Are – found on youtube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcMV5Kp5j6A&feature=youtu.be>

Historian Lou Prato says of what happened next, “We’re going to vote this unanimously – and all the hands went up. We’re not going to play the game without all our players. And, Miami said, ‘sorry you’re not coming.’”

“We play all or none. We are Penn State.”

Triplett said their creed became, “We’re all together. We’re all one.”

We are the church!  
We’re all together!  
We’re all one!

We are...In Christ!

We show our love by how we care for one another...

We show our love by joining our voices with those who have been long silenced and speak truth to injustice...

We show our love by bringing help, hope, healing, and wholeness into being...

We show our love, in the words of Walter Rauschenbusch, by remembering that “God’s kingdom is not solely about getting people into heaven...it’s about transforming life here on earth into the harmony of heaven.”

“The church is not a building,  
The church is not a steeple,  
The church is not a resting place,  
The church is a people.

We’re many kinds of people,  
With many kinds of faces,  
All colors and all ages, too,  
From all times and places.

I am the church!  
You are the church!  
We are the church together!  
All who follow Jesus, all around the world!  
Yes, we’re the church together!”

So let it be!

Amen & Amen!