

BEING BUILT TOGETHER

Eph. 2:19-22

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19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. EPHESIANS 2:19-22

Mr. Rosen was a 26-year-old former Teach for America fellow, trying to find his way as a new teacher. Initially, he let his Dallas-area 7th graders pick their own groups for work in class, because he noticed that students wouldn't participate as often if they were forced into teams that made them uncomfortable. Halfway through his second year of teaching, a student whom he asked to help him pass back papers quietly made her way back his desk, admitting she didn't know who had written half of the assignments. In that moment he stopped the independent reading block and asked the students how many of them believed they could name all 24 students in the class. Only about half of them raised their hand.

He discovered in his 7th graders a symptom of what's true for all of us in this room. Not only do we, when we're left to our own devices, group together with the same people - people who are like us, but at the end of the day we're not good at connecting. Our world is just not that good at community, not that good at knowing one another. But you don't have to take 7th graders as evidence. Consider this survey by Cigna, which included more than 20,000 U.S. adults ages 18 years and older:

- More than half of survey respondents — 54 percent — said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well.
- Fifty-six percent reported they sometimes or always felt like the people around them "are not necessarily *with* them."
- 2 in 5 felt like "they lack companionship," that their "relationships aren't meaningful" and that they "are isolated from others."
- **One in five** people report they rarely or never feel close to people (20 percent) or feel like there are people they can talk to (18 percent).
- **Generation Z (born mid90s to early 2000s, 18-22) is the loneliest generation.**¹

¹ Rhitu Charterjee, "Americans Are A Lonely Lot, And Young People Bear The Heaviest Burden." May 1, 2018 (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2018/05/01/606588504/americans-are-a-lonely-lot-and-young-people-bear-the-heaviest-burden>)

Today, we're getting a better and better picture of the health effects of these realities, both mentally and physically. We live in a world of isolation, individualism, and loneliness, with no turn in sight. More than not learning names of people in a 7th grade class, our world is chasing independence that humans were simply never created for. We were created for community, by a God who is Himself: community.

Sadly, our gospel tends to reflect our world in this way. So often we share a message of salvation that speaks *only* to individuals about their personal, private lives. The reality is that the gospel has a word to say in a splintered and isolated world. Our text this morning in Ephesians 2 reminds us that a part of our redemption is not only a restoration of our personal (vertical) relationship to God, being reconciled through Christ to the Father, but that being in Christ also includes being reconciled together (horizontal). We've been redeemed into this new community that God has created, a community that points to God's future for the world.

Ephesians 2 begins by reminding the readers of the drastic effects of Christ's saving work and the new life now offered to them by his spirit. Paul offers several before and after moments:

- "You were dead... (4) but God... made us alive"
- "You were (12) separate/excluded/strangers to the covenant.. but in Christ brought near
- Verse 19: "So then, you are no longer... but you are..."

This passage begins by pointing backwards. In light of what Christ has done, in light of the fact that he has brought peace, destroyed the dividing wall, brought near those who were formerly far off, made one man from the two (Jew and Gentile), and given both access in one spirit to the father... The consequence of what Jesus has accomplished is that you all are no longer strangers and aliens.

These two words mean essentially the same thing in the original language, foreigners, those excluded from belonging. Those who were once outside the people of God, estranged from God and from others, have now been given access, been given full status as fellow citizens. He's speaking to Jews and Gentiles of the new status they now share in Christ Jesus. Yes, through the cross God has brought forgiveness for your individual sin, but something much larger is happening.

As Paul paints a picture of the new community that is brought together in Christ, he uses three specific images:

1. FELLOW CITIZENS

19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, Gentiles now belong in a way that they never did before. Paul uses the metaphor of citizenship to show that those who were once outsiders now belong. Believers are attached to a heavenly

commonwealth, a heavenly kingdom. Paul know the benefits of Roman citizenship, if you'll recall that story from Acts 22 when he conveniently plays the citizenship card.

Paul the Roman Citizen – ACTS 22

²² The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,²⁴ the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. ²⁵ As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"

²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen."

²⁷ The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"

"Yes, I am," he answered.

²⁸ Then the commander said, "I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship."

"But I was born a citizen," Paul replied.

Getting Roman citizenship wasn't easy, and being born into it and purchasing it are two of the main ways to get in. Here, Paul says to those who were not born part of the people of God – here is a free gift, a new status that has God everything, but is offered to you freely.

Paul understood the power of citizenship, having used it himself to receive the protection of Roman law. His Roman citizenship meant he could receive treatment the common person did not have the right to request. He also knew, however, there was a greater group available to ALL that was of infinitely greater value than the empire could offer.

This is why Paul can say with conviction in Phil 3:20, "But our citizenship is in heaven."

C. S. Lewis penned the words of Jewel, the unicorn in his novel *The Last Battle*, describing this homecoming like this: "I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. Come further up, come further in!" Belonging to God's people is like coming to your true home, and the only reason you liked the home you knew before were the ways it pointed you to this one.

The imagery then moves in verse 19 from the political realm into the household. First, they are fellow citizens, a status that proves their rights with the rest of the believers, and second, they are depicted as members of God's household.

2. MEMBERS OF GOD'S HOUSEHOLD

19...and are of God's household,

They are now children together in God's own family. All throughout scripture this familial language is used to talk about God's people. Language of adoption and kinship define relationships. In this letter, Paul has already pointed out the joy of being adopted as sons and daughters and he has already spoken of the one God and father of us all, but here he's illustrating not only the new status that believers have with God, he's emphasizing their relationship to one another.

1 John 3:1-2 – Children of God

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

To be a member of a household (oikos) meant refuge and protection, at least as much as the master was able to provide. It also meant identity and gave the security that comes with a sense of belonging and even a reliance on each other to accomplish God's purposes.

And in the same way that their citizenship in God's kingdom transcended their allegiance to Rome, this new family supersedes even their kin, their family by birth. This is, in part, why Jesus can say “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” Mt. 10:34

Rodney Stark, in his book *The Rise of Christianity*, tries to explain from a sociological perspective “how the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries.” Among his conclusions: Christianity grows because they care for one another. Christianity spread because the Christians cared for each other in times of sickness and disease. Their communal compassion both staved off death and served as an example to outsiders of the transforming power of the Christian faith.²

Not only are they fellow citizens and members of a household, but Paul shifts his metaphor again to speak of Christians as stones in a temple. Believers are incorporated into God's building, the place where he dwells.

² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, iii.

3. STONES IN A TEMPLE

20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,

Christ Jesus *himself, he adds emphatically*, is the cornerstone.

Scholars are divided as to exactly which stone this unusual word is referring to, which is why it is sometimes explained differently. Some have understood it to be referring to the capstone, or crowning stone at the top of a building or at the center of arch. Others, as I've suggested, interpret this to point not to the top but to the bottom, to the foundation, to the cornerstone that sets the direction and shape of the entire rest of the building.³

Its Isaiah 28:16 that seems to clarify, saying:

**“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;**

The verses together point to the common building practice of laying the first stone, marking the beginning of the foundation, by which the builder could then determine the ‘lie’ or line of the building. Today, we mark these in mere decorative ways, even many churches and structures noting their date or giving honor to those who helped build. But the image Paul reminds the new community that its life together is set by, dependent on, modeled after, the way Jesus has marked out by his example.

Local resident in Queensland AU, Peter Watters (Vine Management Service), asked the land owner Stewart Morland what was to be done with the surplus amount of granite rocks that were excavated for land tillage, humorously suggesting that a pyramid could be constructed. Four hours later Morland decided to build the pyramid and contracted the work to Ken Stubberfield at a cost of \$1000.

Over eight months using an excavator and dump truck, it took 75,000 tons of surplus granite rocks found on the property, to build the pyramid which measures 30sq m at its base. It is about 15 meters tall and the rocks are all granite. A few years ago they sold the granite Ballandean Pyramid pyramid for 850,000. ⁴

When the Bible speaks of believers as living stones in 1 Peter, and as pieces of a temple, a building that are being fitted together here, its not talking about God building something out of

³ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary, 216-218.

⁴ Charlotte Durut, “Local farmer picks up granite belt vineyard and pyramid,” *News.co.au*, April 11, 2014 (<https://www.news.com.au/finance/real-estate/local-farmer-picks-up-granite-belt-vineyard-and-pyramid/news-story/3814215f176080ec2034718719de56ea>)

boredom or because he had no better use for the stones on the land. No, we're told in verse 22 that this is the very dwelling place of God. It's a return to the way God made us – to be in community with God and with each other.

This whole building is being fitted together and growing, active and present tense words that reminds that the God's people aren't stagnant nor are they perfected yet. God is working, building on a history and adding to it in the future, pulling each piece into its proper place.

Here, in Ephesians 2 this holy temple in the Lord is the place where God dwells. It's not made up of pillars or arches or altars, but of human beings. We are together by the way we live and share community to be the place where God is alive and active in the world. Not in you, but in "you *all*." That is where God's home is in the world. We've so made salvation about you and me and mine and that Jesus died just for you that we've forgotten about the you *all*. NT Wright points out that some Jews had already played with the idea that a community, not a building, might be the place that God would truly take up residence, but until Paul no one has said anything like this.⁵

God takes these stones from drastically different quarries and joins them together, building on the foundation of the apostles, those who had announced this worldwide message of peace through King Jesus, with Jesus himself being the stone that holds the rest of the building together. And by doing so God not only heals and redeems our brokenness but he is creating a temple, a kingdom, a household right in the middle of this world so that it would point the world toward the future he has in store – a day when the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it together. The biblical story is clear, God's is forming a temple so that the world would know him.

Fellow Citizens. Members of a Household. Stones on a Temple.

See, we were created for community. And when our brokenness wrecked that design God offered us a salvation that Re-creates us for community. We're not independent. There's no lone ranger Christians. We're joined together in such a way that in this new building we now shelter each other.

John Wesley he met "a serious man" who said to him, "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven. Remember you cannot serve Him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." He was very confident, this serious man, and Wesley never forgot his message. "You must find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."⁶

⁵ NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 30.

⁶ Augustine Birrel, "An Appreciation of John Wesley's Journal," (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.iv.html>)

Some of us come today having chosen our isolation, maybe even preferring it, because its easier. Some of us come as victims of this cruel world, sometimes feeling stuck or disconnected. The gospel saves us from both. And as much I've pointed out the benefits of this today, its comes with a responsibility – a calling.

Tim Keller has said "Community is more than just the result of the preaching of the gospel; it is itself a declaration and expression of the gospel. It is the demonstration of the good news of freedom in Christ through the evident display of our transformed character and our life together."⁷

When God's rule is present – when God's will is done – community emerges. Taken in the opposite way: in the emergence of community, God's very reign and rule is present, his will is accomplished.⁸

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Christ Has No Body

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours...*

We might add to Teresa of Avila, where is God's dwelling, if not here, among you? Our world needs to know and to worship and to experience this God in Christ.

What a gift. What a responsibility. Let his life be so at home in us that He is known in the world.

⁷ Tim Keller, *Center Church*, 320.

⁸ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 52.