

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

Let's Build the Church This Year

Ephesians 2:13-22

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace,¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

If I told you that I guarantee we are going to build the church in the year 2010, what would you think? Would you think that my goal is too lofty or too ambitious? Would you think it is achievable? I think it is possible. In fact, I firmly believe it is going to happen. I believe we are going to build the church in the year 2010. You need to realize what I mean by that statement. When I am talking about building the church, I'm not talking about constructing a new sanctuary, in which to worship (although I believe that is also a worthwhile goal). Constructing a new building is not the same thing as building the church. I say this because a building is not a church. A church is not made up of brick and stone. A church is made up of souls. A church is made up of people, whose hearts have been changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we look at our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we see how God goes about the process of building his church and how we can be privileged to part in God's building project for this church in 2010.

In the first verses of our reading we see that God knocks walls down before he builds walls up in his church. Paul says that Jesus has "*destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.*" What is the dividing wall that Paul writes about here? When we take this verse in its context, we see that the dividing wall is the wall that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles—between God's chosen nation and the other nations of the world. This is a wall that existed because God built it in the first place. He built up a wall around his people by giving them the Law. He gave them a special way to live and worship so that they would not be like the nations around them. He told them not to intermarry with the idolatrous nations they lived among. He wanted that wall to exist so that he would preserve his people and preserve the line of the Savior. He wanted that wall to exist so

that other nations would see the Jewish people and know that their God is the one true God and want to worship him as well.

Jesus came to knock down that wall, however. No longer would there be a distinction between Jew and Gentile. As Paul writes, he came to “*make the two one.*” We see this happening already in the Epiphany Gospel, as the magi from the East come to worship the Christ child. These men are not of the same race as God’s people Israel. But they have come to be a part of God’s chosen people by faith. When Jesus accomplished the mission for which he was sent, he removed all barriers between peoples. His purpose was to come and make peace. He accomplished this mission by dying for the sins of the whole world, not just one nation or race. Through him both Jew and Gentile have “*access to the Father by one Spirit.*” What an amazing accomplishment! How wonderful it is that God has knocked down all barriers between peoples so that we can all call each other brothers and sisters through faith in Christ Jesus.

Unfortunately, we don’t always see things that way. Or at least we don’t always act as though we do. Jesus came to knock down barriers between peoples and yet there are times when we find ourselves trying to reconstruct those barriers. We build barriers when we look down on others for superficial reasons—the color of their skin, the way they dress, the way they talk, their wealth or lack of it. We build barriers when we treat others as though they don’t belong in our group—make it seem as though our church family is not a place for them. You don’t have to be overtly racist or prejudiced to build up these kind of barriers. Sometimes, we can do it in subtle ways that we don’t even realize we are doing. God forgive us for these words and actions.

We can be certain that God does forgive us. We can be certain because that is the very reason the Christ child came to this earth. He came to bring peace to our hearts and reconcile us with God. Our sins should put up a huge barrier between us and our God. It’s a barrier that we could never get past. But Christ knocked down that barrier as well. He brought us into a perfect relationship with our Father in Heaven through his sacrifice. It’s a relationship based on undeserved love and forgiveness.

Having knocked down the barrier of sin and the dividing wall of hostility among us, God then has more work to do. He then works at building us up. As Paul writes: “*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*” This is a perfect definition of the church. It is a group of people who are members of God’s family by faith, built upon the Word of God with Christ as the chief cornerstone. When we begin to see the church as people instead of a building, we see just how beautiful a work of art it is. Think of how God has taken people from all different kinds of backgrounds and life experiences and made them into one church. This incredible work stands as a testimony to his grace. “*In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*”

It's important for us to not the tense of the verb in that final verse. You *are being built together*. God's work of building his church is an ongoing process. Each of us are being molded by God to fit just right into this building we call his church. There is also room for more bricks and stones to be added on and further build a church to God's glory. The theme of this sermon is not "Let's Appreciate the Church We Have". It's "Let's *Build* the Church." Let's realize that God has more work to do among us here. And that he has given us the privilege to be a part of that work. When we break down barriers and invite our friends and neighbors to see what we have seen in our Savior...when we get past our feelings of inadequacy and see how God's Spirit will give us the words to say when speaking with others...when we show love without prejudice and share Christ's compassion with this dying world...we are building the church. And my prayer is that a lot of building goes on in this upcoming year. **Amen.**

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Pastor Steven Hahm

pastor@crossofglorylutheran.com