

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> - Minister: Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

July 25, 2021

Words of Welcome

In a time when our world seems to be very divisive, with people having strong opinions and great divides about everything from vaccinations to racism, even and maybe especially among those who identify as Christians, the writer of the letter to the Ephesians has a lot to say about a kind of unity and reconciliation that puts hostility to death. If you are interested, there is more to say. As we begin, we turn to the call to worship.

Call to Worship

We gather together in the name of Jesus Christ—
members of God's family,
and brothers and sisters to one another.

There are no outsiders here among us,
no one has any special standing or bragging rights.

For we have been brought together by the redeeming love of Jesus.

Let's join together in worship!

Christine Longhurst, re:Worship, <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/06/call-to-worship-ephesians-2-11-22.html>

*Hymn

I come with joy

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1. I come with joy, a child of God,
forgiven, loved and free,
the life of Jesus to recall,
in love laid down for me,
in love laid down for me.
2. I come with Christians far and near,
to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love
in Christ's communion of bread,
in Christ's communion of bread.
3. As Christ breaks bread and bids us share,
each proud division ends.
The love that made us, makes us one,
and strangers now are friends,
and strangers now are friends
4. The Spirit of the risen Christ,
unseen, but ever near,
is in such friendship better known,
alive among us here,
alive among us here.
5. Together met, together bound
by all that God has done,
we'll go with joy, to give the world
the love that makes us one,
the love that makes us one.

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Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Gracious and generous God,
we gather each week in wonder, marvelling at your mysterious presence
in the awesome beauty of the world, and in surprising encounters in our lives.
We gather with grateful hearts, amazed by the abundance in your creation,
abundance we can share at our tables and in our communities,
abundance in food, in friendship and in faithfulness.
We gather with hopeful hearts, seeking another taste of your love for us,
hoping that others will share in the wonders of that love.
Your love for us all is mysterious and miraculous, O God,
with the power to transform times that overwhelm us and lives that hunger for hope.
We gather, trusting that you will move once again in our worship,
and open before us the new possibilities you create for all your people
in Christ, the Bread of Life, bread for our journeys.

Gracious and Generous God,
we gather each week to be fed by your love,
trusting that you embrace each of our lives.
We confess we are not nearly so generous with our love.
We hold back what we have,
fearful we lack enough for our own purposes and desires.
We take advantage of opportunities for ourselves,
and forget to see if someone else is in need.
Forgive us, O God, when our fear makes us stingy
with your gift of abundant love.

Speak to us through the scriptures this day, O God,
and by the power of your Holy Spirit, give us a deeper understanding
of your Word for our lives and our times, through Christ, the Living Word. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

The Letter to the Ephesians declares that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith,
for we are being rooted and grounded in his love.

The forgiveness he offers is a gift of this love
that is wider and deeper than we can ever imagine.

Receive God's forgiveness with faithful hearts,
and be at peace with God, with yourself and with one another.

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Scripture Reading Ephesians 2:11-22

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— ¹²remember 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. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For 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. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Smashing Dividing Walls

I happen to enjoy home renovation shows. If you watch *Property Brothers*, they often begin the renovation of a home with the new home owners getting in there with sledge hammers to take out dividing walls so that there is a new open concept. They are always encouraged to go for it with all their strength and energy. If they are not swinging the hammer hard enough not much happens, but when they get into it, drywall gets crushed and goes flying, studs are cut out, and whatever was in the way of the new design is dealt and usually pretty drastically. Whenever they do come across something that gets in the way of the desired result, they find a new plan that accommodates the desire to get the wall out of the way.

It is this image that comes to mind when I read the words in Ephesians that Jesus in his flesh has broken down the dividing wall, that is hostility between people. The people in conflict that this letter was addressing were the Jewish Christians who had all the backing of history on their side or what is call Torah and the new Gentile Christians who, it would seem, had been without God. This conflict was antagonistic with a strong dividing line of “us verse them.”

We have many such examples in our own time around the globe. In Canada at this moment there is a divide between Indigenous and settlers with the Residential School revelations of late creating even more challenges. World wide there is racism where lines are drawn between those who are black and those who are white and the privileged that white skin affords a person.

Blazing wild fires and flash floods along with other extreme weather patterns are pitting those who listen to the science of climate change against the oil industry and those who see no problem with fossil fuels. In this time of pandemic, we have antivaxxers and those

who would have mandatory vaccinations, as well as anti maskers and those who choose to wear masks. And though Canada seems to be managing the pandemic pretty well right now, one need only look south of the border or to Japan where the Olympics are at this moment carrying on, or to India, or other less developed countries, to know that the pandemic and the controversies that go with it are still ongoing.

As for walls, we all know about the wall that Trump was building between Mexico and the U.S. Biden has put a stop to the building but there is no decision as to what will happen with the wall that is in place or to the landscape that has already been damaged in preparation for a wall to be built. Then there is the wall that Israel has been constructing to basically annex part of Palestine for Israeli occupation.

Just last Monday at our own City Council's meeting a motion was presented to direct city administration to install locking gates on the pedestrian overpass to restrict overnight access. The motion was defeated for the obvious reasons. The gates would not be a very welcoming sight, and did not address the underlying issues that brought about the motion in the first place. And if we want to bring it really close to home, I was reminded this week that this church, our St. Andrew's, erected gates at our sanctuary doors that also create a barrier. The intention was one of safety for those on the streets and for the congregation, but to those who are not aware, it appears that we created a wall of defense against those who are homeless and were using the area for sleeping.

Theologian Karen Chakoian writes about these things saying,

One could argue that the laws and the commandments were themselves peacekeeping fences. Human beings need boundaries both for self-protection and to prevent interference with their neighbor's life. "Do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery" all define boundaries. This is yours, and not that. To love one's neighbor is to honour their boundaries...[However] Eliminating boundaries does not in itself create peace. Peace comes only by eliminating the hostility behind the dividing walls. God does not merely tear down walls, but unites people in the One who is our peace, creating one new humanity.¹

We have seen walls come down in our time. Many will remember the day the Berlin Wall came down. Who would have expected to see that in their lifetime? Then came the end of apartheid in South Africa. Both these events brought hope that maybe the world could change. Maybe we were on the verge of something big. Maybe we truly could stop the hate and hostility of one group against another. Yet in the ensuing years we have seen more protectionism, more hate, more individualism that only responds to what is best for me not my neighbour. As was noted division seems as deep or deeper than ever.

¹ Chakoian, Karen.. *Feasting on the Word: Year B Volume 3 Pentecost and Season after Pentecost*. Editors David L. Bartlett, and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2010. P258.

And yet, centuries ago, there too was hostility with dividing lines that seemed impossible to breach. Into this, Jesus came and with his flesh he made both groups into one and broke down the dividing wall. That dividing wall was and is not a physical one. Physical walls are built in reaction to a dividing wall of hostility between people. Jesus takes a sledge hammer and smashes the walls with his death that was born out of God's passionate love for the people created in God's own image.

Many think of God's image as a white man, but trust me on this, everyone who walks the face of the earth is made in the image of God. Black, brown, white, indigenous, lesbian, gay, bi, trans, two spirited, male or female, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, homeless and downtrodden or rich and famous, able bodied or who face physical, social, or mental challenges, sick or healthy all are made in God's own image. There is no label that we humans can put on a person that takes away from the fact that each person is awesomely and wonderfully made by God.

In Jesus we are one! All of us brought near to God and one another by the blood of Christ for he is our peace! Christ created one new humanity...thus making peace, putting to death on the cross the hostility that divides one from another, granting everyone access to God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is no such thing as a stranger or alien in the land as we all have a place in the household of God, built on a foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the key stone from which all else will find its place. But this is not a building that is built and then stops, the analogy has limitations because this structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple. We are that structure, we become the holy temple, our bodies, our minds, and not just one, but everyone. We are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for Godself.

If this is the case, we must have hope that we can change our world. That we can see the humanity in each face we greet, even in each person we do not have the privilege of meeting and yet we know exists, from the refugee, to the immigrant, to the people who walked the lands before us. In all that seems too diverse to imagine a place of unity, we get to work toward that unity.

How to we do it? We start with love. We love as God first loved us. We take time to listen and learn rather than judging and instructing. We look behind the words to learn why. Then we roll up our sleeves and get to work joining the structures, growing the family of God through love and compassion recognizing there are many expressions of God born out of the experiences of lives lived.

Christ came to proclaim peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near. At the time of the letter, it meant Gentiles were far off and Jews were near, but in our time, it is about those who know that they are beloved children of God and those who don't know. Even those who think there are near are sometime way off. I don't think I have repeated these words from John 3:16 as often in my life

as I have in the last year, but it bears repeating, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

For God so loved the world that Jesus came and smashed dividing walls to let you know that you are loved. All of you and everyone you meet is loved. If God loves us this much what better way to respond than to also break down any barriers that come between you and another, between nations, cultures, people. We get to do that! This is our calling. No matter where you live, what you do, your age, or anything else that you could use as a reason to leave it up to someone else. We get to be the ones who work in the power of the Holy Spirit to break down the dividing walls and create that open concept household of God in our time, and in our places.

Do not lose hope, but be hope. United as one people already members of the household of God, go be the reconciling love, be compassion, be children of God who have the peace of Christ. And may we recognize the work we are all doing as we are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of mystery and miracle,
You are calm in our storms and challenge in our satisfaction.
We give you thanks for all the ways we have tasted your abundance,
in friendship and fellowship,
in food on our tables and safety on our doorsteps.
Amid these everyday satisfactions,
keep us mindful of those who lack the necessities of life
and who find each day unpredictable and anxious.
Like Jesus’ disciples caught on the rocky sea, we fear the storms of life.
So many people know turmoil in war and displacement.
Into the unrest around us, call out to us.

Come near to us and overcome our fear.

Throughout the world and in our own communities,
we witness increased divisiveness
and hatred toward those considered a threat.
In so many countries and in our own neighbourhoods,
we witness great inequity and deep need for even the staples of life.
In our communities, congregations and families,
we witness uncertainty about the future
and the cost of months of pandemic isolation and lockdown.
Into the unrest around us, call out to us.

Come near to us and overcome our fear.

In our own lives and the lives of so many friends and neighbours, we witness depression, anger, anxiety and despair, as we cope with the uncertainty of these months of restrictions and the grief they have caused.

We hold before you in these moments of silence the people and places in need of your healing presence.

And now, trusting in your steadfast love and faithful presence, we pray as Jesus taught us:

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

In countless surveys, we are asked

“how many people live in your household?”

For most of us, that's a pretty easy question to answer.

We'd find it difficult, however, to come up with a number if someone asked

“how many members are in the household of God?”

Yet that's the way we're described by the author of Ephesians. Since Jesus' life, death and resurrection, all believers are no longer “strangers and aliens”, but are members of God's household.

Just as each of us contribute for our home, so we recognize the need to contribute to the church. Our morning offering is one place where ALL can participate.

<https://centerforfaithandgiving.org/2021/07/july-18-2021/>

As people of God's household from different churches and places following this service, I encourage each of you to present your offering to God this day to your church community so it may flourish.

If you consider St. Andrew's your church, regardless of where you live, would like to learn more about St. Andrew's, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian, in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information or to connect with me.

1. The church's one foundation
is Jesus Christ our Lord;
we are his new creation
by water and the word;
from heaven he came and sought us
that we might ever be
his living servant people,
by his own death set free.
2. Called forth from every nation,
yet one o'er all the earth,
our charter of salvation,
one Lord, one faith, one birth,
one holy name professing
and at one table fed,
to one hope we are pressing,
by Christ's own Spirit led.
3. Though with a scornful wonder
the world sees us oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder,
by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping;
their cry goes up, "How long?"
But soon the night of weeping
shall be the morn of song.
4. 'Mid toil and tribulation,
and tumult of our war,
we wait the consummation
of peace forevermore,
till with the vision glorious
our longing eyes are blest,
and the great church victorious
shall be the church at rest.
5. We now on earth have union
with God the Three-in-One,
and share, through faith, communion
with those whose rest is won—
O happy ones and holy!
Lord, give us grace that we,
like them, the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

Words and music: public domain

Benediction

We leave this place no longer strangers,
but members of God's own family,
brothers and sisters through the blood of Jesus Christ.
Together, we are being built into a holy dwelling place
where God lives by the Spirit.

So go out with joy and confidence
to love and serve the world,
for we do not go alone.

re: worship, <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/07/benediction-ephesians-2-11-22.html>.