



“BUILDING TOGETHER”
SCRIPTURE: EPHESIANS 2: 11-22
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, July 18, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Ephesians 2:11-22

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--

2:12 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.

2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

2:14 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.

2:15 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,

2:16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

2:17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

2:18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,

2:20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

2:21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

2:22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God.

You know you're in a difficult stretch of history when the least stressful news stories you can find to read are the ones about government confirmed encounters with UFOs or, as they are called now by the military, UAPs-- unidentified aerial phenomenon.

If you have been following the news at all, you've seen the videos released of navy pilots seeing multiple UAPs over the East Coast every day for months and months. You've seen the footage of the pilot's interaction with a UAP near an aircraft carrier off shore of San Diego California in 2004.

You've heard quotes from the Pentagon report saying that out of 144 documented sightings by military personnel since 2004, there is only one they can explain as something known to the human mind. The rest do not fit into any category of possible explanation. This does not confirm the existence of aliens, they say, but they can't rule it out either.

What they are seeing are phenomena that can move at speeds and the capacity to change course in ways that defy any capacity current human technology can achieve. The other thing these UAPs have the capacity to do is disappear into thin air. This is something not just one person has seen, one time.

This is something that multiple people have seen together, many, many times. For a while Navy pilots saw UAPs every day for a while in 2014 and 2015 off the East coast.

Our brains respond in a lot of different ways when we encounter something we don't understand--something that doesn't fit into our filing system of experience and reality.

We try to explain it away. We have trouble trusting that we saw what we saw. Our brains can quickly construct a narrative that protects our biases, our perspectives, our way of seeing ourselves. Our brains and bodies want to protect us from harm and danger. So, they both work to give us messages about whether a situation is safe or dangerous--and how it relates to us and our location in the scheme of things.

But when we are given time to reflect, discern, analyze, and collaborate--our minds and bodies actually have the capacity to stretch and change, to mold into new ways of seeing things and even feeling things. Human beings actually can change--it just takes will and work.

Now regardless of what these UAPs actually are, the very fact that they exist in such verifiable ways prompts some reframing of the world for us. Some of us may have never ruled out that we're not alone in the multiverse. Some of us may feel certain we can never be convinced there is life outside the confines of what we know on earth.

But these unexplainable aerial phenomena do invite reframing either way for human culture. Part of why these phenomena have been detected by military personnel in the last almost 20 years is because of improvements in radar and technology--in other words we have more tools at our disposal for seeing things that we couldn't see before.

And adding tools to our tool box, or toys to our toybox as Resmaa Menakem, the author of *My Grandmother's Hands* calls them, is a good thing! Those new tools or toys give us a way to stretch and to play, to imagine and to create. And they also give us a way to let go of old ways of seeing things that are actually harmful or hurtful, or bringing diminishing returns.

That's what I really love about this passage from Ephesians.

Ephesus was a trade center, a bustling city with all kinds of people including Jews and those who worshipped other deities. This is not a letter in the same way we see Corinthians and other of the epistles. It is more a theological reminder to several growing churches in Ephesus.

Paul had spent more time in Ephesus teaching and preaching than he had anywhere else. When he wrote this particular communication, it appears he

was imprisoned in Rome. And he was facing the end of his earthly life. He was revered in Ephesus--and his words and ministry were experienced as a healing ministry there. So much so that the sick were often given pieces of cloth that Paul had touched.

Acts 19: 11-12 God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.

Paul's ministry was changing things in Ephesus. And some people didn't like it--especially those who profited from the ways things were and from the worship of objects made in the likeness of the cities deity, Artemis. A blacksmith named Demetrius actually called everyone together into a Ephesian theater that seated 24,000 people--the Bible (Acts 19) called it a riot. It sounds a lot like extra-judicial violence when you read the passage.

23 About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. 24 A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. 25 These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. 26 You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. 27 And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her."

28 When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 29 The city was filled with confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions. 30 Paul wished to go into the crowd, but the disciples would not let him; 31 even some officials of the province of Asia, who were friendly to him, sent him a message urging him not to venture into the theater. 32 Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. 33 Some of the crowd gave instructions to

Alexander, whom the Jews had pushed forward. And Alexander motioned for silence and tried to make a defense before the people. 34 But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours all of them shouted in unison, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 35 But when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Citizens of Ephesus, who is there that does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven?[e] 36 Since these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. 37 You have brought these men here who are neither temple robbers nor blasphemers of our goddess. 38 If therefore Demetrius and the artisans with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls; let them bring charges there against one another. 39 If there is anything further[g] you want to know, it must be settled in the regular assembly. 40 For we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." 41 When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. (Acts 19: 23-41)

When Paul refers to the "wall of hostility" in this passage, he's not talking about people giving him the cold shoulder. He's talking about violence, aggression, imprisonment, and extra-judicial rage.

He calls that community he served, who believed in his ministry as a messenger of Jesus' unique power to heal--he calls them to remember the power of Christ to break down that hostility--to change the landscape of the culture and the nature of the relationships that had been so broken and divided and hurtful and harmful.

That's what Christ can do--bring together people divided by culture, by practice, by perspective.

Paul is working to reframe all the cultural calling cards of who people located themselves in camps--he is reframing sect and side. He is saying those things are not in play anymore with Jesus' love infusing a community with an opportunity to finally be in right relationship with each other.

That means seeing people differently. That means seeing life and death differently. That means seeing ourselves differently--possessions differently, truth differently.

That reframing means actually being changed by this new way of seeing things so that things feel different to us--suffering feels different, grief feels different, trials and tribulations feel different, and encountering new ways of seeing things and understanding things feels different.

And the work it takes to believe in and roll up our sleeves in order to help co-create a better world feels different.

Reframing may be the most important spiritual practice of our time--and churches like ours are the ones who need to do it the most

We like to think other Christians--the ones who've got it all wrong, are the ones who need to see things differently. And maybe they do need to reframe. And we can trust that God is working in their hearts to make that somehow happen.

The important thing is that we see ourselves as those who need reframing, too. The important thing is that we never stop understanding ourselves as building something new together in order to be God's dwelling place in our very flesh and blood.

What if those of us who have been practitioners of white Christianity are the "uncircumcised"--the outliers, the aliens--the ones who stand in the most need of reframing? Seeing ourselves as needing to change is really one of the biggest hurdles many white-identified Christians face. We have been so deeply socialized to believe that white ways are the right ways, that we struggle to see how white ways are violent and divisive.

Paul is talking to us--as Americans, as Presbyterians, as those who count themselves among the Grace Covenant community--he's talking to us about reframing how we see ourselves in the world.

And part of how we reframe the way we see ourselves in the world, is by reframing the ways we see others. Paul is really saying something pretty basic to us--your most important job is not as keepers of tradition, but as members of God's household.

Our traditions are our foundations, but they are not the cornerstone. Jesus is!

2:19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,

2:20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

2:21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

2:22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

In Jesus the whole structure is knit together, in Jesus the whole structure grows into a holy temple, in Jesus we are “built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

How do we work together to equip this community with the tools and the toys to see the world differently, to see the church differently--to see ourselves in community differently? How do we deploy the playfulness and adaptiveness the heritage of this church has given us in the service of following Jesus into a new world--into a new way of being the people of God in the world?

What if we are the aliens to God’s ways at this point? What if we’re the ones who really don’t know how to do this whole faith thing yet?

Maybe, just maybe, the exodus from our building is what we needed to take to really see ourselves the way God sees us. This year has really been about making space in our brains, in our spirits, in our bodies for that possibility--that church is more than we had imagined. That there is life out there we hadn’t even thought to believe in. That there is a way of being together that is better than the way we are accustomed to being together.

The freedom of following Jesus is defined by that capacity to believe in what we cannot see--and to stake our collective lives on a way of being together that we have not yet known.

Reframing is an act of humility and an act of trust and an act of faith. We are people who are building something new together.

“We are being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”
Thanks be to God.