

Joining People to One Another

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Well, again, I say welcome to Church of the Advent.

My name is Tommy. I'm one of the pastors here. I could have just sat there singing that refrain for the next half hour at least. That was exactly, exactly what I needed to hear this morning. And I pray that as we turn our attention to God's Word, we will have that experience yet again. That we will hear something of what we need to hear from the Lord this morning.

That's what we believe when we open God's Word, that He has the power to speak to us in ways that we need to hear. So I'm excited to open God's Word together and look at these two passages that we've just heard read.

This is week two of a series that we started last week, looking at the DNA of our church. We've been through so much change over the last several years that it's time to revisit the reason that we started the church, the sense of calling that we have to the city of Washington, D.C. and the surrounding region.

[1 : 07] Why we're here. What animates us. And our mission, as we state it, is that we exist to join people to God, to one another, and to Christ's work of renewal in Washington, D.C.

If we could get that up on the screen, it would be really great, Joe. Thank you. We exist to do three things, to join people to God, to one another, and to Christ's work of renewal in Washington, D.C. and through it, the world. So last week we looked at the first part of this. What do we mean by joining people to God? Why does that matter? How does it happen? And this week we're looking at the next part of this, which flows out of the first part.

We exist to join people to one another. That's one of the things that we hope to see happen among all of the people in this room, that we would somehow, we're going to talk about that in a minute, be joined together.

Not just today or for the next couple of years, but for all of eternity. And how does that actually happen? The gospel is not just about individual salvation. It's not just a way for an individual to get right with God.

[2 : 11] God is actually building a community in the world. And it's a family made up of people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

So being joined with God means that you were also joined with God's people. They're one and the same. To be joined to God is to be joined to God's people. In fact, in a little while, when we celebrate the sacrament of baptism, that is what will be happening here.

Is that the people who are baptized are joined with God sacramentally and they're joined with God's people in the church. So we're going to be talking about this this morning. And to do that, we're going to look at Ephesians chapter 2, verses 11 to 22.

We're also going to take a glance at Luke chapter 18 to learn more about what I'm talking about here. And we're going to see four things in Ephesians chapter 2. We're going to see a glimpse of the community that God is building.

We're going to see the problem of division that thwarts this community. We're going to see the source of that problem. And then lastly, we're going to look at God's answer to the problem.

[3 : 16] So the community that God is building, the problem of division, the source of that problem, and then God's answer to that problem. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

Lord, we thank you that the great question is not whether you'll show up. You're here. You've been here. You were here before us.

Lord, the great question is whether we'll show up. Lord, we're here in person physically. We're here online. But Lord, I pray that we would be present in heart and mind.

I pray that you would give us the grace to turn our attention to you. That you would give us the grace to open our hearts to you. And that you would have the grace to speak to us as only you can. We pray this in your son's holy name.

Amen. Amen. So first of all, a glimpse of the community that God is building in the world. Not just at Church of the Advent, but all across the world. Across space and time.

[4 : 14] You see this vision most fully realized in the book of Revelation at the end of the Bible. But we see a glimpse of it here. In verses 19 through 22, which is sort of the end of our passage, we see this glimpse of the community that God is building.

It's this incredibly diverse community made up of people from different races and ethnicities and socioeconomic classes. And they're all coming together. They're all joined together.

And then it gives us these images. You know, think of these relationships as people becoming citizens in God's kingdom. Or members of God's family.

Sons and daughters of God the Father. Or the third image, living stones in God's temple. Three wonderfully rich images that all convey the same thing about what it means to be joined together and what this kind of community looks like.

This is the kind of community where everyone's differences can be celebrated and enjoyed. They're no longer sources of division. But rather, it's the kind of community that celebrates difference.

[5 : 18] It's the kind of community where everybody belongs. It's the kind of community where everyone is known and loved. There's no such thing as being just a number in this community.

It's the kind of community where everyone matters equally. There's no such thing as favoritism or preferential treatment or privilege. Everyone matters equally.

It's an amazing glimpse of a wonderful community. And I think that even if you're here or if you're listening and you're not a Christian or not sure what you believe, I would chance a guess that this is probably a compelling vision for you.

I don't know many people who wouldn't want to be a part of a community like that. Many people try to build those kinds of communities in the world. But there's a problem. And that is if you think about reality, a lot of churches don't look like this.

And, you know, the church in Ephesus actually didn't look like this. And the reality is that most churches, most communities at large, not just churches, most communities are fairly divided.

[6 : 25] And so what I want to look at now is the problem of division. It's a very real problem. It's a problem today. It was a problem in Paul's day in places like Ephesus. Now, the Christians in Ephesus were divided because of a physical difference.

Basically, the Jews were circumcised and the Gentiles were not. So Jewish Christians had been circumcised. Gentile Christians had not been circumcised. And what we need to understand about circumcision is that it started out as a very good thing.

God said to his people in the Old Testament that circumcision was to be a symbol of their relationship with him, their special covenant relationship. So it started out to be a good thing and a symbol of God's love and grace.

But over time, the Jews had turned circumcision into a symbol of their own righteousness. In other words, their own inherent moral and spiritual superiority.

And when Paul refers in this passage to the dividing wall of hostility, he's most likely referring to an actual physical wall that existed in the temple. There was a section for the Jews, and then there was a section on the other side of the wall further back for the Gentiles.

[7 : 33] So the Jews literally sat closer to where the presence of God was supposed to be. That's the dividing wall of hostility. Now, most of us probably can't identify with the Jewish perception of circumcision.

But we all want to feel good about ourselves. We all want to feel a sense of personal worth. We all want to feel a sense that we are good enough according to a standard that actually matters.

We all want to feel a sense of our own validity or our own personal credibility. And I think almost every human being out there feels some desire to know that they're good enough.

Right? And the Bible would actually say that that's kind of a longing that every human being has to know that we're righteous. It's a longing for rightness. Right? We use terms like being on the right side of history or one of the good guys.

You know, that's essentially what that is. This desire to know that I'm doing the right thing. I'm living the right way. And there's somebody out there who's given me their stamp of approval. And I know

I'm good enough.

[8 : 41] And so in order to get that, obviously, we need some standard to measure ourselves by. We need a standard of worth, a line in the sand, and we need to make sure that we're on the right side of that line.

Now, this could be anything. And I think for most people it's pretty arbitrary. It could be a physical characteristic like circumcision or skin color or hair color. It could be some belief that you have or some value that you hold to.

It could be something that you do particularly well or particularly faithfully. It could be almost anything. But the point is almost everyone out there, everyone out there I know, has some sense of a standard or a rule that they live by that assures them that they're good enough, that they're valid. And so that obviously leads us to consider that question for ourselves. What about you? What about me? What do you count on? Just think for a minute about your life. What do you count on to give you a sense of personal credibility or worth?

What you will find, I mean, if you're anything like me when I was doing this inventory for myself, is there's a lot of things that you don't care about not being good at. There's a lot of standards that you don't care about meeting probably.

[9 : 55] But I guarantee you, you'll find something if you look hard enough that you do care about. So what is it in your life that tells you that you're a good enough person or maybe even a little better than most other people?

That you're in the top 50%. Right? So here are some examples behind me on the screen. I'm not going to go through all of them. But here are some of the things that it might be for you. Some of us have a kind of legalistic righteousness.

These are all sources of righteousness. Right? Some of us have a kind of legalistic righteousness. That's a, you know, people who say, you know, I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't use foul language. I rarely watch movies that are worse than PG-13.

I only dance if it's liturgical dance. And because of that, I feel really like I'm a real Christian. Unlike all of those other Christians who don't care about holiness at all.

And I wish more Christians took holiness seriously. But I'm closer to God because I do. Or there's parenting righteousness. Right? I do things right as a parent.

[10 : 57] I parent my kids in a godly way. I'm a more godly parent, if I'm totally honest, than all of those other parents who can't control their kids. And who let them run all over the place and climb over the pews.

I'm more godly because I keep my kids in line. Or there's a mercy righteousness. Right? I just care more about the poor and the marginalized than anyone else around me.

And because of this, I'm a real Christian and I'm closer to God. Or there's an anti-tech righteousness. I'm not on social media. Gave all that up. I don't even have a smartphone.

I have a flip phone. Right? I only do one hour of screen time a year. And because of that, I'm actually spiritually more advanced than all of those people who are addicted to their devices.

Right? Or I'm theological righteousness. Right? I have the most biblical doctrines. And because of this, I'm closer to God than all of those people with bad theology.

[12 : 01] I mean, they're saved. But I'm closer to God. Right? Or woke righteousness. Right? I care more about racial justice than anyone I know. I can barely stand to be in my church because nobody cares as much as I do.

Because of this, I'm a real Christian. And unlike other Christians, I'm doing a lot to act on those beliefs. So these are all examples of what the Bible would call self-righteousness.

Not in the way we use it in kind of popular culture. But self-generated righteousness. Right?

Righteousness that comes from what I believe or how I live. And there's an almost infinite array of examples that we could give.

You know, in our staff discipleship time this past week, we're reading a book together called The Gospel-Centered Life. And this question that I asked a little while ago comes out of that book. So we all kind of took time to go around on our team and just, you know, how does this play out in your life?

And Deborah said the craziest thing. No, I'm just kidding. I'm not going to tell you what Deborah said. But I'll tell you what I said. Tell you what I said. But as I thought about this for myself, I realized that for me, it's actually my ability.

[13 : 09] One of the ways that I do this, the one that I feel comfortable sharing with you, is that I tend to think of my ability to see both sides of most every issue as something that kind of makes me a little above people who I perceive to be close-minded.

And I realize how easily that creeps into my thinking, my sense of my own sophistication in that way. So I like to call that my insight righteousness. But it's just as pernicious and just as ugly as any of the examples that we put up on the screen.

And I guarantee you, if you take a moment to reflect, you will find something in your life. So it could be something that you do well or something that you take pride in not caring about. Right? It could be either side of that coin.

But these are all ways, these are all sort of things, standards that we draw in the sand. And this leads us to the third point. This really is starting to get at the source of the problem.

Why do we have such division? Why do we do this? The problem is, no matter what your source of righteousness is, they all share something in common. These are all ways for us to bolster our own ego by judging and condemning and excluding other people.

[14 : 27] Right? So here's the problem. I want to feel good about myself. I want to feel like I pass muster. I want to feel like I meet the standard. And the only way I know to do that is to, instead of loving and serving others, use them to feel better about myself.

Right? If there's a line and I'm on the right side, there has to be somebody on the wrong side for it to count that I'm on the right side. And so I have to put somebody over there.

And so instead of loving and serving people in the community or people in our neighborhoods or people at our work or wherever, we end up using them in subtle ways to bolster our own sense that we are good enough.

Right? And I think this is actually one of the main things that is causing such division in our society. I mean, this on a basic level is what drives racism and ethnocentrism and classism and nationalism, not to mention a lot of our politics, is driven by the ability to define who are the good guys and who are the bad guys.

Right? And I think that there's profound self-righteousness on every side of every issue. We have all of these special interest groups and they're all yammering at each other and everybody is claiming the moral high ground.

[15 : 46] And so what you have are you don't have, you know, debates are not just about figuring out what is true. Debates in our society are much more about defining who is righteous and who is not.

And so that's why many of the debates that most divide our society have a highly moral quality to them. I mean, think of the mask debate. We're not having a kind of benign conversation about how effective they are and whether or not we should be wearing them.

There is an incredibly high amount of moral language in this argument. Right? So there's such a thing as, I think, mask righteousness. You know, I'm a good person because I wear my mask and I love my neighbor and I prioritize their safety and that makes me a good person.

Unlike all those people who don't care about anybody but themselves. Right? And the other side you have the kind of anti-mask righteousness. I'm a good person because I live by faith and not by fear.

I'm not a sheep that allows the government to tell me what to do and I obey blindly. I actually believe in freedom and what's more, I'm willing to take a stand for it. Right?

[16 : 54] And so incredibly moral language being used here. Each side is claiming moral superiority over the other. I sometimes wonder if the debates really aren't about establishing what's right and wrong at all.

If we're almost like vampires. Just trying to suck as much of a sense of righteousness out of other people as we possibly can. I also think this is one of the main reasons the church is divided.

I mean, any time you gather a whole bunch of people together who are committed to doing good and loving and serving their neighbors and making the world a better place, self-righteousness is crouching at the door waiting to devour people.

It's only a matter of time. And you know, we've all heard stories, and they're horror stories, of individuals who have been judged and condemned by church communities.

And those are horrible stories. And whenever they happen, they're horrible. What we don't often hear about, but in my experience, what happens all the time is actually the opposite.

[18 : 03] You also sometimes have individuals who judge and condemn entire church communities. Right? So over the years, I've been a pastor in D.C. something like 14 years. And I've just seen over the years in the DMV area certain people who just sort of drift from one church to the next because they can't ever find a church that lives up to their standard.

You know, they're so theologically sophisticated, and they have their doctrines in such clear order, and they can't ever find a church that can match them in theological precision. Or their aesthetic sensibilities are so high or so precise.

They can't ever find a church that really meets their desire for a certain worship style or a certain feel or a certain aesthetic. People who care more than anyone else they know about justice and mercy, and they can't ever find a church that is as passionate as they are about loving and serving and caring for the poor and the oppressed.

And so people just sort of drift from one church to the next, one disillusionment to the next. It's never good enough. They're alienated from the community of God's people because of self-righteousness.

And self-righteousness, here's the real rub. Self-righteousness doesn't just divide people from one another. Self-righteousness is the thing that alienates us from God. It is the thing that alienates us from God.

[19 : 27] Back in verse 1, Paul names our core problem. Verse 1 of chapter 2. He says, apart from God, human beings are spiritually dead because of sin. Now, just in case you miss the force of that, what that's saying is we can't save ourselves.

For a human being to save themselves would be like a dead body trying to give itself CPR. It's just impossible. It's not going to work. He says we're spiritually dead.

Now, practically what that means is that we can change everything about how we live. You can change everything about how you're living right now. You could go out and say, God, from here on out, I'm doing it all better.

Right? You can change everything about how you're living, but that's not going to bring you any closer to God. Right? So you can live a life of sexual promiscuity, and then you can go out and totally change your life.

You can get a purity ring. You can commit yourself to being a secondary virgin, which is a term that used to get thrown around in the purity movement. You can devote yourself from this day forward to sexual purity.

[20 : 33] That's not going to bring you any closer to God. You can be a white supremacist who becomes an anti-racism activist. That's not going to bring you any closer to God.

You can be a greedy, money-grubbing miser who transforms into a generous philanthropist. It's not going to bring you any closer to God. In fact, that might actually drive you further from God.

It might deepen the wedge. Now, am I saying that these changes don't matter? Absolutely not. I mean, these would all be great changes for you to make. The world would probably be better off if we all made these kinds of changes.

But the question I'm asking is, would these bring you any closer to God? And the answer is, not necessarily. And probably not.

Why not? Doesn't God want us to do these things? Doesn't God want us to live this way? Yeah, He does. But the thing that is keeping people away from God is not their sin.

[21 : 43] God has already dealt with sin. God's amazingly adept at dealing with sin. God's made absolutely sure that sin can never divide people from Him. He's done it once and for all.

He's taken care of that. The thing that keeps people far away from God is not their sin. It's their self-righteousness. It is their self-righteousness.

It's their sense in their heart that they don't actually need God. That they don't actually need God's mercy. It's their sense in their heart that they can actually do it themselves. That they can be their own saviors.

That compared to most people out there, they're really not that bad. That's the thing that keeps the wedge in place. And so the more you try to be your own savior, the more you think, well, now that I've turned my life around, God is going to love me so much more and I'm going to be so much closer to Him, the deeper the wedge goes and the further from God we go.

So you can have a morally upright, you can have a morally exemplary, philanthropic, crusader for justice over there, and you can have a greedy, racist, sex offender right here.

[22 : 56] And this guy might actually be closer to God. This guy might actually be closer to God. And you say, well, that doesn't sound fair at all. Bullseye.

It's not fair. It's not even remotely fair. There's nothing fair about it. If that's offensive, we're going to have to take it up with Jesus. Because that's almost exactly what Jesus says in Luke chapter 18. Jesus tells this parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who both go into the temple to pray. What you need to understand is, by all accounts, Pharisees were amazing people. The Pharisee is, by all accounts, a better human being.

He's morally upright. He gives to the poor. He's a community leader. He sets an example for the kids. He's a role model. Right? The tax collector was the scum of the earth.

I mean, a tax collector was a Jew who worked for the Romans to squeeze money out of people who were already dirt poor. I mean, these were sellouts who had betrayed their own people and worked with the oppressors.

[23 : 59] But look at how these men pray. The Pharisee prays, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. The tax collector, by contrast, beats his chest, and he cries out, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

He won't even look up. Then Jesus drops the bomb. He says, The main source of division, I believe, in the community and in our relationship with God is not simply sin.

It is self-righteousness. It's self-righteousness. So what's God's answer to the problem? Well, the only answer that we can possibly put our hope in is finding another source of righteousness.

If every kind of righteousness we generate leads to division between us and other people and alienation from God, if every kind of self-generated righteousness just pushes me further away from God, then the only answer is to find another source of righteousness outside of me.

[25 : 26] Somebody to give me CPR and wake me up and fill me with life and give me a clean record and fill my account. And in our society, there are a lot of walls that divide us.

There are a lot of walls that we build to divide ourselves from one another. And race and politics, these are walls that we feel like are insurmountable. But there is one dividing wall that matters more than all the rest.

And that is the dividing wall that stands between human beings and God. That is the one that matters the most. And the Bible actually says that we have all built this wall and that we all hold it up.

And as much as I might be able to feel like I'm on the right side of this line, if I'm looking at you, when I look at God, I recognize I'm very much on the wrong side of that line and that wall.

We all hold it up. Jews and Gentiles alike. And the Bible says that every single human being has rejected God so that we can live as we please. That's why we're in this condition to begin with.

[26 : 31] And then the Bible says that unless God intervenes, what Paul says in verse 12, we are separated from Christ. We're alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. We're strangers to the covenant of promise.

Listen to this last phrase, having no hope and without God in the world. Unless God intervenes, here's your life. You have no hope and you're without God in the world.

And so that's why the gospel becomes such good news because the gospel says that Jesus, because of his love for all people, went to the cross. And because Jesus died on the cross, the wall between humanity and God came crashing down.

And guess what? When that happened, the walls separating human beings from one another, they also come crashing down. Right? So this is the grace of the gospel.

Here's the grace. Here's the solution to the problem. It is Jesus' righteousness, not my righteousness, that saves me. It is Jesus' righteousness, not your righteousness, that saves you.

[27 : 38] Right? So the grace of Christ, once your source of righteousness is found in Christ, that begins to transform how you see yourself compared to other people. I mean, here's the way it works.

You can't possibly see yourself as superior to anyone else when you know that apart from Christ, you would be utterly hopeless and without God in the world.

I don't care if you're not on social media. Right? I don't care how you parent your kids. Right? I don't care what time you get up in the morning or how hard you work or whether or not you drink.

I mean, those things matter. But here's the truth about you. Apart from Jesus Christ, you would be without God and you would be hopeless. Right?

Also, on the other side, you can't possibly think of yourself as inferior to other people. Right? You look at that person who gets up at 6 o'clock. You look at that person who keeps their kids in order and your kids are climbing the walls and tearing things down.

[28 : 41] You know, you look at that person who does their quiet time every day and you're like, I think I prayed once this last year. You know? You look at the person who volunteers for everything in the community and like you don't even want to talk to your neighbors.

You know? The Bible would say, how dare you feel inferior to that person when you know that Jesus went to the cross for you because you were worth dying for.

And if you feel inferior to anyone in your life, you're calling Jesus a liar. How dare you feel inferior? And what you see here is that the grace of Christ is the great equalizer.

It's the great equalizer because it tells us that we were all equally hopeless before God and that by faith we can all be equally blessed in Christ. That's the only source of true equality you're ever going to find in the world.

And this is why, just to kind of bring this back, this is why our mission is not only to join people to God but also to join people to one another. It's the vertical and the horizontal.

[29 : 46] Because that's exactly what grace does. Right? Grace not only connects us to God in Christ but grace also connects us to each other. If we are all living stones in the temple that God is building then grace is the mortar.

Grace is the glue. Grace is what binds us together and holds us together. And so grace is what makes it possible for us to have the kind of community like we talked about at the beginning.

Do you want a community where everyone's differences can be celebrated and enjoyed? Do you want a community where everyone belongs? Where everyone is known and loved? Where everyone matters equally?

The only way to establish that kind of community is to saturate ourselves in grace. Only if we are built on, centered in, saturated by, devoting ourselves to grace, the righteousness that comes from Christ, will we ever look like that.

And the thing is, the moment we start to forget this, the moment I start to think, you know, I care more about grace than anyone else around me. That makes me a real Christian, right?

[31 : 00] The minute we start to do that, we will start to slip back into self-righteousness. And that's why, if you look at this entire passage, Ephesians chapter 2, verses 11 to 22, all of this is controlled by and flows out of Paul's central exhortation.

This is all about one word that Paul says to these people. Remember. Remember. Remember. He says, remember that you were once alienated from God. Remember that you were once hopeless. Remember what Christ has done for you. If you look at the liturgy that we follow here on Sunday, it's essentially designed to help us do that one thing. Remember, remember, remember.

Right? So when you catch yourself judging or looking down on other people for any reason, remember. Remember. When you catch yourself being self-critical or feeling inferior or beating yourself up, remember.

When you catch yourself building walls of hostility in your mind between people who are like you and other people, some other group, remember. The word remember brings those walls down.

[32 : 06] Grace is what joins us together. Grace is what keeps us together as God's family. This is why we have some of the values that we have. If you want to put the values on the screen, Joe, just a few of the values that flow out of this commitment to joining people to one another.

We value being and becoming a diverse family because we believe that grace-filled communities are diverse communities where differences can be celebrated. So whether it's racial or socioeconomic or life stage or age or political persuasion, right?

We have people on both sides of the aisle in this church. That means that we are, that's a little bit of evidence that there is grace here. When you see people who are divided in the world sitting in the same pews, that's just a little bit of evidence that there's grace in this community, right?

We are also, we value being a sacrifice, a community of sacrificial generosity because we think that grace-filled communities are generous communities. We've seen that in spades over the last 14 years.

We're a community that practices gracious hospitality because we believe that grace-filled communities are welcoming communities. because we remember that at one time we were alienated, cast out.

[33 : 15] And that it's only because Jesus was willing to be cast out that we were welcomed in. So grace is what joins us together. Grace is what keeps us together as God's family.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the grace. we thank you that it is your righteousness and not our righteousness that joins us to you, that joins us to one another. Lord, I pray for all who feel any sense of their own excellence, any sense of their own self-sufficiency. I pray for conviction.

I pray for these words to sink deep. I pray that they would hurt. I pray that they would lead to repentance. repentance. I pray for anyone who is struggling with a sense of their own inferiority. Lord, anyone who's beating themselves up. Anyone who lays awake at night at three o'clock in the morning rehearsing things that they wish they had said or done differently. Anyone who's locked in a shame cycle.

[34 : 20] I pray that the gospel would speak words of comfort and love and belonging. I pray that they would be lifted up out of the mire. I pray that they would be, they would have a vision of themselves seated at a place of honor at God's table.

I pray that they would have a vision of coming down the road and the father running out and embracing them in his arms. Lord, I pray for conviction. I pray for comfort.

I pray for the great equality of standing that comes through grace. That we would all see ourselves as citizens of your kingdom, as members of your family, and as living stones in the temple that you're building in the world.

For your glory and in your son's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.