

What is the Church?

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[0:00] O Lord, our rock and redeemer. Amen. This eighth Sunday after Trinity, having concluded our series through 1 Corinthians, we're back in the lectionary readings.

! And we will be looking this morning at our epistle reading in our post-letit to the Ephesian church. I will be looking at chapter 2, verse 11 to 22. I invite you to follow along in your Bible if you can. It's on page 1160 of the Pew Bible.

And we'll be looking and considering together what the Church of Christ is, what binds and keep us together as the Church. I want to invite you to consider the reality that we live in a world that, for all its claims to tolerance and inclusivity, it's just, our world is just as divisive as any previous generations before it.

Perhaps some will argue even more so. The walls of hostility that divide us are both real and numerous.

Just look at the prevailing theories that say, for example, in our world today, that the color of your skin, that your gender, your nationality, your orientation, whatever that means, are all inherent factors of your worth or inferiority, of superiority or inferiority.

[1:44] And those things, those different factors determine your place in the world. And those different factors also are set in opposition to others that have differing sort of lists that differ on those sort of gradient points.

The world, that the world thinks this, that the world has invented even more ways of division, is not a new sin. Fallen humanity has always found ways to alienate and to divide.

But instead of finding the root cause of our misery, of this division that is among us, instead of finding that the root cause is our alienation from God due to our sin, instead we look to cast blame for the problem on others.

Right? It's always others' fault. Not that there are not actual institutions or things in the world that are contributing to the divisions in the turmoil of the world, but we must admit that when we're looking at the problem of the world, our first inclination is not to look close to home, to look at ourselves.

But we always cast the vision and our eyes away from ourselves to others, whatever those others might be or whatever umbrella they might fall under. But here's the reality.

[3:18] We know we're so far gone because of our sin and our fallenness. We're blinded. We're blinded by our sin so that we cannot see the light. We're so devoid of life as fallen humanity that we cannot rise to move in the right direction.

To know that first the root of the problem is alienation from God and to remedy that, we cannot do it of ourselves. And in the first ten verses of chapter 2 of Ephesians here, Paul reminded this mostly Gentile church of the amazing things that has taken place in them.

He reminds them the change that had to do with their relationship with God. That which they could not do by themselves, Paul reminded them. He reminded them, for example, that you were dead in your transgressions and sins, he says to them, as he says to us.

What is true of them is true of us. He says to them, you were slaves to the world. You were slaves to the flesh and the devil. You were by nature objects of God's wrath.

Like all of mankind. That's who you were. That's who you were. That was your reality. But, for Christians, all of that description is past tense.

[4:41] That's who you were. Now, Paul says, you, based on God's love and abundant mercy, you, who were once dead, have been made alive by the same resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead.

And he says, for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God. Not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in. Here's the beauty of what Paul is saying to the Ephesians in the first half of chapter 2.

You were dead. You were aliens. You were mired without hope, without any sort of means of solving the problem. But Christ, in love and mercy, through his abundant mercy, has restored you to right standing before God.

On the basis of what Christ has done. Not on the basis of anything you've done. But not only that, Christ is working in you. He continues to do the work.

[5:54] You are his workmanship. And so, that which you could never do to fill the chasm that lay between you and God. Jesus Christ has done it. He's bridged the divide that lay between you, a condemned sinner, and a holy God.

And he has brought peace. And it's not just a peace as a cessation of war, of conflict. But it's a peace that is the root of an abiding, fruitful relationship with God.

A relationship that is not based on you, but on Christ's ongoing sufficiency in you. It is not your work, but Christ's ongoing work in you, through the Holy Spirit, that is the basis of your communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

That's a wonderful comfort for us, to know this. And not only has the enmity between you and God been fixed in Jesus Christ.

Jesus has also broken down the walls of division and hatred between you and your fellow man. So, he has made peace with God on your behalf.

[7:08] But he's also made peace between you and your fellow man. This is the two-pronged good news of the gospel. Peace with God and with man.

Therefore, remember, Paul then continues in verse 11. Therefore, remember that at one time, you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision, by what is called the circumcision, you, which is made in the flesh by the hands, you, remember that you are at that time, separated from Christ. You were separated. You were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. You were strangers to the covenant of promise. You had no hope. Having no hope. Without God in the world.

But, that's past tense. But now, again, now, in Christ Jesus, not only has he made peace with God, but even between the divisions between you and Gentile.

But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Notice the repetition, then, in verse 14 to 17, of these two words.

[8:26] Peace over and against hostility. Right? Paul now presents Jesus Christ, that he himself, Jesus Christ himself, is our peace.

Christ is our peace, Paul says. He's made both, he's made us both, the two divisions, we're the both, Jew and Gentile. He's made us both one.

And he's broken down in his flesh, the dividing wall of hostility. By abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. That he might create in himself one new man in place of the two.

So, making peace. And he might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross. They're about killing the hostility. The Israelites believed that there were only two kinds of people.

Jews and everybody else. And they were not wrong. Paul rightly said in Romans 9, that to them, that is the Jews, to them belong the adoption.

[9:32] To them belong the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs. And from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all.

That is the heritage of the Jews. To them belong all of that. And the way Paul described us who were Gentiles is that we were far off. Without God in the world, without hope.

But, we were far off. We were alienated. We were strangers to the covenant of promise. We had no hope without God in the world. But, by the blood of Christ, we have been brought near.

And he has made us. Here's that sort of implacable division between Jew and Gentile. Has been demolished in Jesus Christ. He himself has made us both one.

Having broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. In other words, Christ Jesus, by his cross, has now created a new humanity.

[10:44] Christ accomplished this by creating a new humanity in himself. He did this by offering himself on the cross. He did this by removing the distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

By removing the barrier, the hostility that divided us. At the cross of Christ, he made there the ceremonial distinctions of the law that made Jews clean and made Gentiles unclean.

He made that distinction obsolete. Even the distinction in the Old Testament that gave the priest a greater proximity to God than the people.

That was removed. By his cross. So that in Christ, what has happened? All of us.

This new humanity. We've all been elevated. And we've been placed on a higher plane. Than even the Old Testament saints could ever imagine. We, now, together, all of us.

[11:50] Can commune with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we all have equal access to God by the Spirit. And notice the corporate nature of the salvation that Christ has accomplished.

Essentially, what Paul is intimating to us is that you are saved into this. You are saved into a family. This new humanity. There is no such thing.

I hope you know this. There is no such thing as a personal Jesus. Or private relationship with God.

Of course. Of course we know that Jesus relates to us intimately.

And personally. He does. But he does so. In the context of a family. You know, as a loving father.

Father, who, while gathering his children together. Knows each one of them by name. And provides for their individual needs. But yet the Father still desires that they remain a family.

[13:00] United in love with him. And with one another. That is what has happened. As Christ Jesus has gathered us. By his cross. Together into this new humanity.

And then Paul continues. And he expounds on how Christ Jesus is our peace. He himself is our peace.

But he also came to proclaim. To preach peace. Not only is he the peace. He came to preach peace. Peace. Now this. This second aspect of peace.

Is important for us to grasp. Christ is our peace. And he preaches peace. And what does that mean? Well. Think of it in the context of Ephesians.

And even in the rest of the New Testament. We see that Jesus came. To proclaim himself. He is the preeminent apostle.

[14:01] What does apostle mean? It means one sent by God. One sent from God. And by God. And he. Jesus Christ himself. Is the preeminent apostle.

He is the one who came from God. Sent one. The Messiah. But not only is he the preeminent apostle. He is also the message. He is the message being proclaimed.

He came to proclaim himself. This is why St. Paul writes to the church in Colossae. He says. He says of Jesus Christ.

He says. We. That is the apostles. Him. Christ. We. Preach. Warning every man. And teaching every man. That. Every man in all wisdom.

That we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end. I labor. Striving according to his working. Which works in me mightily. That is the whole purpose of the apostolic ministry.

[14:59] Paul and his fellow apostles. Their whole aim. Is to proclaim. Who? Jesus Christ. Christ himself. The risen Christ himself.

Affirms this. In Luke 24. Remember that story. On the road to Emmaus. Those two disciples. What did Jesus tell them? As he expounds. To them.

Beginning with Moses. And all the prophets. If you read that. That's just a catch-all to say. The whole Holy Scripture. Right? The beginning with Moses.

The Pentateuch. And all the prophets. Including the wisdom languages. And all the prophets. That's the whole Holy Scriptures. The Old Testament. Jesus does what? As he begins. He says. He says. He says. He says. All of that scripture. Speaks concerning himself. He is the message. What does this mean then for us?

[15:54] This means that the defining picture. Of the church. Is that it has. As at its center. The word of God.

The word of God. Is at the center. It's what defines the church of Christ. The word of God. Is that we come to know Christ. Who is the hope of the world.

This is crucial. In our estimation. Of this church. And any other church. For that matter. And St. Peter tells us. In his first epistle. That it is true.

The living and abiding word of God. That we have been born again. It is true. The living and abiding word of God. That we have been given birth. The word.

Is the instrument. By which people are birthed. Into Christ's family. It is here in the gospel. Of Jesus Christ. And coming to faith. In that word of promise. This word of truth.

[16:55] Is the gospel of our salvation. The instrument. Of our justification. And if you go ahead. And look ahead in Ephesians. If you look at chapter 5.

For example. Paul gives us. Sort of a. Another picture of the word. As the instrument. Of the. Of. By which the church. Is not only justified. But is being. Being.

Being. Built together. Sanctified. Not. You know. There in. In Ephesians 5 verse 25. In this exhortation. In that passage. Where. What Paul talks about.

Christian husbands. As they relate to their wives. But. But. But Paul. Gives an example there. That gives us a picture. Into. Jesus Christ. And the church. It tells of the reality.

Of. How Jesus relates. To his church. Christ. Loved the church. And gave himself. Up for her. That he might. Sanctify her.

[17:49] Having cleansed her. By the washing of the water. With the word. The word. I want to repeat that. Christ. Loved the church. And gave himself.

Up for her. That he might. What? Sanctify. Wash her. Having cleansed her. By the washing of the water. With. What? The word.

The word of God. Again. Is instrumental. In making the bride of Christ. The church. Fit for her husband. It is through the word of Christ.

Proclaimed. That we are brought to new life. And it is through that word. Preached. And taught. That we are being changed. More and more.

Into Christ likeness. That's. The word is. Essential. To what the church is. And.

[18:46] And. What about. What of article 19. Of the 39 articles. Our confessional standard. As Anglicans. It says this. The visible church of Christ.

Is a congregation. Of faithful men and women. In which the pure word. Of God. Is preached. And the sacraments. Be duly ministered.

According to Christ's ordinance. In all those things. That are of necessity. Are requisite. To the same. Here's. Here's the thing. I want to repeat it.

And I think. I'm repeating myself here. But. I want to drive the point home. The testimony. Of the. Holy scriptures. The testimony. Of the holy scriptures.

We've seen that. In both in Colossians. In first Peter. In. In. In. In. Ephesians 5. But also. The testimony. Of even our confessional standard. Is this.

[19:43] The word of God. Is essential. In making a church. A church. We. Are not a church. On the basis. Of our building.

Whether. It's its size. Or its beauty. We're not a church. Based on our historical. Heritage. Or the structure.

Of leadership. In our denomination. That's not what makes us a church. None of this. Is essential. To true communion. With God. And with one another.

They're not. Unimportant. But they're not essential. Instead. When we gather. By his word. In the spirit. He is with us.

That's what's essential. When we gather. By his word. In the Holy Spirit. He is present with us. This is what is essential. This is the basis.

[20:37] Of true communion. With God. And with the church. Universal. This is why. Then Paul can say. For through him. That is Jesus Christ. We have both.

We both. That is. Both Jew and Gentile. The walls of division. Have been broken. And through him. We both have access. In one spirit. To the father. That is.

Communion. With God. The father. Through the son. And the spirit. And then Paul continues. And concludes. That chapter.

By then. Talking about how. We are members. Of the household. Of God. Together. So then. It goes in verse 19. Into conclusion.

To verse 22. So then. You are no longer strangers. And aliens. No longer. But you are fellow citizens. With the saints. And members.

[21:32] Of the household of God. Here is the beauty of it. You are fellow citizens. Fellow citizens. If you believe in Jesus Christ. With your fellow brothers and sisters. Gathered here.

But not only that. Your fellow citizens. With other Christians. Across the street. Across town. Across the nation. Across the world.

Who are also gathered. Through. Under the word of God. By the spirit. You are fellow citizens. With them.

In the household of God. Fellow members. And here is the beauty of it. It transcends. Even time and space. Your fellow citizens. With St. Paul. Who writes this.

To the church. Your fellow citizens. Of this. Household of God. With the apostles. And the saints. That have gone before. In Christ. Christ. But here is the.

[22 : 30] You see the broadness of it. You see the broadness of it. Right? But you also see. Sort of the. The exclusivity. Of the basis. Of that. Citizenry.

Verse 20. Built on the foundation. Of the apostles. And prophets. Christ Jesus himself. Being the cornerstone. In whom the whole structure. Being joined together. Grows into a holy temple. In the Lord. In him. You also are being. Built together. Into a dwelling place. For God. By the spirit. And so. As we gather. On this basis. We're reminded.

That in Christ. The things that separate us. Have been destroyed. What are those. Some of those things. We said earlier. The things. The things. The things that the world.

Will say. Are means. By which. We're meant to divide. Between one another. Ethnicity. Social economic. Backgrounds. Political leanings.

[23 : 25] Whatever those things. Might be. They've been destroyed. By the cross of Christ. You've been. Made one. Jesus. In fact. What Paul is. Saying here.

Is that. Jesus. Has killed. The hostility. Between us. At the cross. Right.

If you just. Believe that. Here's what. This is saying then. It's saying that. The cross of Christ. Has the power. To destroy. Any.

And every. Hostility. Every division. Among the people of God. And then. Essentially.

This means that. We cannot allow anything. And I mean. Anything. To cause lasting division.

Among us. We cannot. We cannot. We cannot.

[24 : 20] We cannot. Also. We also. Cannot. Let anything else. But Jesus. And his word. Be the basis. Of our unity. We cannot.

Allow anything. To. To. To. Threaten. Or to tell a lie. About the unity. That we have in Christ. That Christ himself. Has won. For us. At the cross. But.

The basis. Of that unity. Cannot be anything else. Either. Than God's word. And Jesus Christ. Whom the word. Proclaims. This is why Paul.

Then says. When he writes. Regulations. Even if an angel. Were to come from heaven. And preach. Another gospel. Than the one. That has been brought to you. That brought you.

To salvation. If anything else. Than this gospel. Which is Christ crucified. Is offered to you. You must reject it.

[25 : 14] And you must. Reject such teachers. As well. The apostles. Are clear. On this matter. Faithfulness. Through the word of God. Giving through the.

Prophets. And the apostles. Is what keeps us. In the family of God. Notice then. The basis. Of communion. In the church. It's not. As I said earlier.

It's not. The dividing walls. Of the hostility. That the world builds. Because. All of those walls. Of hostility. Have been leveled. By the cross of Christ.

Ethnicity. Gender. Economic. Social background. Political leanings. The kind of teams. You support. Sports teams. The way somebody looks. Personalities.

Anything. Sin. Here's another thing. Even sins. Sins. Sins that we commit. Against one another. Are not sufficient.

[26 : 14] To break. Communion. With one another. Are we going to sin. Against one another? Yes. Are we going to hurt one another? As in the family? Yes. But we must remember.

That in Christ. We will be forgiven much. Are also invited. To then lay our sins. And our hurts.

At the foot of the cross. In exchange for his freedom. And his peace. This is why then we pray.

Forgive us our trespasses. As we forgive those who trespass against us.

Because we know that in Christ. We find forgiveness. And in him. We also find the power to forgive. So the question then for us.

This morning is this. Brothers and sisters. Do you. Do we. Have the connection. That matters. Are you connected to Jesus.

Say it in our prayer.