

**A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD**  
Ephesians 2:19-22

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Sometimes it's hard work to understand a passage of scripture. The language seems obscure. The references are dated.

And then sometimes we are rewarded with a passage like this one for today. The language is beautifully poetic, the wisdom is timeless, and each time I read it I find new insights.

It starts with a description of the human condition..."sometimes we feel like strangers and aliens..." It's true, isn't it? Sometimes we feel like outsiders. Sometimes we feel alone. Sometimes we feel alone when we're by ourselves. But sometimes we feel alone in a crowd, even a group of friends or relatives. Sometimes you can feel alone when you're with one other person. Have you noticed couples sitting at a table for two? I've learned that it's dangerous and unhelpful to judge other people's relationships, for none of us truly knows the inner dynamics of other people's lives, but sometimes you can almost feel a painful distance between people...and then, today, of course, there's the phenomenon of two people sitting across from one another at a table but instead of gazing into one another's eyes, they're both staring at their phones. We know what loneliness is.

You know what it feels like to be an outsider, you've had the experience of wondering if you'll ever belong, feeling as if you won't fit in anywhere. That's why we try so hard to practice hospitality here at church because every Sunday could be someone's first Sunday in these doors. We want that first-time guest to feel as welcome

as possible, to never feel as if they're sitting in someone else's usual seat. It's why we print the words to the Gloria Patri and the Doxology and the Lord's Prayer so that everyone can participate. It's not fun to feel like an outsider. Or a stranger, or an alien. We long for a sense of belonging, family, community. We yearn to feel at home in the world.

"Sometimes we feel like strangers and aliens" - and the very next phrase gives us the good news, "But now we are no longer strangers and aliens...we are now citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." Now we belong. Now we have a home.

What causes us to move from the experience of loneliness to the experience of belonging? Is it the baptismal waters, the official sacramental entree into the family of God's people? Is it when we claim the faith as our own, as we do in Confirmation? Or is it when that faith is first tested, either by intellectual challenges or personal ones? Is it when we know that our particular gifts and talents are needed and useful? It could be any of these moments, and it's different for each of us. For this sense of belonging is quite personal, and it also can be fleeting. We know from reading the writings of people throughout the ages who have talked about the spiritual journey that it is not one steady uphill climb but one that is more like a roller coaster ride, full of twists and turns. Sometimes we feel closer to God and sometimes we feel God is absent. Sometimes God's love is such a powerful force in our lives it is like a strong wind propelling us forward into good works, and sometimes we are listening and listening and cannot hear God's still small voice.

Yet gradually, if we practice the faith, little by little, day by day, week by week, our relationship with God will grow stronger. And one of the gifts of following Jesus is that we do not and in fact cannot do it alone. So we develop these relationships with one another along the path. And if we are bold enough to say what is really on our hearts and minds, we can ask one another for help. When we are at our best, the church is the kind of place where we can speak the truth of our lives to one another in love. I don't mean just blurt it out in the middle of Coffee Hour...but develop the kinds of friendships in small groups so that you can say to a friend, "You know, I'm really struggling to feel the presence of God right now. I'm having a hard time figuring out my next decision or knowing my purpose."

So that in those times when we feel less connected to God, our connections with one another take over and instead of veering so far off path that we become lost, we stay close and eventually find our way back.

That's what it means to belong to the household of God. It means keeping a sense of direction about our lives, and relying on one another.

There's another dimension to our life together that I want to talk about today. The writer Henri Nouwen was a remarkable Christian leader who died nine years ago. He spent his career as a priest writing, teaching, and spending time in Christian communities for the developmentally disabled. He describes Christian community this way: *"Community is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit, not build upon mutual compatibility, shared affection, or common interests, but upon having received the same divine breath, having been given a heart set aflame by the same divine fire and having been embraced by the same divine love."*

In other words, there is an element of our life together which is a gift, something for us to embrace and receive. And here's what makes this community so different from most of our other associations: being a part of this church together doesn't mean we will always agree with one another.

We live in a time that is so politically charged and divided. We are divided between red states and blue states, between people who watch MSNBC and people who watch Fox news. Somehow that sense of sharp division seeps into our lives at every point, so that we begin to act, perhaps subconsciously, as if there's something wrong with us if we spend time with people who think differently than we do. But the more time we spend among likeminded people, the more closed our minds can become. The more we spend time with people who think just like we do, we are less able to converse in a civil manner with those with whom we disagree.

What if the church is the place where we can practice civil discourse? Where we can learn to listen to one another? Where we can acknowledge that each person has something to teach us because each person's life experience has unique value? Can you imagine what a gift we would then be to the world?

You see, it's not our politics that brings us here together. We're not all gathered under this roof because we all agree on political and social issues. We're here because we have been inspired by the person of Jesus, who walked among religious conservatives and prostitutes, tax collectors and fishermen, loving and teaching and learning from them all. We're here because we have been claimed by a higher power, and we want our everyday lives to have a sense of the transcendent. We're here

because we have passed through the baptismal waters, we have been fed together at the welcome table, we have carried each other through life's valleys.

It's a witness we need to make to our world right now because there is a new form of conduct which has become all too commonplace. You see it if you read comments in the newspaper or - especially - online. You see it in acts of hatred and violence. That conduct seems to take this form: "If I like you, and if you and I think alike, then I'll give you the shirt off my back. But if I don't like you, and if you and I are at opposite sides politically, I can be as mean and hateful to you as I want, and my actions are justified."

Last Sunday, while many of you were here in worship enjoying the incredible stories from our senior high mission trip group, Doug and I were making a memory. In Colorado, there are 54 mountains that are over 14,000 feet. They're called "14'ers" in Colorado, and climbing "14'ers" is a passion for many people there. Doug and I climbed our first 14'er last Sunday and since we're still recovering, I can't tell you whether or not it will be our only. It was a hard and grueling athletic event, but it was made better by the amazing scenery and also the friendly camaraderie of people along the way. We started climbing at 6:45 AM but it wasn't long before people who started before us began coming down the mountain. When we were at an especially steep part of the climb, almost every person coming down gave us words of encouragement, "You're doing great!" "It's worth it!" I didn't know which people were Democrats and which were Republicans, who was a Christian and who wasn't. I only knew them by their behavior and their kind words. We were unified by our common experience and goal. So unified that my husband even refrained from making snotty comments to a few people we

encountered who were wearing Michigan shirts. And then, when we were on our way down, we said to those on their way up, “Look, we’re old and we’re from the flatlands of Ohio. If we can make it, you can make it.”

It’s not a bad way to think about the church community - people who encourage other people through the steepest challenges of life - whether those challenges are the challenges of parenting, the challenges of job loss, the challenges of grief or illness...people unified by their common experiences and because we are all walking the same path.

But before we close, let’s look at one more phrase from our scripture for today. This passage isn’t only about us finding a place of welcome and belonging. Listen to the last phrase: “you also are built together spiritually<sup>ly</sup> into a dwelling place for God.”

We, as followers of Jesus, we as the church that bears Christ’s name, we become a place where God chooses to live, a dwelling place for God. Now you might say, “Well, God is everywhere” but the truth is that this is one of the places people look for God. We really do have a new guest here almost every single week. This is a place people come when they are seeking that something that is missing from their lives. And people often come when their lives feel at their most vulnerable. It’s why we extend a warm welcome. It’s why we devote time and care to planning worship. Because this is all a gift to God. It almost takes my breath away, that phrase, “we become a dwelling place for God.” I was out of breath last week because I was climbing and exerting myself at a high altitude. And this week it is God’s word which fills me with awe. God has chosen us, and this place, for a home.

I close by reading you this morning's scripture one more time, this time from the Message version of the Bible:

<sup>19-22</sup> That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

Let us pray. We are honored and humbled, God, that you have chosen to make your home among us. May we make you -- and all your children -- truly welcome here. For we walk and live in Jesus' name. Amen.