



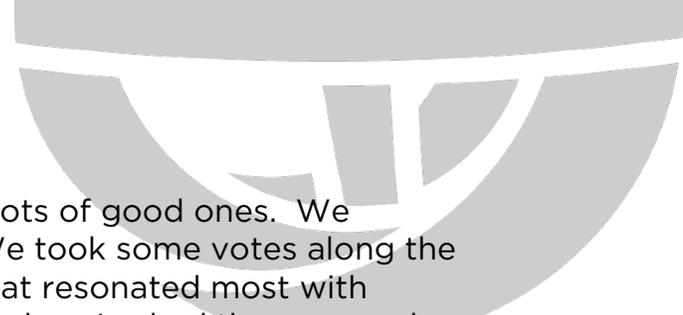
May 19, 2019

Lord, Give Us Vision and Keep Us Sure
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Ephesians 2:11-22 NRSV

¹¹So 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.

In the fall of 2013, we invited people to come to Zumbro for a mission discernment night. Close to 100 people gathered in the Fireside Room. We talked about Zumbro’s rich history, the issues that had been important to us over the years, and the challenges we faced going forward. During the main part of the evening, we divided up at round tables. Each table was assigned a passage of scripture. The groups explored what God was up to in their particular passage, and what it might have to say about the ministry and mission of God’s people. There were lively conversations. It felt like we were talking about important things, things that hopefully would inspire our church for years to come.



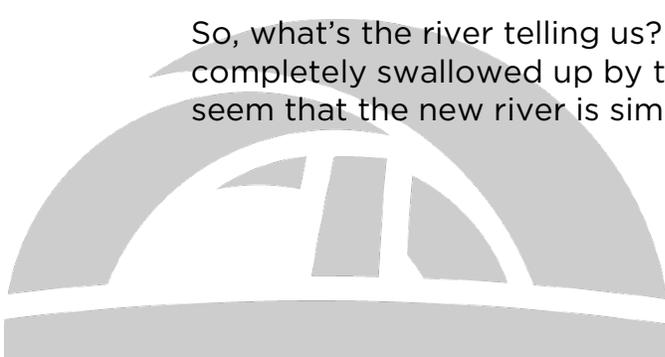
We wrote ideas on a white board. There were lots of good ones. We prayed, and prayed, and prayed some more. We took some votes along the way. By the end of the evening, the passage that resonated most with people was from Ephesians 2, our reading for today. I asked the group why. They said they were especially drawn to God's incredible work in bringing Jew and Gentile together, and in providing hope in places where there was no hope. They were also drawn to the image of Christ breaking down the "dividing wall of hostility" that still exists between so many people today.

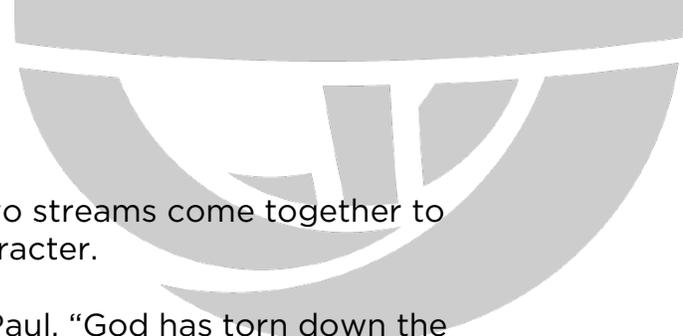
As I mentioned in this week's Big Idea Guide, we're not sure who wrote Ephesians. It might have been Paul, or it might have been one of Paul's disciples who wrote in his name. It was common in the ancient world to keep the ideas of great preachers and teachers alive by writing in their name. To keep it simple for us, we'll refer to the author as "Paul." Certainly many of the themes in the letter were dear to Paul's heart. The reason I bring this up is because the early Christians were living at a time of great social upheaval. Most of the churches started by Paul were a mix of Jew and Gentile. That included the church in Ephesus. Paul and his coworkers had a vision unlike any other: to share the good news of Jesus in the midst of incredible diversity.

As we try to unpack Paul's message to the Ephesians, I want to lift up three images for you today. Hopefully, they'll help us make sense of it. **The first image is a river.** Let's go with the Zumbro River. Perhaps you know that the Zumbro has a North Fork, a Middle Fork, and a South Fork. Of course, the South Fork is just outside our door. These forks eventually converge near Mazeppa, and the full Zumbro flows for 65 miles before emptying into the Mississippi.

What I hear Paul saying is that his Jewish heritage is a little like the Zumbro. It's not terribly large, but it's so very important. Judaism comes from the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Jews have circumcision, the covenants, the commandments, and the Promised Land. The Gentiles, on the other hand, are more like the mighty Mississippi. They seem to have everything going for them, including temples to this deity and that on almost every street corner. But the Gentiles don't have circumcision, nor the covenants, nor the commandments, nor the Promised Land. In short, Paul claims, they've been living "without God." Paul zeroes in on this: "You Gentiles were once far off, but now you've been brought near by the work of Christ."

So, what's the river telling us? It might seem that the tiny Zumbro gets completely swallowed up by the mighty Mississippi, but it doesn't. It might seem that the new river is simply a combination of the two, but it's more





than that. As Paul develops his imagery, the two streams come together to create a new river with a new and different character.

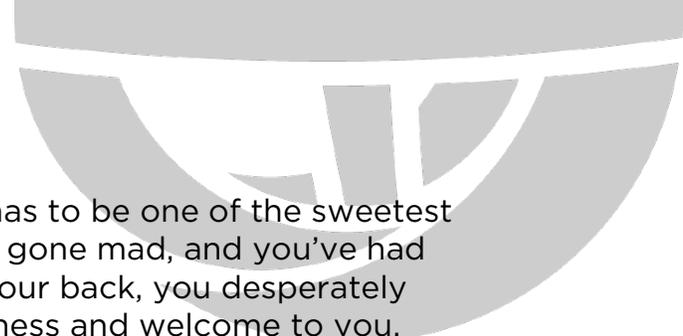
Stick with me here. “Through the cross,” says Paul, “God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility that used to stand between the two families.” This action has abolished the Jewish law, not in the sense that it didn’t come from God in the first place, but rather in the sense that the Jewish law had, as one of its main purposes in places like Ephesus, the keeping apart of Jew and Gentile. “That’s not the way God intends for it to be,” Paul is arguing, “the hostility between the two groups has been put to death on the cross. And now” – and this is Paul’s radical claim – “God has created a single new humanity in place of the two.” It’s almost as if, once the Zumbro gets to the Mississippi, we should acknowledge this new reality and start over with a brand new name. Anybody want to call the DNR and let them know?

So what does this mean for us? We’re not dealing with Jew-Gentile issues today, but we have plenty of issues of our own, and they’re big ones. We continue to be divided along racial lines, cultural lines, political lines, gender lines, sexual-orientation lines. In that churches still struggle with these issues, and sometimes use them to keep people out, there’s plenty of work still to do to live into Paul’s vision of *one new humanity in place of the two*.

A second image from Ephesians is citizenship. Without a doubt, one of the most critical problems in our world today is the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. We see it on the news on an almost daily basis. More people than ever, it seems, are fleeing violence and are displaced from their homelands. They’ve gone in search of a new place to live. The countries where they arrive have to scramble to find adequate resources and space, and they’re regularly overwhelmed. As we hear stories from refugees, what they often want, above all else, is to return to a home that is safe and secure. When that’s not possible, they want to be accepted into a new community where they can rebuild their lives and their families. And the ultimate sign of that acceptance is to receive citizenship in the country they’ve adopted as their own. A new passport is often their proudest possession.

Paul describes the situation of Gentile Christians in similar fashion, and not simply in political terms, but religious ones. “Once you were strangers and foreigners in relation to Israel, the family of the one true God,” says Paul. “But now you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. This is not because you’ve gotten circumcised or are living in the Promised Land, but simply because of what Christ has done for you.”





What Christ has done is bring peace. “Peace” has to be one of the sweetest words a refugee can hear. When the world has gone mad, and you’ve had to escape with little more than the clothes on your back, you desperately hope that someone, somewhere will show kindness and welcome to you. Paul affirms, “That’s what God in Christ has done for you. You will always have a home and a welcome in the family of God.”

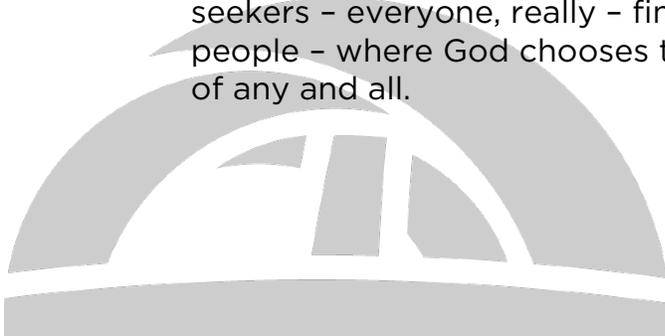
A third image from Ephesians is the temple. By the time this letter is written, the temple in Jerusalem may have been destroyed, or close to it. The year would have been 70 A.D. The temple was the heart and soul of the nation, and the place of pilgrimage for Jews throughout the world. It was also their political, social, and cultural center; a place of feasting and celebration. And above all else, it was where Israel’s God, Yahweh, had promised to dwell.

Paul pictures Jews and Gentiles being built into a brand new structure. The structure doesn’t consist of stones, arches, pillars and altars, but of human beings. God has decided to live within the people themselves. God makes a home in hearts and lives, and particularly in communities that have declared their loyalty to Jesus.

This image might be especially important for us at Zumbro right now. We’ve been talking about our facility here in downtown Rochester for the past several years. These haven’t always been easy conversations. And the choices we’ve been dreaming up haven’t always been easy either. We’re considering spending close to \$2 million just to keep the place open: to replace the roof, to fix our heating and air conditioning, and to provide a full-size elevator to get people to various levels of the building. In addition to this, we’re considering replacing aging pews, helping people hear better by installing a hearing loop, renovating the organ, and creating welcoming spaces not only for ourselves, but also for people from the community who want to come and use our space.

Please hear me: We are not building a temple here. According to Ephesians, *we the people are God’s temple*, built upon a foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as our cornerstone. The building we have at Zumbro is not our temple; it’s our platform for ministry and mission. And at 50 years of age, it could use some tending.

There you have the three images from Ephesians: 1) A river symbolizing one new humanity instead of two; 2) Citizenship – where refugees and asylum seekers – everyone, really – find a place to call home; and 3) A temple – a people – where God chooses to dwell and puts folks to work for the good of any and all.





Just a reminder, in the weeks and months following our mission discernment night, we continued to listen for God and the things God had laid upon our hearts. Eventually we ended up with a new mission statement. You probably know it. Join me if you do: *Our journey of faith leads up to build bridges of understanding and peace, to reach out with compassion, and to share the hope of Jesus.*

Friends, with so many walls of hostility still out there, and so many folks in great need of compassion, and so many living without much hope at all, there are abundant opportunities for you and me to be part of something that's bigger than ourselves.

Lord, give us vision and keep us sure. Amen.

