



Sunday, May 24, 2020  
*Easter Sermon Series: We're All in This Together*

Jesus Breaks Down Walls and So Do We  
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Ephesians 2:11-22 NRSV

<sup>11</sup>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—  
<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>He 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, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup>So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Creator and from Christ the world’s redeemer, Amen.

Friends, I don’t know about you, but I’m tired, exhausted really. Not because of the ways my routines have had to change or because I still grieve some of the things I had hoped to do this summer but can’t because of COVID-19. Those have been hard, but the exhaustion comes from the division that has been sown by different leaders in our society, by the false dichotomy between keeping people alive and keeping the economy open. The heartache comes in the loss of a vision for the basic common good for our neighbors and for feeling grief over the loss of unity of what it means to follow Jesus, even among Christians. Maybe you’re feeling some of this too.



This week has been dizzying, trying to keep up with the contradictory proclamations of our governor and president. On Wednesday, we heard from Gov. Walz that it could be quite a while before churches were gathering in groups of more than ten and by Thursday night the president was saying that churches should open this weekend. On Friday, the Catholic diocese of the Twin Cities and the Missouri Synod proclaimed they will openly defy the state guidelines. And on Saturday, the governor revised guidelines for church gatherings to allow for some form of worship, but everyone wear a mask and don't consider singing or celebrating Holy Communion. Exhausted yet?

As much as any of us are tired of talking about and dealing with the effects of this global pandemic it's necessary, particularly this week, to look more closely at what our Scriptures have to say about what it means to be Christian and the church, rather than what our politicians have to say about opening buildings for worship.

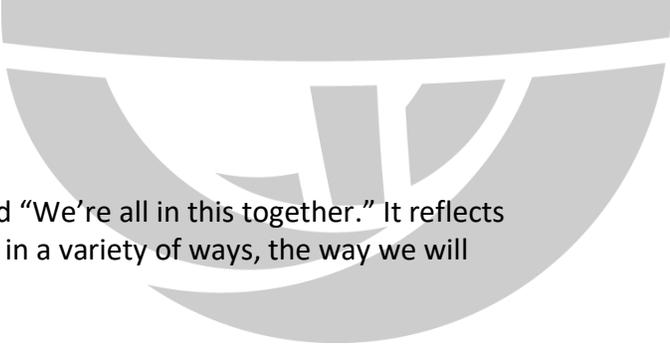
Let me say first that the church has never closed. When the church is mentioned in the New Testament it is called the *ekklesia*. It's a Greek word that means, "those who are called-out". Buildings can't be called out. People can. Ephesians 2 gives us clear images of what God does to call us out and for what purpose we are being called.

Remember that the broad society during those first decades of the early church was highly ordered, and highly segmented. Everyone had their place. And it was socially unacceptable to cross lines of race, creed, or status. Everyone was to stay in their lane. And then Jesus was raised from the dead and this story swept through communities and started to upend the divisions and the long-standing hostilities. People heard that there was a God who loved the world so much that God bathed the world in grace and by this grace people of all kinds were raised up with this God to celebrate their freedom through putting their trust in Jesus Christ. So, the first way we are called out as the church is from the human categories people set up to divide and isolate us. God went to tremendous lengths to send Jesus into our world to unite us and break down walls of hostility. Because of that, we are called to seek collective ways of life, that help our neighbor.

Maybe that means that in today's situation, we base our actions on what it could mean for the most vulnerable among us – our senior population and those with health conditions. I'm a healthy 41 year old. I know that if I were to get COVID-19, I would most likely be okay. But I work with people who might not be so lucky. If we were to resume things as normal, I would interact with people who are more susceptible to this disease than I am. That's why we limit exposure and why we at Zumbro will take a very slow and deliberate approach to how we welcome people back into the building and develop in person ministry opportunities again.

When it comes to making decisions that impact more than ourselves (and let's face it, most of our decisions impact more than ourselves) we are fortunate to have the teaching of Martin Luther. In his writing, *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther distinguished between what we are free from and what we are freed for. Even as guidelines loosen and we are freed from some of the restrictions on size of gatherings, we are also called to consider how our actions reflect our freedom for the care and





safety of our neighbors. After all, our sermon series is called “We’re all in this together.” It reflects the reality that as much as this virus impacts all of our lives in a variety of ways, the way we will make it through this is through collective effort.

And perhaps this isn’t just something we think of when we are facing a global crisis, but something we think about in all the decisions we make in our lives. It’s like the old sage wisdom, “Just because we can, doesn’t mean we should.”

Again, our text from Ephesians affirms that God’s intent is to unite and bring peace, not divide. To make us whole, not to weaken us. And these verses paint a distinctly communal picture of what God is doing through Jesus. God’s people are united. We are brought into one body. We are not strangers, but citizens with the saints. We’re part of the household of God. We’re being built into a holy temple to the Lord.

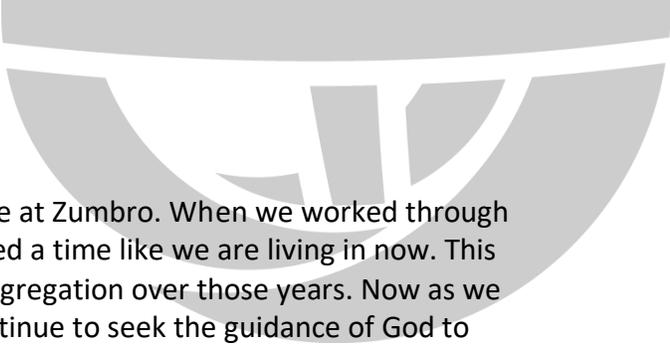
All the images that Paul paints in these verses remind us that whatever circumstances we are in, we are in it together. But none of this is predicated on gathering weekly in mass numbers. It’s grounded in the truth that the death and resurrection of Jesus makes this so.

Perhaps now more than ever we trust that Jesus is right, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you.” Perhaps the goal right now is to welcome Jesus into our midst in new ways, wherever we happen to be and with whomever we can safely gather. Perhaps this is a season where we rediscover, or maybe even discover for the first time how it is that God has brought us who were far off near by the cross of Jesus. Perhaps this is the season that God is calling you into a spiritual practice that connects you more personally to God and also helps you live more fully for your neighbor?

I posted on Facebook earlier this week a meme that does a pretty good job of summing up what it means to be the church today. (show image). It says, “Churches are essential, we already knew that. When the faithful are scattered in every age and place due to persecution, disaster, or plague, we persist in worship and service, in sacrament and sacrifice – feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, being good news for the poor, working to free the captives and oppressed. Our highest and holy calling is to be the church, not go to church.” Friends, the church has not sacrificed much in this pandemic. Our modes of worship have changed, but we are still able to lift our praise to God, cry out in lament, and love and serve our neighbor. In this time, Christians have simply been reminded that those who follow Jesus are the called-out ones, chosen by God to work out of the grace and love we have so freely been offered and to share that with our neighbors.

Here at Zumbro, we have seen an increase in worship participation since moving online. Though at a distance our voices are raised together in praise to God. We continue to pray for one another, and connect through pen pals, phone calls, and Zoom gatherings. We continue to serve the hungry and advocate for the marginalized. We support those who grieve and find new and creative ways to pass on faith to our youngest among us.





This passage from Ephesians is the basis of our mission here at Zumbro. When we worked through this process seven years ago or so, I could not have imagined a time like we are living in now. This mission has shaped many decisions we have made as a congregation over those years. Now as we live in a time when we cannot gather, it is vital that we continue to seek the guidance of God to continue to be Zumbro Lutheran Church, the body of Christ, citizens with the saints wherever we find ourselves living and working and being today. Our journey of faith may have taken a dramatic turn on March 15, 2020. But none of what has affected our lives impacts God's ability or will to bathe the world in grace and love. And nothing, not even having to worship online for the foreseeable future will prevent God from working through us to continue on our journey of faith that calls us to build bridges of understanding and peace, to reach out with compassion, and to share the hope of Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.

