

Ephesians 2:11-22

A reading from Ephesians.

¹¹Remember 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, 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.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

The holy gospel according to Mark.

Glory to you, O Lord.

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³²And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

The Cozy Inn. This was a name of a bar that I think many of us would easily call a 'dive'. While 'sketchy' would be too strong of a word, it was certainly in an economically depressed area of Chillicothe, where I served my second call. They had this little sign out in front of this old dilapidated building of the Cozy Inn, that said, 'homemade potato soup on Fridays.' I love potato soup. And I must have driven past that sign countless times before I said, I am going to go in there. So, I parked my car along the street, locked my doors, and ventured into this very darkly lit bar. I sat down, ordered a beer, and the potato soup -which by the way was fantastic, and I miss it to this day. As I sat there, and my eyes began to adjust to the darkness, I heard some laughing and then turn to see some of my parishioners sitting at a nearby table. They were giggling because their pastor just came into this establishment. They also had come in for the potato soup – but then, maybe that's what we all said - I don't know. However, what ended up happening is that place, became the closest to my own, "Cheers bar experience", for those of you who are old enough to get that reference, where everybody knows your name.

I began to go there quite frequently, as one of my growing friendships with another church member, Gary Mohr who some of you heard when he visited several years ago and taught and spoke at our worship and Sunday school. It was also his favorite place to go as well, which probably explains a little bit of our kindred connection. As I would go, the servers began to know my order. On occasion, some individuals would approach me at my table and say, 'my friend over there says you're a pastor and I don't believe it. Are you really a pastor? And I would say yes, I am the Lutheran pastor of the Lutheran Church down on Main Street; and even a couple of times, they said, is there some way you can prove it? Apparently, some friendly

bar wagers had been made. Throughout the course of my time there, there would be a few occasions in which people would approach me that I did not know, but knew I was the pastor that came into the bar there and would come and ask if they could talk to me about certain issues in their lives. Now I'll be real honest and say that often when I went in there to have my drink and potato soup, discussing other people's problems was the last thing I wanted to do; but I got to know some of the locals who were frequent attenders, in that place. We developed some pretty unique and awesome relationships; much of it because of their willingness to put aside their preconceived notions of who I might be, in order to approach me. I remember one local butcher who I met there, when we were getting ready to celebrate our church's 100th anniversary with a catered meal, insisted that he was providing the meat at his cost, because I was the pastor who came into the Cozy. I had a few others make an appearance in the sanctuary, every now and then, and I believe I did a wedding, as well. There were also a few who said they would never step into a church, who found themselves making an appearance. Even one patron who was a retired train conductor and he, a non-church goer, showed up in the call I took after leaving Chillicothe, because his daughter lived there, and when he heard that she was going to come to our preschool with his grandchild, he insisted on coming to church to introduce her to me, because he proudly knew the pastor already. Those are stories that I was privileged to be a part in this thing called ministry. I did relish that place and the time spent there.

In our second lesson today, from the book of Ephesians, the author wrote these words: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 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. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

Did we catch some of those phrases? “he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall”; “that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross” and “you also are built together spiritually.” The “he” in that text, of course, is Jesus. In Christ, we are called to unity, in Christ we are called as one. This doesn’t mean we are called to all be the same, it does remind us, however, of our equal humanity as loved by God..

Human beings seem to almost constantly be in the business of separating, dividing, and running up against each other. We build all kinds of walls to separate us, not only physical ones, but probably even more so, other kinds of ones: economic, moral, gender, skin color, ethnic backgrounds, religious, and even walls among those who claim “Christian” as their faith. In the church we have erected walls both physically, and otherwise, that have often kept people out, some with intention, some

without intention, some our fault, some not our fault, some because of misinterpretation and bad reads, some because of our own or other people's brokenness.

My time in the Cozy Inn, became a living a breathing reminder of boundary lines we draw in the categorizing of other people. These boundary lines have often come from our own unique life experiences, some have been drawn by our culture, by our life learnings, both the good and the bad, some have become barriers to people encountering a loving God.

When each of us reaches across the aisle, especially to those whom we encounter who are normally pushed aside; those who we do not see as 'church people', God through the Holy Spirit, can cause stirrings in the lives of others, as well as, ourselves. Who, in the people intersections of this life, do you need to extend that God welcome in the name of forgiveness, in the name of grace, in the name of love? Sometimes it is the crossing of the least expected with the profound, that leads us to a deep spiritual awakening in our own faith life, as well as those around us. The church as a whole, is a place where God knows our name. May we discover that 'church' not only inside these walls but also more importantly beyond our walls where we have the opportunity to gather with others who also are seeking a 'dwelling place with God.' Amen.