

Ninth Sunday of Pentecost, Year B  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
July 22, 2018

*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.*

If this priest thing doesn't work out, I want to be a realtor. I have always had a thing for houses. I think it's genetic. I remember my parents dragging me to open houses after Sunday brunch when I was a kid. When I was really little, it was boring, but when I got a little older, I started to see the appeal of walking through empty houses and imagining what life might be like there. My family always lived in a beautiful house, even when money was tight—a faux Tudor home my father built, a beautiful brick colonial, a new-construction townhouse and, finally, a lovely cedar home sitting on the most gorgeous mountainous property you can imagine.

As an adult, I still have house fever. I go to open houses even when I'm not in the market, and I can't think of a week out of the last year when I haven't stopped into a hardware store for some, small, strange thing that my 1893 home can't live without. There is always something around our house that requires attention, or fixing, or painting, or leveling. It is so old and rickety that a marble would roll from one end to another and probably back again. But it is home, and I love it. In writing to the church at Ephesus, the author, probably a student or disciple of St. Paul, draws on the image of a home to make his point. The people to whom he is writing are divided—some are ethnically Jewish while some are ethnically Greek. They are trying to forge a new kind of community where the old ties no longer have ultimate meaning. And it is really hard. Their disagreement is bitter.

One side believes that the promises God made to Israel and to the descendants of Abraham mean that those people who come from Hebrew families are closer to God. And the other side, the Greek side, think that they have been adopted into God's covenant because of Jesus who came and erased all divisions. They both, of course, can find proofs for their point of view in the scriptures somewhere. The disagreement is deep and not easily resolved.

The author, trying to help them work through this fight, uses the image of them all living together in a house. The author tries to weave them into one family, despite their differences, by preaching the radical notion that their house is not built on being correct, but instead is built on Christ.

Someone outside the Christian faith might wonder why we keep two-thousand-year-old letters written to long-closed churches from long-dead pastors. It's a fair question. But what comes to me year after year listening to these words is this: nothing much has changed.

Our church is just as divided as theirs ever was. I don't mean St. Mark's, though I'm sure we have our disagreements. I mean all the Christians in the world. We are not a unified body filled with the praise and worship of God. Instead we break regularly over one issue or another. I understand why these divisions exist. There some kinds of Christianity that I can barely recognize as coming from the same root as what we practice here.

But our letter writer is admonishing the community at Ephesus and here at St. Mark's to live with other Christians as if we are all dwelling in the same household.

This is harder to do than to say. What about those Christians that limit the leadership potential of women, of queer people, of people of color? What about those Christians that preach a gospel of prosperity and talk about a Jesus that we hardly recognize? What about those Christians that use screens and guitars and strobe lights in worship? Surely we are not all cut from the same cloth. Ephesians is, I believe, saying just that. That somehow, we are supposed to look at these people who hold views different and sometimes repugnant to us and imagine that they living in the household of God too.

I confess this is not my strong suit. I know what Christianity is supposed to look like, thank you very much. So this letter is a bit of a shock to my system.

But consider: the living together in God's house is not something that we invented and have to maintain. It's a reality that God brought into being, and it is a gift to us.

I wonder, though, if Ephesians doesn't go far enough. I know that all Christians are to live peaceably in the household of God. It's a beautiful dream. But what if we take the vision of the letter and move it out another click. What if we are supposed to live together in unity with everyone we meet? One theory about the rise of Christianity from a tiny sect to a major world religion hypothesizes that during enormous plague events, Christians would move toward the horror to offer succor and basic nursing to people of all different faith traditions. Christians would band together to raise funeral monies for pagans who had no resources to bury their dead. Christians got a reputation as people who would care and would help without regard to the delineations that world insists upon.

That's the kind of world that's possible if we really believe that everyone we encounter is a housemate in the temple of God. And, I happen to think, that's our call. We know that God has knit us altogether beyond any kind of division. And it is up to us to live as if that's really true. Even if the person across the table from us is not our idea of what a Christian ought to look like.

*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. Amen.*