

## The Household of God

Ephesians 2:11-22

*Eighth Sunday after Pentecost/ 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021*

When I was a boy, I believed that God lived in the sanctuary of my church, the First Presbyterian Church of North Arlington, New Jersey. The sanctuary was truly a *sanctum*, holy and set apart. My maternal great-grandparents and grandparents were members of that church. My parents were married there. Both my brother and I were baptized in that space. Growing up I spent a lot of time at church and loved roaming around the buildings. There was the original church, the Parish House, a huge building that contained all the Sunday school rooms, and the main building which included the sanctuary, fellowship hall, offices, and church parlor. The sanctuary was different and special. As a boy I noticed how people treated that space with enormous respect. I remember one exchange between two adults. It was around Christmas and one member was about to write a check and give it to another member who was ordering poinsettias for the season. That member would not receive the check in the sanctuary as there shouldn't be moneychangers in the temple. I observed that exchange, it was cordial, but it struck me that this space is unlike any other space. And, in time, that was my experience too—a space unlike any other space. It was the dwelling place of God. This is where God lives. I could feel or sense something there that I felt or sensed nowhere else. And the feeling was even stronger the times when I happened to be in the sanctuary by myself, as a boy, later as a teenager, and as an adult, and by that time I had a key to the church and could visit whenever I wished. I was the youth minister when I was in college and was given an office and study space in the Parish House. Alone in the sanctuary, I was aware of a presence, a presence present in its absence. That's the only way I can describe it.

God lives in the sanctuary. But then I also learned the old rhyme, "Here's the church/here's the steeple/open the door/ and see all the people." I remember my mother telling me that the church is not a building, the church is a people. The church doesn't need a building, a church is more than its building. These memories and thoughts came to mind this week as we return to worship in the sanctuary after more than a year of being scattered and apart during the pandemic and slowly open up the building and as I listened to this text from Ephesians. The church is a people, true, but people also enjoy being in places and buildings that are set apart for worship, where the people gather. Many people told me this past year that they appreciated the fact that we continue to hold worship here, that we recorded worship from the sanctuary. Even though they couldn't physically be present here they could connect with the space and connect with the memories and feelings associated with this space. We saw this in Advent when we had the doors of the church open during Advent vespers for people to look in, just to get close to the sanctuary filled with light and decorated for Christmas. Many have shared with me, and I have heard how emotional it's been for people to be back in the sanctuary for worship. It was very moving for me on July 4 to stand near the Beechwood steps and watch people, all ages, walking up and eagerly entering into the sanctuary for worship. To be here, surrounded by others, to experience something profound and different in this space, together, which can't be experienced in quite the same way when viewed on a computer screen, this is special. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit doesn't work through the internet—there were a lot of very holy moments during online worship this past year—but there's something special about being here, gathered for a

shared experience, to hear the organ—live—to hear the voices of others singing, to pray together, to offer the Lord’s Prayer together.

“Collective effervescence” is one way to describe what happens when we’re together. That’s how organizational psychologist and author Adam Grant described, this week in a New York Times essay, what can happen when we gather together around a shared purpose. Collective effervescence, a phrase he borrows from the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, is that “sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose.” It’s a synchronous experience, sharing time and space. And there’s a joy – a *joie de vivre* – that’s found in the group, in the gathering. Joy in being together, having fun together, connecting and caring for one another, but also doing something together, a task, a mission, a vision, contributing something, giving something to others, to the world. There is enormous joy to be found there and that emotion, like all emotions, can be contagious, it literally infects those around us. (Negative or toxic emotions are also contagious and can just as easily be spread in the collective, especially through social media.) The joy found in collective effervescence can be creative and life-giving. We find ourselves with renewed energy and new perspectives, with drive and purpose. That’s a pretty good description of what happens when the people of God gather together.

The church is the people and the people of God enjoy being with the people of God in a space, a building that we also call church. Mixed metaphors, to be sure. All metaphors break down. Every metaphor is inadequate to convey experience. No metaphor is perfect especially when it comes to God and for the experience of God, and what happens when the people of God gather for worship, when the people of God live together and love one another and serve the world in love. This letter to the Ephesians is a case in point as it’s full of mixed metaphors. The author, perhaps Paul, is straining, striving, reaching for a way to describe for this community of Christ-followers in Ephesus what it’s like to be part of this strange, new, marvelous, wondrous gathering of people the Spirit is forming into something that is strange and new and marvelous and wondrous and even radical. A community of people bearing witness to the power of God to redeem and reconcile all things and all people into something new, a “new humanity.”

Last Wednesday, we read this text at our Session retreat, our first time together in one room in sixteen months. After I read the text and we shared what we heard in the reading, and then I invited the elders to walk around the building in silence, roam around indoors or outdoors. Explore the sanctuary, classrooms, classrooms. As you do, think of the people—imagine the people of the past that filled the sanctuary and classrooms, all the emotion and feelings these rooms have witnessed and the walls absorbed into them, all the lives that have been touched by the ministry of this church; consider the present – people who haven’t been here in more than a year, people we’ve missed, said good-bye to; and then imagine the people we haven’t met yet, people who are on the way here, people we will meet drawn to this space, to the ministry that takes place within these walls, to the way God is present in us, in the people of this community.

People—God bringing disparate groups of people, insiders and outsiders into one, breaking down barriers and dividing walls of hostility, in order to make peace. Strangers and aliens now become, by grace, friends, members of the household of God. A house—*oikos*—without walls and yet contained and held together, like a wall (another metaphor), which holds

us together. This “house,” which is not really a house, has a foundation but it’s not really a physical foundation. It’s built upon the foundation provided by prophets and apostles. And underneath this house, which is not really a house, is a foundation with a cornerstone that is not really a stone, but Jesus Christ. For “In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you are also built together spiritually—or built by the Spirit—into a dwelling-place for God.”

Can you sense how the text is straining after the metaphor that describes this experience? Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul used a more organic, dynamic metaphor of the body and its members to describe the church. Here, though, the author turns to the metaphor of construction, formation, of building and upbuilding a people not into a church, *per se*, which literally means a people called out (*ekklesia*) from the crowd into a particular group. There’s nothing inherently religious about the word church or *ekklesia* in Greek, it’s only become so due to the way early Christians adopted the word. But here God is not building a church, but a group of people that becomes a “holy temple.” A temple is not just another word for “church,” although it’s often used that way today. A temple is a dwelling-place of the gods, of the holy, of God. A temple is the place of meeting, the place where heaven and earth touch, where God and human beings meet and encounter each other, and for Ephesians that interaction, work, that relationship is forming a new humanity.

This new humanity being forged and formed by the Spirit in us is holy because God is dwelling in us—God dwells in and amongst us. We, together, through our lives, our lives together and apart, but especially when we’re together, we “house” the holy. We—in how we relate to one another and live together and love one another and enjoy one another and welcome all people to build a life, a new humanity, with Christ as the cornerstone, held together by the Spirit—become the place of meeting where we meet God in one another and, together, we become the place or, better, the people may come to experience and witness in us, the love and grace and justice of the living God who dwells in us and in whom we dwell. And this is, when we realize this and let it sink in, into our hearts, this is incredible. Amazing and awesome, indeed. Holy. We are the sanctuary of God and God lives in us.