

## A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD

(07/16/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 2:1-22

*“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.”*

This morning, I would like to continue to explore the apostle Paul’s *Letter to the Ephesians*. It is believed that Paul wrote this letter to his parishioners from prison, exhorting them to hold fast in the faith. At the time the letter was written, the Roman authorities had begun their persecution of Christians. It was a time of crisis.

In the second chapter of his letter, despite the literal life-or-death threats that his parishioners are facing, Paul frames life and death metaphorically. He tells his parishioners that they were dead because of their sin. They had become lost or absorbed in the materialistic values of their culture. Then, through their experience of the spirit of Christ, they became truly alive.

Paul presents life and death as stark opposites. However, life and death do not need to be seen as opposites, nor is death necessarily bad. We can think of life and death as two faces, two aspects of a whole, just as the two sides of a piece of paper can be different though they are essentially one. The death of the form, the old way of being in the world can lead to resurrection, to rebirth, to new life. The many different kinds of death we can experience in this life, e.g., the death of the ego, can be in the service of individuation, of the creative unfolding of God’s will for us and for our lives.

Paul tells us that we can be physically alive; we can be mentally alive; but we can be spiritually dead. I agree with Paul that there is a “dark spirit” that is alive and at work in the world. We can picture this dark spirit as a spirit outside us, a dark force or being that roams the earth. We can also think of it as a spirit inside us, a demonic force that can take us over and lead us to think, feel, say, and do things that are contrary to the teachings and the will of Jesus. When the dark spirit takes possession of us, we do not view the world and other people with the enlightened heart of which Paul spoke in the first chapter.

Paul tells his parishioners that there is a mean spirit that dwells within us. There is a self-centered spirit that dwells within us. There is a cold, unfeeling, uncompassionate spirit that dwells within us. I think of the continued battle against the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, and the white nationalist demonization of immigrants of color as an

example of the work of this dark spirit. I think of the Taliban's decree that girls and women in Afghanistan are not allowed to obtain an education, to work, to have a career, as an example of this dark spirit. Fear feeds this spirit, a fear that gives rise to anger, a need to control, a need to destroy. As Paul puts it, we are too often "children of wrath," behaving like little children who become angry when things don't go their way.

Paul then reminds us that God loves us. He tells us that God shows mercy toward us. He tells us that God patiently, faithfully, calls us forth into fullness of life. He tells us that God's creative spirit makes us alive with the spirit of Christ, that he makes us alive "in" the spirit of Christ. There is that wonderful pronoun "in" once again! The God of whom Paul speaks "raises us up."

As we noted last week, when Paul uses the term "redemption" or "redeemed," he means that something is raised up or restored to its proper place. Paul says that we are redeemed by the grace of God. By God's grace we are saved through our faith. This redemption is not of our own doing; it is the gift of God.

This reminds me of a teaching that the Zen master Charlotte Joko Beck shared in her book, *Everyday Zen*. In describing the practice of Zen meditation, the spiritual practice of finding and experiencing our true center, of becoming enlightened, Ms. Beck notes that the word meditation is taken from the passive form of the verb "*meditare*." It does not mean that we move to the center by our own volition, by our own will; rather, *we are moved to the center*. Ms. Beck tells us that there is something (a Christian would say there is Someone) who is moving us, who is pulling us toward the center. All we have to do is let go of the attachments that pull us off center and let the Holy Spirit do its work!

In the first section of this letter, Paul enumerates the blessings that come to those who are "in Christ Jesus." In the second section he calls attention to the sufferings that come to those who are living their lives without Christ. Those who are without Christ are not in a covenantal relationship with God; they are strangers to God, or God is a stranger to them. This is why they have no hope either in this life or in life after death.

As commonly understood, life and death are two different states of being. To be dead is to have no feeling. To be spiritually dead is to be apathetic, to have no empathy or compassion. It is to be cold and rigid. This kind of death leads to decay. The dark spirits come upon us; they take possession of us when we are self-centered rather than Christ-centered.

To be alive is to have feeling. To be spiritually alive is to care. People who are spiritually alive feel empathy and compassion. They are warm and flexible. They are vital; they grow. The spirit of life fills us when we are Christ-centered. It brings with it an experience of joy!

Paul tells us that the experience of Christ within us leads to a transformed life. This transformed life finds expression in good works. Paul tells us that we are actually “created for good works.” He says, “we are what he has made us: created in Christ Jesus for good works.” Both as individuals and as a church, we are called to do God’s work in the world!

I recently read about a man who killed his girlfriend and then killed himself. In his online postings, he wrote that he was not afraid to die because then he would be with Jesus in heaven. According to the teaching of his church, salvation has nothing to do with the way we live our life. His church taught that if entrance into heaven were based on the kind of life we live, no one would be admitted. (I, by the way, don’t agree with this. For example, think of the Prodigal Son or the woman caught in adultery, or the thief on the cross.) From the teachings of his church, the man concluded that if it doesn’t matter to God what kind of life he lives, he might as well kill his girlfriend, with whom he was angry, and then himself. He posted online that since he believes in Jesus, when he dies, he will go to heaven. (By the way, I’m not sure this man really believes in Jesus or he wouldn’t do this.)

Paul never says that it doesn’t matter how we live our life. He tells us that as individuals and as a church we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works;” we are created to be “the fulfillment of Christ.” Faith, the quality of our relationship with God through Christ, will invariably give rise to good works. I don’t see how the killing of innocent people or turning our backs on immigrant children fits into Paul’s theology.

Paul tells us that when we are separated from God, we forfeit the blessings God would bestow upon us. I see this a little differently. I don’t think we can ever be separated from the love of God that is present to us in Christ Jesus. I don’t think we can ever be separated from God. I can’t imagine a state of being within me, or even a place in the universe, no matter how dark, where God is not. This is because I am basically a monist. As the philosopher of religion Huston Smith has said,

*To the polytheist, there are many gods.*

*To the monotheist, there is one God.*

*To the atheist, there is no god.*

*To the mystic, there is only God.*

If, as the mystics say, there is only God, then how could we be separated from God?

I know that we can *feel* separated from God. We can feel lost and alone. People who are struggling with depression often feel cut off from God, adrift in an uncaring universe. They cannot experience the presence of God within them. This is why depressed people often feel so guilty, why they feel so helpless and hopeless, why they experience so little joy. When you are depressed, you are not cut off from God, not separated from God, but it *feels* as if you were. This is precisely when you are most apt to make ill-advised and self-destructive decisions.

Paul tells his parishioners and us that Christ breaks down the walls that divide us. This is true on a social level. There are walls that divide us from our brothers and sisters: walls of race, sexual orientation, even religion, walls that find expression in prejudice and discrimination, walls that separate Us from Them.

Paul, who was speaking specifically of the theological and cultural wall that separated Jew and Gentile, tells us that Christ breaks down the walls that divide us, just as Jesus broke down the wall between the Jews and the Samaritans in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. We witness to this teaching when we sang our opening hymn this morning: “In Christ There Is No East or West.” Paul tells us that the spirit of Christ breaks down or dissolves the walls that give rise to hostility between groups, leading to the creation “of one new humanity.”

Doesn't it make sense that it will not be through power, but through love, that we will be able to break down or dissolve the walls that have been erected by those who believe that only white evangelical Christians who are heterosexual and cisgendered are true Americans, walls that split our people into Us and Them, which becomes Us against Them? Power can't break down the walls of a racism that is fueled by fear. We need to reclaim the vision on which our nation was founded, the belief that people of all races, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups can live together in peace and harmony. This vision, by the way, is unique in human history. We haven't always been faithful to it, but it is what has made us great!

Paul tells us that when we keep God on the margins of our life, we become estranged from God. Paul then reminds us that we are no longer strangers and aliens from each other and within ourselves. In this glorious affirmation, he tells us that we are “citizens with the saints” and “members of the household of God.” Paul says,

*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.*

In this passage, Paul calls us as individuals and as a church to be “members of the household of God.” He calls us to open ourselves to the spirit of Christ, to “see with the eyes of our heart enlightened” that we might come to love our brothers and sisters, even those who declare themselves to be our enemies. We are to become a dwelling place for God!

If we become a “dwelling place for God,” if God dwells within our heart, we can never be alone! Just as there are dark forces present within us, the saints are also present as spiritual realities within us, spiritual forces that can do battle with the dark forces that seek to overwhelm us!

As our closing hymn this morning, *Built on the Rock*, one of my favorite hymns, reminds us, the church can be a dwelling place for God. However, the church is not the only place where God dwells. Each one of us is a dwelling place for God! For those of us who are Christians, Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of this dwelling. It is his presence that joins us together, that keeps us together, that holds the world together, even when things seem to be falling apart.

If we open ourselves to Paul’s teaching, we will come to discover the deeper meaning of the dichotomy of life and death. We will know what it means to be spiritually dead, and we will know what it means to truly live. We will realize that we are temples of God’s Holy Spirit, the God dwells within us, and that God is working to create a loving, caring, compassionate world through us!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

## **RESPONSE TO THE WORD: A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

The Lebanese prophet and mystic Kahlil Gibran, in his spiritual guide entitled *The Prophet*, helps us understand the importance of giving. Gibran (speaking through “the prophet”) says,

*You give but little when you give of your possessions.*

*It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.  
For what are your possessions but things you keep and guard  
for fear you may need them tomorrow?  
And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the over-prudent dog burying bones  
in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city?  
And what is fear of need but need itself?  
Is not dread of thirst when your well is full, the thirst that is  
unquenchable?*

Gibran's "prophet" sounds a lot like Jesus, who said,

*"Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume  
and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourself treasures in  
heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in  
and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew  
6:20)*

When Jesus calls us to be faithful stewards of all that is entrusted to us, he is not just talking about our property; he is not just talking about our stocks and bonds, our wealth; he is talking about our heart. He is telling us that when we harbor a dread of thirst when our well is full, we suffer the thirst that is unquenchable.

It is in this spirit, the spirit of true stewardship, that we return that which God has given us to God, to the creation of God's kingdom on earth.

Let us consecrate the offerings that we place in the offering plate and on the altar of our hearts and dedicate them to your ongoing creative work in the world.