

Over these summer months, I'll be picking up a thread in the lectionary on the book of Ephesians, which we heard from this morning, because the readings, you'll notice, will go on from that book all summer, and I'm going to be following them. So, I'm not going to pick up on all that was said this morning about sheep and shepherds, I've had quite enough of that in recent times. But I am going to talk about Ephesians, which is a great book. And one of the main themes about Ephesians is Paul's writing to the church. He writes about what the church is, how it's to understand itself, how it's to behave, and I think there are lessons that we would do well to heed.

And as we turn to the epistle reading today, from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we are struck immediately by the fact that human nature hasn't changed much since St. Paul was writing his letters. The church he was writing to was deeply divided, and that's probably what precipitated him to write to them in the first place. They were divided between the Gentiles, who'd converted to the faith, and the Jewish believers, who were the first followers of Jesus. And that division, between Jew and Gentile, existed across all the early church in its various forms and communities, which is why that theme, of how those two communities can come together as one, pervades so much of our New Testament and its writings.

The early church was riven with two factions, here labeled the circumcision, that's the Jews, and the uncircumcision, which is the Gentiles. The labels might be different, but there's a process going on here that we're all too familiar with. St. Paul's writing to a church who were in the process of othering. They identified a group of others based on certain characteristics. The characteristic that's at play in St. Paul's time is circumcision, but it could be any number of things. Could be skin color, could be socio-economic background, could be political affiliation, could be anything. But the effect of othering is to create a divide between us and them.

That's why St. Paul talks a couple of times in this reading about both groups. He talks about both groups, and the presence of a dividing wall. And there's something disturbingly familiar about St. Paul's language here. St. Paul is writing, in his letter, to encourage the church in Ephesus to overcome their divides. He wants them to rediscover the unity that they have in Christ Jesus. And I want to draw out two things from what Paul is saying in this passage, two grounds for unity, both mentioned in the last verse of our reading. He's writing to a church, but I think there are principles here that we might be able to apply more widely.

The first thing I'll pull out is this. He writes, "You are being built together." And the "you" here in this phrase is plural.

I'm rather disappointed that our American translation doesn't have y'all, because that would be a much better way of translating what Paul is saying here. "Y'all are being built together." Christianity is not an individual pursuit. It's impossible to live what the New Testament presents as a Christian life without belonging to a Christian community. The Christian walk is not done solo; it's a journey we make in the company of others.

My dad, as many of you know, was a priest, and he used to bring out, when talking about this theme, a piece of coal. In fact, this very piece of coal, which I have in my hand, which is... It must be 60, 70 years old now. He came from a mining town and a mining family, and what struck him was that if you saw a burning fire of coal, and one of the coals like this fell out, it would soon lose its heat and its warmth. On its own, it would very soon go cold. Which is like us, when we fall away from the Christian community, from the church, we go cool, we get cold.

And not all the pieces of coal look the same. None of them will be like us. St. Paul says elsewhere, "There is no Greek or Jew, male or female, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free. But Christ is all and is in all. We are one in Christ Jesus." There's a unity that we share in Christ that's deeper than anything else, even political affiliation. which is why churches are not gathering places of like-minded people. They're not a club. We here at St. James are the body of Christ, the body of Christ in this place. and as such, we're called to model how to live together in unity. We're a community without dividing walls that can focus on what unites us, rather than more superficial things that could divide us.

In some ways, living and growing as a Christian is comparable to learning a language. You could, I suppose, learn to speak a foreign language sitting on your own with a Babel app. But the best way to learn a language is to be amongst speakers of that language. Then you really get to be immersed in it and learn how to speak it well. And so it is with faith. We need the Christian community in order to learn to speak and live the language of the saints. Our character, our Christian character, is formed in the context of community, and its formation that we're about. We're not a club into self-improvement. We're into formation. having our lives shaped after the form of Christ Jesus. We're to grow into His likeness.

We can learn from the pelicans that we see on our seashore, flying in that V formation. It's been calculated that flying like that, rather than being on their own, makes them 14% more efficient. They can go that much further, because they have the aerodynamic advantage of being in that formation with others. And so it is with us: people

who work together and share a common direction and sense of community make better progress.

The second phase I want to say something about is this. Paul talks about "a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit." Paul's drawing here on the Old Testament imagery of the temple. In Christ, he says, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. The temple was at the heart of Old Testament worship. It was the place where God dwelt. The very presence of God was in the Ark of the Covenant, which was placed in the Holy of Holies. If you were here last week, you might have heard, or you remember, Christina talking about that, about when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem by David, and placed in the temple, in the Holy of Holies.

The New Testament makes the amazing claim that since Jesus came amongst us, God dwells not in His temple, but with His people. And the great symbol of that was at Jesus's crucifixion, when the curtain in the temple was torn in two, as a sign of God's presence being amongst His people, and not localized. As Jesus returned to His people by His Spirit, His presence wasn't confined to a particular place, because the Spirit dwelt in the heart and amongst believers. A group of Christians can be compared to the temple in Jerusalem, because this was now where God made His dwelling.

It's an amazing claim. It says much about the uniqueness of a church community; that we're not just a human organization, we are also the body of Christ, His temple, the dwelling place of God. God is close by, and He's with us. He's with His people. And there's a verse I love in this, tucked away in this chapter, where Paul writes this. "For through Jesus we have access in one Spirit to the Father." And that word "access", the Greek equivalent, it's translated from a Greek word *prosagoge* which has a slightly technical meaning. It's to be ushered into the presence of the king. *Prosagoge* is to gain access to royalty. And it's an image of what Jesus has done, bringing us into the presence of the Father.

There's a story told in the Civil War about a soldier in Washington, whose mother was taken ill. So, he wanted to go and visit her, but his commanding officer wouldn't let him go. And another soldier came by and found him weeping. And he told him the story, that he wasn't allowed to go and see his mother. So, the other soldier said, "Let me see if my father can help." So, he tagged along with him, and they went to the White House. And the upset soldier couldn't believe, as they went right through, past all the guards, into the Oval Office, and... If there was an Oval Office then. But anyway, there was a desk there, and Abraham Lincoln was sitting behind it. And

it was Todd Lincoln, was the boy who'd taken the soldier and taken him into the presence of his father. And Abraham Lincoln heard his story and said, "That's fine, you can go and see your mother." He'd been taken into the presence of the President. Through Jesus, we have access to God the Father, who's not far off. He's with us, amongst us.

So, Paul's saying some amazing things here about the church. We, at St. James, have a high calling. And he reminds the warring Ephesians that Jesus is our peace. He has made both groups into one. He has broken down the dividing wall. Jesus has made peace, reconciling two groups, and proclaiming peace. Through Jesus, we have been reconciled to God, and we can be reconciled with each other. And we who are a reconciled community need to be a reconciling community. We have to pursue reconciliation. St. Paul says elsewhere, "We have a ministry of reconciliation." We're to model unity and to seek unity.

That's why the work of our outreach committee, who do a great work, is so important, because we wouldn't be a healthy church if we just wallowed in our own unity and peace. We are called to strive to build bridges, to express our unity with groups who are very different to us: with refugees, the poor, the unhoused. I was delighted to hear recently that because of what Katina, in our choir, gave an announcement a few months ago, and as a result of that, we have half a dozen people now working at St. Mark's in their food pantry ministry, which is a wonderful expression of our unity with those who are very different to ourselves. Remember that in Christ, there is no us and them.

And finally, maybe there are things here that we can apply outside of the church community to our other networks, to our families. Maybe there are situations where we are called to be the reconcilers. As people of faith, we have grounds for hope that dividing walls can be taken down, that peace and unity can prevail. May we who pray for peace and reconciliation also be agents of reconciliation.

Amen.