

# **First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan**

**Sunday, April 25, 2021**

**“Ephesians, Chapter 2”**

**Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor**

## **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Welcome and Announcements**

Friends, good morning! Welcome to worship at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth. I'm delighted that you decided to join us today.

Here in Michigan during this past week we have been jumping between seasons with snow storms one day and beautiful spring weather the next! Today, we can be grateful that within every season in life, through every challenge in life, God is present and actively at work.

It is a blessing that we are able to partner with God today in mission. To that end, this past Saturday, here in our church's parking lot, we had a collection for Hope Clinic in Ypsilanti, collecting reusable shopping bags and baking mixes in order to strengthen their pantry supply. Thanks to everyone who generously donated to this cause. This coming week, on Sunday, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, our church is sending a team of volunteers to Detroit to make 400 takeout lunches for Crossroads Soup Kitchen, located on West Grand Boulevard. If you wish to join this volunteer team between 9:30 and 1:30 next Sunday, please reach out to Chuck Hodge via email. His details can be found in today's online church bulletin.

Now while you're checking out our online bulletin, please make sure you take a moment and sign into our church's online friendship pad. We always find it fascinating to see the many places—in Michigan, throughout our nation, and throughout the world—where people are watching us each week.

In this worship service today, we will be carrying on in our sermon series on the New Testament book of Ephesians. Ashley Ashley is here and she will be preaching for us. I'm grateful to her and to Darlene Maginley, who is bringing a word to our children during this worship service. I'm also grateful today that our Chancel Choir who, through the magic of prerecorded videos, are leading us in praise. None of this would be possible without Susan Underhill, who brings all of these pieces magically together.

Let us now prepare our hearts for worship as we turn to God in prayer. Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for making us one this day in worship. You have brought us together from different homes, from different experiences of life, at different times, to build your church in Christ. You have made us one family of faith. As one family we praise you and worship you today, for you are holy, majestic, merciful and kind. We pray your blessing upon this time of worship. May it glorify you and draw each of us closer to you in faith. We thank you, dear God, for the peace which you bring to our lives, to our nation, and to our world. Help us to lean into your peace this day, even as we confess before you that we do not always live our lives as your loving children. Our own needs too often take precedent over the needs of others, and we close ourselves off from the Spirit's work within us.

Forgive us dear God please open our hearts and our minds to your Spirit's leading here and now. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

**Chancel Choir sings "Jesus Shall Reign"**  
**[Recorded in 2018]**

**Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry — Children's Message**

Hey, kids. Do you remember last week when we talked about how sometimes you can focus on the wrong thing and not see the whole big picture that God has for us? Well, I want to tell you a story about a guy in the Bible. His name was Saul and Saul was really not a nice guy. He, for some reason, decided that he didn't like Christians. This was not long after Jesus had gone back up to heaven, and a lot of people were really believing in Jesus and the church was growing well.

Paul was of the Jewish faith. And he was kind of a big deal in the Jewish faith, so he didn't like that people were becoming Christians. So he made it his mission in life to hunt down Christians and to throw them in prison or even have them killed. He was on his way to a city called Damascus one day, and he was going there to find some other Christians to throw into prison. Suddenly a blinding light came down from heaven and Paul couldn't see anymore. He heard a voice and the voice said, "Paul, this is Jesus. Why are you doing this to my people?" The people with Paul could hear a sound but they didn't know what was going on. Paul couldn't see any more so they had to take him by the hand and lead him to Damascus.

For three days Paul was at a friend's house in Damascus and he couldn't see anything. He was completely blind. In that time he spent the days praying to God and fasting, which means not eating so that you can focus on other things. Well, God did a pretty extreme thing with Paul when Paul was focused on the wrong thing. He completely took his sight so that he was blind. But that made Paul focus on the right things.

By the way, he was known as Saul and Paul. Usually when we talk about Saul we mean the one that was kind of mean, who was trying to hurt Christians. By the time that God had talked to him, his name became Paul, and everyone referred to him as Paul. He wrote Ephesians, the book of the Bible that we have been talking about last week and will be talking about for the next few weeks.

After starting out as not a very nice guy, Paul ended up being one of the biggest advocates for Christianity that there has ever been. He traveled hundreds of miles. He started dozens of churches. He converted thousands of people to Christianity!

So, even if we are focused on the wrong things, if we listen to God, he can tell us where our focus really should be--on Him and on loving others.

Let's pray together today. Dear God, like Paul, we can oftentimes be looking in the wrong place and seeing the wrong things. Thank you for giving us prayer and for giving us the Bible and for giving us other Christians who can help us to keep our focus on the right

things and the right place, how best to always keep our focus on Jesus Christ, and what He gave us on the cross. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.

### **Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Scripture Lesson**

Our scripture lesson today comes from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus. It's a reading of Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 13 through 22. The Apostle Paul writes:

<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor – Sermon: Ephesians, Chapter 2**

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that, as your word is read and proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you have to say to us today. Amen.

Back during our junior year of college, Brendan and I had an opportunity to travel to Turkey as part of our theology degree program. We spent three weeks in January of 2010 traveling around the former Asia minor, visiting ancient Christian sites, and putting emphasis on Ephesus, the city at the center of our current preaching series.

In addition to religious sites our group also visited a number of museums. One afternoon our professor received special permission to allow us access into one of the museum's backrooms in order to view some pieces that were not currently on display.

Among those items was a single block with an inscription in Greek that roughly translated to, "No foreigner is to enter the forecourt around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will be responsible for his own death." You see, at one point this block and its inscription were a part of the wall of the temple in Jerusalem. The holiest site for the Jewish people, the temple consisted of courts, each one a little holier and more exclusive than that one that came before it.

First there was the court of the Gentiles, then the court of the women of Israel, then the court of the Israelite men, then the court of the priests, and finally the holy place, where only the chief priests could enter once a year. As the name suggests, Gentiles could only enter in the very first court. Between it and the court of the women of Israel there was a four-and-a-half-foot tall wall of marble. At various intervals on that wall, stone slabs like the one I saw in the museum in Turkey were inlaid to warn the Gentiles to stay back.

This emphasis on separation needs to be considered within the history of the Jewish people. For generations, the Jewish community was defined by their bloodline leading back to Abraham and the covenant that Abraham made with God. Their laws and commandments served to preserve them from the influence of other nations and shaped them into God's people, a people set apart from the rest of the world.

In the verse directly leading up to our passage for today we are reminded that this distinction was so important to the Jewish community, the act of circumcision was intended to be a physical reminder of the covenant that was made between Abraham and God. But in verse 14 of our text for today, Paul challenges this way of thinking with a bold proclamation. In it he states that Jesus has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. This use of imagery is certainly intentional. Paul, a lifelong Jew himself, is suggesting that the new work being done in Jesus is so powerful, so influential, that it has the ability to topple all the boundaries that have been in place for centuries. What exactly is this new work?

Verse 15 tells us that Jesus' purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of two, thus making peace and one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross. The new work that has been established in the life of Christ is to bring peace, unity, and reconciliation. Not just peace, unity, and reconciliation between humanity and God, but also between people.

Now I'm sure I don't have to tell any of you that the work of unity is hard. You can't simply throw two people who previously hated, or at least disliked each other, into the same room and expect them to get along due to their now newfound proximity. I've witnessed this more than once.

While I won't share a story about people, I will share one about my cat. About two years ago, Brendan and I had the chance to house-sit for one of my seminary professors for about a year while he and his family were away on sabbatical. It was a wonderful experience except for one major challenge. Our cat Augie and their cat Tiger Lily did not exactly get along. For weeks whenever these two happened to encounter each other in the same room, there would be a flurry of cat slapping and hissing. The forced unity that I tried to create by putting them together in the same space just wasn't enough. In the end the only time these two calmed down was when they wanted to snuggle with either Brendan or myself. Their love for us is what allowed for peace to be created between the two of them! In a way, the same is true for the Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is their peace. Only by first coming to know and love Jesus, can they then hope to know and love each other.

The first half of chapter 2 talks extensively about how humanity comes to be in a right relationship with God. Verses 4 and 5 tell us that humanity is reconciled because of God's great love for us. God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive with Christ. Even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace we have been saved. There is nothing we can do to earn God's grace, nothing we can do to reconcile ourselves to God. We can only

receive grace as a gift, one that Christ freely extends to us out of His rich mercy, vast forgiveness and, of course, great love

Just as we are reconciled to God only through God's actions, so are we reconciled to each other in the same way. True peace, unity and reconciliation between individuals is not something we can achieve on our own but must be established through the work that Jesus has done through the cross.

In his biblical translation, The Message, Eugene Peterson puts it this way, "The cross got us to embrace and that was the end of hostility." But how, exactly, does the cross get us past the point of separation and hostility into the point of being willing to embrace? Paul states that it is the sacrificial grace of God to all people that are gathered together in order to form a new humanity.

In the Greek language, there are two words for "new" First there is "*naos*," which means something is new in terms of time. A thing which is "*naos*" has come into existence recently but other things like it have existed before. For example, a pencil produced in a factory is *naos*. It's new in that moment, but thousands of pencils just like it have existed before. However the second word for new in Greek is "*kainos*," which means new in terms of quality. A thing that is "*kainos*" is new in the sense that nothing like it has ever previously existed.

The second form of new, "*kainos*," is what Paul uses to describe this new form of humanity. That was a major claim for first century Jewish and Gentile hearers. Previously, it was expected that Gentile believers would assume the rituals and practices of Jewish believers, essentially needing to become Jewish first in order to then become Christian. Paul, however, challenges that, stating that when Jesus brings together believers of different backgrounds he produces a new kind of person out of both. The grace that both received through faith transforms them into people who are now able to fully reconcile.

Peterson translated it this way in The Message: "God has crafted a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody." This fresh start comes with a fresh purpose. God has a new plan in mind for these new people. In verse 22 we read, "That in Him you two are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His spirit."

For Judaism, the temple was considered sacred and holy because it was believed to be the place where God would dwell among God's people. The purpose of the courts which separated the Gentiles from the Israelites was to protect them from the unattainable holiness that is God. But now through the work of Jesus Christ, through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, humanity and God have been brought together.

God is now constructing a new temple, with Jesus as the cornerstone, one that is built on Christ and designed according to the will of Christ. What does this new design look like? It does not consist of stone arches, pillars, altars or walls, but instead it is designed with human beings. Human beings have been reconciled to both God and one another, are now one new humanity, and are equally invited to bring their gifts and passions, their stories and their experiences, to this new building project together. Only together, are we invited to create a holy space, to form a community of faith in which the living God will be delighted to take up residence again.

I love Peterson's translation. He puts it, "...a temple in which God is quite at home." Friends, these are the words that Paul had for the Gentile and Jewish believers. I'm sure it

won't surprise you to hear that they continue to be true for us today. Although we all come from different places, although the world might divide us along various lines, including race, gender, socioeconomic status, political party, nationality, and background, Jesus is calling each of us to join Him in the ministry of building a place for God to dwell.

While this is a call that is extended to the global church, it is also offered more locally. It's an invitation for us to ponder how we are joining together as a church, to build a new place for God to dwell right here in Plymouth. When I first started here, about six months ago, one of the members of our Human Resources team sat down with Pastors Emily, Mark and myself, and reminded us that every time someone new joins the staff, we are creating a new thing. The new person shouldn't just be expected to assimilate into the old staffing structure but should be invited to help shape the way the staff will function moving forward.

I love this image and I think that this is exactly what God is reminding us here in Ephesians. Every time someone new joins our community, whether in person or perhaps online, we are invited to incorporate their gifts and abilities, their very presence, into the life of our church, to celebrate an opportunity to grow. Those who are new are not expected to become like us. But together, *all* are then invited to become something new, something shaped by God.

This type of change is hard. It requires us to let go of what we might want in order to embrace the plan that God has. It requires us to be flexible with our own desires and gifts. It requires us to allow God to place us alongside people that we might not have expected to partner with, and requires us to trust that the new temple that God is building, the new community of faith that God is gathering, is even more beautiful and wonderful than the one that we already knew before.

Friends, this type of change is, indeed, hard. I won't deny that! Thanks be to God that God is the one who leads us in all of this work, and that we are not left to do it alone. Thanks be to God that God is the one who teaches us about God's grace and God also transforms us into one united people. Thanks be to God! God is calling us—First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth—to build on the work of Jesus and create a place for God to dwell with us forever. Amen.

### **Ashley S. Ashley — Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the gift of grace, for the ways that you constantly reach out to us and draw us into your arms. Throughout history we have sought to divide and separate from those who we deem not like us. We label and avoid those we find hard to love, but in your Son Jesus Christ we learn that you cast a wide net. You invite the stranger and the foreigner, the Jew and the Gentile to be your beloved. As you gather us all together, you transform us into your new people, to become one as you make us your children. You also make us siblings, called to work together in your name.

God, as this new united people, we pray for all of those who have been abused, forgotten, wrongfully accused, objectified, dehumanized and stigmatized. We pray for those who are experiencing grief, illness, depression, emptiness and fatigue. Grant us the courage to live into the power of your grace, to be transformed by your love, to seek forgiveness and work for justice. Make us a people willing to sit with and care for all of those in our community. Together, may we join hands and seek your face, building each other up as sisters and brothers in Christ, so that we might be a holy place where you can dwell, starting with today.

Let each new day be an opportunity to embrace this glorious calling, as we seek after you.  
May we start with praying the words that you have taught us to say,

Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name.  
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom,  
and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.

**Chancel Choir sings “The Majesty and Glory of Your Name”  
[Recorded in 2019]**

### **Ashley S. Ashley — Benediction and Blessing**

Friends, as you go from this space, may we learn how to lean into God's grace more fully each new day. May that grace transform us into new people. And as God's new people, may we follow the example of Christ, our cornerstone, and may we learn how to build a new temple right here at FPCP, so that God can be quite at home in Plymouth!

And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, and may the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and forever give you peace. Amen, and go with grace, my friends!