

We Are the Lord's Building Project

Ephesians 1:13-22 (NIV)

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

I've never built a house, but I did go through my first remodeling project here with the church. From it, I learned that contractors around here rarely do what they say they're going to do when they say they're doing to do it. I also learned that the more you can involve people of the congregation, the more ownership they feel in the project as a whole. At the same time, I learned that the more people involved, the more opinions you get to hear, and the more decisions then have to be made. And when you make a decision, that means someone's opinion and thoughts are not the direction you decide to go. This can make people feel ignored and that their advice and their opinions and feelings are meaningless. When this happens, the building project has a potential to become an "us" vs. "them" mentality, which build a dividing wall of hostility instead of a project meant to build people together.

The Apostle Paul, maybe the greatest Christian missionary ever, experienced the same. He certainly had strategies when going around building churches. He would go to urban population centers and start with those worshiping at the local synagogue (people who adhered to the Jewish faith). If, but really more when, some of them rejected Paul and the message of Christ, he would go to the non-Jews - the Gentiles - and preach to them. Christ would be the thing to bring Jews and Gentiles together in one place, one building, to form one church.

But Paul ran into problems doing so because the Jews were instructed from the Old Testament of the Bible to stay away from non-Jews, Gentiles, lest they become unclean. They were separated by diet, circumcision, and other practices. So, the Jews would push away from the Gentiles, disassociate from them. Some built dividing walls of hostility in these new churches.

Do we build dividing walls of hostility? Our remodeling project decisions have come and gone, but I still reflect on how we handled it as a whole, how some put up walls from that and we haven't yet broken them down. But right now I see the potential for other dividing walls being built around church, between God's people. Our COVID pandemic has exacerbated our differences of thoughts, opinions, and feelings. You bring up wearing a mask right now and everyone has an opinion, and there is not an overriding majority opinion or one clear cut moral decision that everyone obviously should make in regards to wearing a mask. For one person who is at high risk and has a compromised immune system, they want people to wear masks so that they don't get sick and that others don't get sick and potentially die from it. This is a real concern. They say the loving and considerate thing to do is for everyone to wear a mask. Another person who also doesn't want anyone to get sick or die from COVID has a problem with wearing the mask because it negatively and severely affects their health and well-being. And so they say that not forcing them to wear a mask is the loving and considerate thing to do. More differences are highlighted when talking about how political this whole COVID thing is, to presenting and repeating facts without valid sources, to the dismissal of information saying that it goes against common sense, and the list goes on.

I don't expect us to be united and all think the exact same way about wearing masks during a pandemic because we don't have all the information. However, when we dismiss someone out of hand because they think and feel differently than me on these issues, then I build a dividing wall. When I call someone a moron or an idiot because they make a statement about mask wearing or COVID that I don't agree with, I build a dividing wall of hostility. When I avoid talking with someone about all of this because I see that they're not wearing a mask and I assume that they're selfish and unloving or I see them wearing a mask and I assume that they're feeding into propaganda and living in fear, I build a dividing wall of hostility.

This is what Satan wants. He wants us to be divided. He wants us to be mad at other people for not thinking like I do. He wants us isolated and alone because that is when we are weaker and more vulnerable. He wants our differences to tear us, to tear our church, apart. He will use opinions and thoughts and feelings on building projects as well as on wearing masks to do it.

For the Ephesian Christians, dividing walls were built because of the ethnic and religious differences between the Jews and Gentiles, but there was a way to demolish these dividing walls. Paul wrote this letter to tell them that Christ is the solution. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." (verses 13-16)

Christ brought the two groups – Jews and Gentiles – together. They were divided because of Old Testament laws, made the Jews think the Gentiles could never be God's people, could never have the same status before God as they had because of something like circumcision. But in Christ, these differences were destroyed. He died for both the Jews and the Gentiles equally and fully – one death to forgive all their sins, one life lived in perfection for both groups. Through Christ's blood, his sacrifice, all of humanity, all people, every single one of us, has been reconciled, brought near, to God. "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." (verses 19-22) God brought Jews and Gentiles together. He made them one house, one building. They were the Lord's building project.

What was true for the Ephesians some 2000 years ago is true for us today. We, as a church, as a congregation, are not brought together because we dress the same or have the same interests or the same backgrounds or come from the same place or have the same thoughts and feelings and opinions on COVID or on wearing masks. We are brought together by Christ. He put to death our hostility over our differences. He killed it. It's dead. The wall has been knocked down! Rejoice that the Lord has brought us together by his blood – no matter the chasm of differences that exist between us. Jesus reconciled us to God by taking away our sins. As he did so, we are then also reconciled to each other, brought into one group in which God lives. We are the Lord's building project along with the Ephesian Christians!

Another thing I learned from our church's building project: the work is never really done. I've said it to many people that as soon as the cross goes up on the front of the building, which is going to happen soon, then the remodeling project is officially over. But as one project is finished, I realize that it's not really over. Now is when the maintenance begins and continues. Cleaning needs to be done. Spots have to be puttied, fixed, repainted. Attention has to be given to other areas of the building – to the bathrooms, to the lawn, to the parking lot. Clean up days will be scheduled. Building projects are never really over.

As the Lord's building project, after we are brought to faith we are not simply finished this side of heaven as if we are an artifact on display in a museum. We need constant maintenance because we are a living stone part the Lord's holy temple. God dwells in us. So by his Word and his power, he continues to care for us, maintain us in our faith in him, and grow us in that faith. Then he adds new pieces all the time as more and more people are built into the Church, this body of believers. With every baptism and every confirmation, we see the Lord continue his building project, his Church. When you see people taking time to check in others and see if they can meet their needs, giving more of their treasures to help those in need and continuing to spread God's Word, you see the Lord building his Church. When you see people sanitizing, taking out the trash, vacuuming, setting up for worship, mowing the lawn, you are seeing the Lord building us together as his holy temple, lined up on him, Christ Jesus our chief cornerstone.

When we remember that the Lord has built us together to be his Church, we treat our differences, well, differently. We can think and feel differently on building projects and COVID and wearing masks, but it's how we react, how we treat people, what we say – these are the things that change. Instead of building dividing walls of hostility with name-calling and avoidance, we spend time listening and trying to understand. We treat people as individuals, and hope that in taking our time doing so that we are making them feel heard and not dismissed. We take this time and allow that our opinions and thoughts and feelings might actually change, and maybe they should. In response to someone else's thoughts, opinions, and feelings, we choose our words and reactions carefully, to speak not what dismisses, not what puts down, but what uplifts, what builds up. When treat each other this way, we continue to see the Lord's building project take shape as we are built up together by God as his holy temple in which he lives.

We are the Lord's building project. If you don't like building projects or are frustrated because you know that they're never truly done, I'm sorry, but you can't escape this one. And, honestly, we want to be a part of this. We want the Lord continuing to work on you and me and build us up through his Word. His blood has brought us near and together, people who have all sorts of differing ideas and opinions, and his still small voice continues to do so, continues to build up his Church. He has put to death our dividing walls of hostility. And so we leave them broken down and don't build new ones. Rejoice that we are the Lord's building project and that he continues to build us up as a holy temple in him. Amen.