

Reuniting Old Friends
September 29, 2013
Ephesians 2:19-22

This morning's reading comes from the second chapter of Ephesians. Verses 19 through 22 conclude a section focused on unity in Christ.

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 are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words from the letter to the church at Ephesus. Amen.

Let us pray . . . Loving God you have invited us to participate in your household. Help us to live into our role as a part of this church and the church universal. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Let me begin with a story . . . ¹

"Once there were 3 friends who grew up together. . . . their lives were intertwined in play, at school . . . and in their dreaming. Their relationship made them inseparable.

. . . At college they shared a rich intellectual and social life and . . . they would talk at length, sharing their hearts, listening to each other's dreams, and making plans to change the world. . . . Their relationship was their strength; it shaped their identities.

. . . when they grew older, they gradually moved apart. . . . They would still connect by phone and internet . . . but the long conversations became rare events.

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 31-33.

Every few years they'd meet for a weekend, and then it was as if they'd never been apart. . . . Then one day . . . two of the friends received an email from the third. . . . The third friend invited them to spend a weekend at his home . . .

. . . The evening began with catching up about family and jobs. . . . But sometime during the evening the atmosphere changed . . . An unspoken awkwardness set in . . .

The host began doing the talking and it was all about himself. Each time the friends spoke, the host cut them off and turned the conversation back to his life, his questions, and his needs. . . . He mined them for information that would make him look better. He seemed preoccupied with how to become more successful.

. . . What had happened? How could their friend have become so self-absorbed?"

This engaging story is actually a parable created and told many times by Alan Roxburgh, a leader in the missional church movement. He explains² that, in his parable, the three friends are the Bible, the culture, and the church.

For many hundreds of years they grew together. While there were times one was more dominant than the others, they were always connected. But . . . In recent years, the three have gone their own ways. Now, whenever they come together the church always wants center stage.

Roxburgh puts it this way: "The only questions the church asks of the culture are church questions: How do I get information and data about this culture to make the church successful? And when the church comes to the biblical narratives it is only there to ask church questions . . .

We're so preoccupied with church questions that neither biblical narratives nor culture can become places where God addresses us and challenges us . . ."

I believe there must be a better way. The more time I spend as your pastor the more aware I am of the many questions being asked about

² Ibid., 47-48.

just what it means to be church today. Given such, it seems appropriate to consider the possibility of restoring the relationship of these three old friends.

First, we must revisit the nature of the church's relationship with our lifelong friend culture.

For most of my life, America has been engaged in a war within its own borders. These culture wars were most intense during the 80s and 90s when our nation was divided over issues that included abortion, guns, and the separation of church and state. The term "culture wars" was popularized in large measure as a result of the book by that name written by the University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter over 20 years ago.³ In that book, Hunter noted that people were choosing sides in the culture wars not based on religion, political affiliation, or socioeconomic status, but rather based on ideology or world view.

We have now all lived through the first decade of a new millennium and experienced a significant shift in our culture. In light of this change, Hunter recently wrote a new book, *To Change the World*,⁴ which calls us to reconsider how we understand power and proposes what he believes to be the best way forward for Christians.

Rather than adopting the view that it is the job of Christians to change culture or proposing that people of faith can become the primary creators of culture, Hunter suggests that we adopt a perspective he calls "faithful presence within culture." His approach is supported by "a theology of engagement in and with the world around us."⁵

Faithful presence takes us far from the dominant selfishness of our age by calling us be fully present to each other within the community of faith and fully present to those who are outside it as well,
to be fully present and committed to our tasks, and
to be fully present and committed in our spheres of social influence, whatever they may be -
families, neighborhoods, voluntary activities and places of work.⁶

³ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

⁴ James Davison Hunter. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ Ibid., 247.

⁶ Ibid., 242-247

Being a faithful presence in all areas of culture is the only way the church can be authentic in the years to come. While being fully present is a demanding experience, it is and will be required.

As we adopt a new way of engaging culture that cares for all, much as Jesus envisioned, the church will no longer exist only for itself and its own interests.

Second, we must revisit the nature of the church's relationship with our lifelong friend the Bible.

The so-called religious right has sought to make their version of Christianity the only authorized American version. While many within this group market a message that suggests a literal approach to the Bible is the only correct approach, the general public are not embracing that news. In fact, only 3 in 10 people approach Scripture with a highly literal interpretative framework, and an understanding that it is the actual word of God.⁷

This tendency to equate Christianity with only one of its many forms is among the more troubling factors that continues to contribute to the decline in adherents. In just a few decades the percentage of the American population that labels themselves as religiously non-affiliated has more than doubled.⁸ Increasing numbers of people have decided that this kind of religion is no longer relevant or meaningful.

For those not ready to give up just yet, the well-known progressive Christian scholar and prolific author Marcus Borg offers a way forward that invites people to both engage their minds and experience the Christian faith.

A few years ago he wrote his first novel: *Putting Away Childish Things*.⁹ It is a story about moving from a rules-based religion to a living faith and from a Christianity that offers all the answers to one that embraces paradox and multiple possibilities.

⁷ Greg Smith. "How Americans Interpret the Bible"

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2011/07/14/how-americans-interpret-the-bible/>>

⁸ Greg Smith. "Rise of the Nones."

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2013/09/07/rise-of-the-nones/>>

⁹ Marcus J. Borg. *Putting Away Childish Things: A Tale of Modern Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

Since then, Borg has also written about the same topic in a more direct manner in *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored*¹⁰. In this newer book, Borg deals with the very real problem of what it means to speak Christian. Put differently, he addresses many of the key words that have been a part of our vocabulary of faith for the last two thousand years. Many of the words long associated with Christianity have undergone rather radical shifts in meaning.

Borg offers a hopeful way forward, seeking to redeem rather than replace Christian language. He provides a pathway that enables us to move beyond both literalism, and beyond what he calls the "heaven and hell framework."

As we adopt new ways of returning to the Biblical text and redeeming Biblical language we open ourselves to the possibility of encountering a Still Speaking God – a much larger God who invites us into relationship.

Finally, we must look within & be reminded of what church is.

When it comes to explaining what the church is no one term ever seems adequate. Our Scripture passages this morning speaks of church as "citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."

The two terms in our passage are borrowed from the realm of politics and the language of family.

Being church is like having all of the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen in God's realm, alongside all of the saints.

Being church is like being a part of the household of God, acting as key contributors to a shared family life.

In our era of individualism, it is also important to note that both illustrations make it clear that church is not something one can do or her or his own; it is always a group effort.

Dan Stiver, one of my theology professors in seminary, writes:

¹⁰ Marcus J. Borg. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – and How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

The early Christian movement was called the Way, a path, a journey (Acts 9:2). It was never seen as a solitary path, however, but as a way for people to walk together. The early church quickly took the term *ecclesia*, a gathering, a community of people joined in a common undertaking.¹¹

Clearly being church is a relational task that includes sharing in a community of faith. And, when you think about it, being church also means moving beyond the walls of the church campus (if there is such a thing) and beyond the interests of the members of the congregation.

How do we begin to break free of the illusion that the church exists for its own and looks elsewhere only to find ways to strengthen itself?

We can start by remembering that the church is always bigger and more diverse than it first appears.

While this congregation has associations with the United Church of Christ and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, we know that no such body provides us our ultimate identity.

While sociologists now count some 38,000 unique Christian denominations or traditions, we recognize that we are all part of one church.

We also must be willing to ensure that the church is reunited with its long-term good friends. And, since we are all a part of the church, it seems to me that we all have a role to play in making this happen. Amen.

¹¹ Dan Stiver. *Life Together in the Way of Jesus Christ: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 365.