

The Next Chapter
June 22, 2014
Ephesians 2:14-22 (The Message)

This morning's Scripture reading is found in the second chapter of Ephesians. It invites us to recognize that everyone who follows the way of Jesus is equal, and that we all have a place in the future that God is building.

The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped.

Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody. Christ brought us together through his death on the Cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility.

Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone.

God is building a home. He's using us all - irrespective of how we got here - in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together.

We see it taking shape day after day - a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. God of insiders and outsiders and those who feel they don't fit into either group, remind us that You see us as equals and that You have a place for each of us. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

A few weeks ago, Susan and I participated in Hodges University's annual commencement ceremony. As professors, we know quite well how much the graduating class and their families look forward to that special occasion. This year we listened to remarks from a member of the graduating class and from a faculty member.

While those short addresses were interesting, the one speech this year's graduates are most likely to remember is the commencement speech. Theresa Shaw, President and CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Collier County, shared her professional journey starting with serving as a special education teacher.

Teresa never imagined leaving that professional world until a friend named for her a giftedness she had not yet identified in herself. Once she saw it in herself she was able to move beyond her comfort zone and enter the world of nonprofit management. It is that world she has inhabited for the last several decades, and it is in that world that she has excelled and made a real difference for children in so many communities including our own.

I don't want to repeat or even summarize her entire address. I shared just enough to get you to begin thinking about the graduations you have attended . . .

You may be asking yourself when you last attended a graduation, who spoke, and what they talked about. If you cannot recall the specifics, don't worry – you are in good company. Most of us – myself included – would fail a quiz about our own commencement ceremonies much less ones we simply attended to support a loved one.

While this is a sermon on the occasion of a pastoral transition, I am aware that it has much in common with a commencement speech. Both types of speeches happen at a time that marks the end of something and the start of something new – often something that people have been waiting on for quite some time. The expectations of the listeners overlap in at least three areas.

- Both groups – those gathered for commencement and for worship – expect to hear a little about the speaker’s life experiences.
- Both groups expect the speaker to offer a few suggestions for the next stage of their lives or the lives of their faith communities.
- Both groups are ready to get on with life and welcome that which comes next. They hope the speech doesn’t go on and on and on.

Since those are likely your expectations and since I don’t want to disappoint you, I will say a bit about each.

Expectation #1: My experiences. Ten months ago I first set foot in this sanctuary about an hour before leading worship. My introduction to the church campus came in the form of a whirlwind tour led by Dave Yates. In twenty minutes or less I saw it all: Disseler Hall, the Administrative Building, and the Sanctuary. I also learned where to stand to do what, and everything else I thought I might need to know.

Now, in addition to knowing many of the uses of the buildings here on our main campus as well as the Bargain Basket I also know most of the quirkiness. Some of the mysteries were solved, including how the sanctuary doors unlocked all by themselves and how the door to a stall in the men’s bathroom stall kept magically locking itself. Others were never solved, including what happened to the multi-colored snake that slithered into the church office one Friday afternoon.

Interim periods are transitional times. They are times to address the so-called seven last words of the church: we never did it that way before. Those who worked closely with me through boards, committees, work groups, and especially those on staff know this well.

At times, change was the only constant. Many of you are holding a change in your hands – the logo that appears on our bulletins and brings together all of our new media including the new website. Almost all of you experienced changes you embraced as well as some you rejected. Perhaps the most important changes are those that didn’t stick, but have informed understandings and will be helpful in the coming months and years as new possibilities emerge.

Finally, and most importantly, my experience here has been for, with, and about you - the people who comprise this community of faith. The

Sunday school understanding that the church is the people is every bit as true whether your life is measured in months, years, or decades.

As your pastor one of the most rewarding parts of my ministry is the opportunity to regularly remind you of the great work you are doing as a church. You are serving our community in significant ways that embody the mission of the United Church: celebrating God's presence and serving all people.

You are truly an amazing group. I have had the opportunity to interact with many of you and with many of our seasonal folks in a variety of ways. In addition to all you have accomplished for others, you have taught me a great deal and have helped me to become a better minister.

As your minister – at least for a few more days – I must move on and share a bit about **expectation #2. This is my opportunity to offer you some practical advice for living well as followers of the Way of Jesus.**

Christianity is relational.

Get to know one another. Commit to expanding the number of people in this community of faith you know, and to deepening relationships with those you already know.

Christianity is holistic.

It is a religion that should shape and give meaning to all areas of life. It is also something that should guide you each and every hour of the week even if you only gather with others for an hour of worship.

Christianity is incredibly diverse.

Focus on what matters most. Remember and stay grounded in the 4Ps – priorities, prayers, parables, and proposal.

- Priorities. That which Jesus prioritized in his life and his teaching should inform how we order our lives. The Gospels clearly show his priorities: heal, love, pray, spread the word, treasure in heaven, seek God's will, see children as precious, and live with humility.¹

¹ This listing is based on that of Christopher Maricle in *The Jesus Priorities: Eight Essential Habits* (Upper Room Books, 2007). It served as the foundation for a sermon series I preached at the United Church, which later became an e-Book: <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/188385964/The-Jesus-Priorities>>

- Prayers. Jesus was a person of prayer. He regularly retreated for times of prayer and incorporated prayer into his every day routine. Jesus also provided us with a model prayer – the Lord’s Prayer – that we can turn to as a guide.
- Parables. Jesus’ preferred method of teaching was parable. He used parables to teach about the realm – the kingdom – the reign of God, something we are called to make real on earth as it is in heaven.
- Proposal. At the heart of Jesus’ message is a singular proposal: love God and love others. This is both his simplest and most challenging teaching.

Perhaps this is enough advice . . . after all the third and final expectation is brevity. I think it is safe to assume that you all want to go to lunch sooner rather than later.

I don’t expect you to remember all of what I shared today. Instead, I trust that you will remember my ministry in your midst these last ten months.

I came and I contributed. I did the best I could to prepare the United Church for a bright future as you begin the next chapter of this faith community’s story with Pastor Mark as your permanent pastor.

Lest you forget, the current chapter which is now drawing to a close and the next chapter share something in common. I end where I began with the first part of this morning’s Gospel reading:

God is building a home. He's using us all - irrespective of how we got here - in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day . . .²

It is my prayer that the shape the next chapter takes is perfectly aligned with God’s preferred future for the United Church.

Amen.

² Ephesians 2:19b-21a, *The Message*.