

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 18-19, 2015
Ephesians 2:11-22

“Life Together: Built on Christ”

O almighty God, who hast built thy Church upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone: Grant us so to be joined together in unity of spirit by their doctrine, that we may be made a holy temple acceptable unto thee; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Did you know our congregation actually has three cornerstones? This is true because of three different building programs that have taken place over the years. But do you know where they are? On May 10, 1959 the original cornerstone for St. John’s first sanctuary, now our Fellowship Hall, was laid, and the building itself dedicated on June 14, 1959. The cornerstone is in a rather unique location, since it is not in the building itself, but at the base of the 50-foot tri-cross tower in front of the church facing Franconia Road. The second cornerstone, located just outside the main entrance doors, was laid on October 16, 1966 for the current Sanctuary and Narthex, dedicated on January 8, 1967. The third cornerstone, located near the end of the front walkway, was laid for the Education Center and the building itself dedicated on June 5, 1988.

Cornerstones, foundations, and the idea of building are what we hear about in today’s Epistle lesson. The concept of a cornerstone (or foundation stone) comes from ancient times. It has its origins in the first stone set in building a masonry foundation, important since all other stones were set in reference to this stone. So the entire structure literally depended on how straight and true the cornerstone was. Over time this became merely ceremonial, with a stone set in a prominent location on the outside of a building, with an inscription on the stone indicating the dedication date of the building and perhaps the architect’s and builder’s names. Cornerstones sometimes will have a hollowed out interior with a time capsule inside that contains items important at the time when the cornerstone is laid. In digging through old files, I tried to find out what is actually contained in the three cornerstones here at St. John’s, but I couldn’t find this information. If anybody knows, please share! Our summer preaching series, “Life Together,” based on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, continues today under the theme “Built on Christ.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

It’s one thing to talk about cornerstones, foundations and buildings made of bricks and mortar, Paul is writing about something far more challenging and complex: a building made of living stones, flesh and blood. Paul’s purpose in writing this letter, or epistle, to Christians in the city of Ephesus was to remind them that they are part of God’s eternal plan of salvation for all people – that plan being revealed and made known in Jesus Christ. Already God’s promise of this is found in the Old Testament (see Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22-23). Paul writes about God’s construction plan for life together in Christ: what it is based on, what it means, what it looks like, and how it is lived out. But like most construction programs, before any new building can take place, some demolition has to happen first. The **“dividing wall of hostility”** (2:14) has to be broken down so that instead of a bunch of factions that are divided there is one Body united under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul here is writing to Gentile believers who had no background or history in Judaism. They were **“without God in the world”** (2:12); literally “atheists” (ἄθεοι). To say that Jews and Gentiles were at odds in the New Testament era would be a gross understatement. “The Jews utterly despised the *goyim* or Gentiles; they considered them dogs, vile, unclean (Matt. 15:27; Rev. 22:15)... The Gentiles reciprocated in kind and hated the Jews because of their arrogance, their peculiar religious laws and ways. The enmity was mutual... there was a gulf between them, so deep and wide that it seemed impossible ever to close it” (*The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians*, R.C.H. Lenski, 1937). And this

was reflected in the balustrade, or fence, that surrounded the Temple proper in Jerusalem. There was a dividing wall that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of Israel with this inscription: “Foreigners must not enter inside the balustrade or into the forecourt around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his ensuing death”

(<http://holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,3,7,202,203,336,337&img=TWMRISAM06>). That’s the wall that needed to be demolished, torn down and flattened. Only in Christ Jesus can such walls come tumbling down, for with God nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). **“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility... and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility”** (Ephesians 2:14, 16). And what are our dividing walls of hostility today that separate us? And more important, do we believe that Jesus and his sacrificial death have the power to break these walls down?

If you ever watch home renovation shows on TV, there is always something called “Demo [short for demolition] Day.” That’s the day when the sledgehammers and pry bars come out, and the place gets gutted down to the studs and floor boards. This has to happen before the planned-for renovation can take place. For Jews and Gentiles, our “Demo Day” is Good Friday. That is when Jesus set aside all the demands of the Law of Moses, as well as all the sinful ignorance of those outside the Law, pouring out his blood as the perfect and sinless sacrifice for everyone – you also: **“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:23). Whether we are Jew or Gentile, the same Lord Jesus has given his life that you may have forgiveness, life and salvation, now and for all eternity.

Have you ever seen a construction job or a building program that started but never finished? It looks bad, of course, and it’s usually never a good thing. What would God’s building program for us have looked like if it just stopped with Demo Day? What would it look like if it only went so far as tearing down the wall but didn’t build anything up in its place? This is why Christ our Cornerstone is so important. Jesus invites all – Jew and Gentile, men and women, young and old – to build their lives on him. In truth, this is not something we do ourselves. Rather it is God in Christ who builds us up as living stones (1 Peter 2:4-10), **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord”** (Ephesians 2:20-21). God does this through his life-giving Word, the Scriptures, which make known to us the living Word, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Through both Word and Sacrament, God is doing his amazing building program with living stones like you and me. In Christ our Cornerstone, we are being shaped and formed for placement in God’s temple. In Christ our Cornerstone, our rough edges are being chipped away and smoothed out so that we may be properly fitted and put in alignment with our fellow living stones. And when we fall out of alignment, when the lines and angles in our lives start to get crooked or lop-sided, when the mortar that cements our lives together becomes to crumble, then it is that very Cornerstone on whom we are built, our Lord Jesus Christ, who restores and realigns us. Whatever division, discord or disunion there may be among us must give way to unity and union in Christ as **“fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God”** (Ephesians 2:19b).

So, what is your cornerstone? What are you building your life on? This world and the things in it are passing away. They do not last, but one thing does: Jesus Christ. Cling to him, and by the power of the Holy Spirit build your life upon him who is our chief Cornerstone. God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.