

2 Samuel 7:1-14a
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I have a tough question for all of you this morning.

Where is God's dwelling place?

That's a question that keeps coming up through the ages. This morning in our Old Testament lesson, we heard the instructions God gave to Nathan to pass along to David. While the Hebrews wandered through the desert on their way to the Promised Land, the Ark of the Covenant, housed the Lord. It was believed that the Lord's dwelling was a tabernacle in a tent that was carefully moved through the desert as the Chosen People worked their way toward the Promised Land. It fell to David to build a permanent place for the tabernacle of the Lord once the people of Israel had been planted in a safe place by God where they would not be disturbed and evildoers would not afflict them and God would dwell in their midst in the house that David built for God.

That we know. But where is God's dwelling place now? That's a good question. It's easy to slip into believing that God dwells in a building that we know as 'the church.' But it is actually a little more complicated than that. I've stood before you in this place many times and reminded you of how often I've heard comments that this sanctuary is absolutely filled with the Holy Spirit and surely it is. But the church is not the building...the physical space. The community of believers that uses this space is actually 'the church.' The people, not the building, are actually 'the church' which is the body of Christ. And God has gone to great lengths to create that community.

Moving to our second lesson this morning, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he speaks to the Gentiles first...the ones who were the outsiders. They were not circumcised, so they were strangers to the covenant promises between God and the people of Israel. They were aliens. The covenant promises were not for them. They were without God and without hope. But Paul reminds the good people of Ephesus that Jesus himself has brought these aliens into those covenant promises between God and the people of Israel by virtue of his sacrifice on the cross. Jesus has put to death the hostility of these two groups and has welcomed all of them to be one together. Jesus proclaimed peace to them and erased their standing as outsiders. The Gentiles and

the Israelites were now of the same household...the household of God...and both had access in one Spirit to the Father.

That's all well and good....but wait a minute. Humanity may have changed in these thousands of years, but human nature does not change. How do you suppose the 'special' ones of God, the Israelites...might have felt about these heathens being brought into the fold? Do you suppose there might have been any jealousy happening? Do you suppose the 'new' members of the family were not always fully welcomed? This is the beginning of the church...the dwelling place of God...and right off the bat there's some controversy going on. Peter and Paul argued for years about whether or not the uncircumcised needed to be circumcised in order to become full members of Christ's following. From its very beginning the church was fraught with controversy.

And so, many of us bring different ideas to our experience and expectations of church. We can look around us and see in how many different ways Christian fellowship and worship is practiced. And we can watch as some of our Christian brothers and sisters seem to wander away from the precepts and beliefs about Christianity that we hold most dear. Many of us know that the Christian communities we

choose as adults may be very different from the Christian communities we knew as children. And many of us may never have felt particularly close to God even in our childhood in the churches where we learned the basic tenets of the faith. The church itself sometimes wanders far from Christ, becoming alienated from life in the kingdom of God and estranged from the ways of Jesus.

It was Jesus who dissolved the divisions between Israelite and Gentile and that's a powerful image not only to hold close, but to emulate. We know that within our own congregation we aren't able to accomplish that sort of dissolution of division, but each Sunday we make a gesture among us and between us that is powerful enough to do just that.

When we pass the peace on Sunday morning, we are giving each other the powerful peace that Christ gave to his disciples and to us. It is not a simple greeting. Instead, the peace of Christ is a shocking new reality in which former enemies who would not touch one another or say a kind word about one another or eat a meal with one another now reach out to one another in recognition of their common humanity and their common commitment to Christ. This one gesture is powerful enough to melt the coldest heart and to dissolve the greatest divide as resentments fade into memory.

As we habitually break down those dividing walls between us and among us, Christ becomes the crucial building block of our own Christian community...the church to which we belong. Like a human body, the body of Christ sloughs off old skin and grows new skin to replace it. As the configuration of our congregation gradually changes, we ourselves change along with it. As we voluntarily relinquish our old ways of behavior that are the antithesis of what Jesus wants for us, we become new people as well in Christ. Our church becomes the dwelling place for God and the home for the Holy Spirit. It's not just the place where we gather for worship and prayer and study and fellowship. Instead, it is the household where God chooses to live. People who live together after they have let go of their hostility form the kind of community in which God abides.

When St. Paul describes the peace of Christ, he describes it as reconciling both people to each other and to God...each one passing God's peace to the other...and both reconciled to God and each other in the process. Human schisms cause an even greater separation between people than the hostility between clans or tribes or even nations. When we are individually involved in one of those schisms...intentionally or inadvertently...we are temporarily alienated from God. Our reunion in Christ in the peace we exchange not only

reunites us to each other...it is our path to our blessed reunion with God who dwells in our midst.

The church congregation is a powerfully important laboratory where we are invited and encouraged to change the way we interact with one another as we discover that some of our habits or practices are actually wounding others. The presence of God can give us all a sense of safety in experimenting with new ways of interacting as well as giving us the courage and the good will to do so. Change is hard, but not impossible with the help of God. None of us is perfect, but with the grace of God, all of us can try. And all of us can forgive our own missteps as well as the missteps of those around us.

All for the love of God who dwells with us.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.