

Welcome to Worship

-Prayer cards & Connect Cards, along with gift bag for guests.

***Hymn**

Together We Serve

TFWS 2175

***Passing of the Peace**

Sharing of Joys and Concerns & Pastoral Prayer

-Prayer Board:

-Prayer Chain:

The chapel space is available anytime the building is unlocked if you'd ever like a quiet space to sit, read, pray, or otherwise escape from the busy-ness of your day for a time.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

***Hymn**

How Firm a Foundation

UMH 529

Scripture

Ephesians 2:11-22 (NRSV)

So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” — a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow 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 also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Children’s Moment

-Cherie Ortman sharing songs from VBS.

HymnWe Are God’s People*

TFWS 2220

Message

Aliens Brought Near

Will you please pray with me and for me? O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each and every one of our hearts be holy and pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

As of July 1st, I was officially re-appointed to serve the Hartford United Methodist Church for what will be my sixth year. Sorry about that. It's a little strange, to think about the last five years. Partly because I started in the summer of 2019, just a few months before the world seemed to change so drastically from COVID and everything else that came about around that time. In that sense, it feels like I've been here a lot longer than five years. And looking around the room, I remember when you were all strangers to me. You may feel the same about people in your neighborhood, or the people sitting around you today. You may remember a time when they were once strangers. But now they are the people who lent you their tools, played with your kids, shoved the snow on your driveway and sidewalk. They are the people who have prayed with us, struggled with us, worked with us on mission projects locally or abroad, and fought with us when it came to choosing the color of paint to use on the walls.

We were once strangers... Aliens. But now, as Paul writes to the Ephesians, we are brought near by the blood of Christ. He is our peace. That's not a simple thing. That isn't easy. These are strong words, not just because they have to do with ancient and eternal realities, but because these are also words of revolution. "He is our peace." Believe or not, but in Paul's time those were words of treason. They are words opposed to the state. These are words meant for demonstrations and protests against empires.

Any talk of peace within the first century of the Roman Empire would be politically charged. Roman emperors were considered the vessels of the divine, and the

originators of peace. To say that Christ is our peace was a defiant act. It meant denying the political power, authority, and divinity of the emperor, and challenging the legitimacy of the Empire. Paul is declaring peace on new terms, a peace forged not by the lord of the empire in its varied expressions, but in the blood and bone of the crucified Christ. The cross undermines the wall dividing Jew and Gentile, but that was only the beginning. This is only the beginning of a revolution of love that radicalizes are notions of peace, community, and church.

So this household of God that we call the Church, that we claim as our own, is not simply a spiritual reality that we visit briefly on the weekends. It is not just a weekly time-out in which we pretend peace is possible by sitting next to people we avoid the rest of the week. No, the Church is meant to be a daring practice of new politics, a different kind of power, the self-sacrificing, boundary-crossing power of Jesus' cross. Our God bringing diverse and contrasting people together is a challenge to the divisive powers of this world. It goes against everything we see in the world today. Imagine how subversive the Church today would seem if "aliens and strangers" were all gathered together in our pews? God reconciles us to God's self, but we live out that reconciliation in how we courageously and creatively share in relationship together, even with those who are "far off."

Now, many of us here today may have been born and raised in the Christian Church. Some of us are former Catholics, or Baptists, or Lutherans. Some of us have always been United Methodist. But regardless of our particular denominational background, many of us were raised in the Church. We may not remember a time when we, ourselves, were "far off" and then "brought near by the blood of Christ." But just

because we have been raised in the church does not mean we have always been near to God. There are ways in which the Church itself can wander far from Christ, becoming alienated from life in the Kingdom of God and estranged from the ways of Jesus. It is not only those outside the Church who live without hope and without God. This journey from far off may remind us of the parable of the Prodigal Son, and reinforce Paul's point that the Church is a holy experiment in reconciliation, in bringing different, broken people together through Christ.

The heart of our reading from Ephesians today is a reminder that in Jesus Christ, the two distinctive people of the Jews and the Gentiles have become one, new humanity. In Paul's day, there were those who wondered if such a thing could be possible. How could impure and unclean Gentiles fit into the Jewish story of salvation? Paul uses some unflattering language to describe the dilemma of the Gentiles. He says, "Remember you uncircumcised Gentiles were separate from the Jewish Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. You Gentiles are far removed from the Davidic promise of salvation that was fulfilled in Jesus." And yet, these Gentiles, these strangers and aliens and outsiders of the promised salvation are now heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and share in the promise of Christ Jesus. The foreigners are now fellow citizens, the aliens have been adopted into God's family.

This is a powerful image of a dividing wall of hostility being broken down. And it may even inspire us, today, to imagine the ways the division and hostility of our own day may yet be broken down, too. Instead of a division of Jew and Gentile, it may instead be the right and the left, the conservative and the progressive, the mainline and the

evangelical. It could be the division between religion, ethnicity, race, class, gender, or whatever else may need to call out as a source of conflict. Many of us stumble onto these battlefields, dreaming of the day when “our side” is finally triumphant. But the Scripture dreams of another day, where both groups are one, and such hostility is finally put to death. Jesus has made that which was divided as one, and has destroyed the wall of hostility. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

There are places in our lives where we need that dividing wall to be broken down. And we need to allow Christ to be the critical building block or cornerstone of a new structure — a holy temple in the Lord. The final verses of our passage imagine this new holy place to be built not of stones, but of people. Consider that for the Ephesians and the rest of the Jesus-followers of the first century, they had no concept of the Church being a building. The Church was, and has always been, the people of a reconciled community. The word “church” describes an odd group of aliens and strangers, misfits and outsiders, have become citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. When Paul describes the Church as a building, with Christ as our cornerstone, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, he is trying to get the Ephesians to wonder and dream about who such a space is created to serve. Paul says it is a community that exists to be a dwelling place for God. Church is not a *place* for people to come into, it is a household, a home where God lives. It is where people who live together form the kind of community in which God abides, and brings all those

who are far off from one another to be in peace together... A peace that challenges all the assumptions, rules, and behaviors of the world in which we live.

And irony of our time is that so many battles are being fought between those who think God is on their side, and that their rivals are without God. The mudslinging has not ended in over 2000 years. Unity, whether in the Church or in the world, seems to only exist in our dreams. Even after years of work for Christian unity, we still see some Christians condemn others as not being “Christian” enough, and denominations themselves, including our own, seem to be coming apart at the seams. It seems as if the whole world is busy building walls. The United States has been building walls at our physical borders to prevent illegal immigration. The Israeli’s continue to build walls to separate themselves from the Palestinians. Other territories are protected by invisible fences called demilitarized zones, or no-man’s land, to keep enemies apart.

We can argue that in our world, strong walls make for peace. There is some truth to that. Every child who has ever shared a room knows this. There is nothing quite like a dividing line across the middle of the flood — your side, my side — to keep the peace. This is your side of the closet, this is mine. These are my cloths, my toys, my books; those are yours. As long as we keep apart, we will not argue. In the words of the poet Robert Frost, good fences make good neighbors. Strong longes will prevent break-ins, security checks prevent violence, good fences prevent smuggling of weapons, drugs, and enemies. There are times when a boundary is necessary for self-protection and to prevent dangerous influences from overtaking the greater good.

And yet, God seems to want to tear all boundaries down. We may question the wisdom of that, or write off Paul’s words as being irrelevant to our modern world. We

assume that if we were to follow that path, and tear down those boundaries, there would only be conflict and chaos, not unity and peace. But I think we need to remember that God doesn't tear down the walls without a purpose behind it... God is, in fact, mindful of the chaos that would come from such actions. God is aware that simply eliminating a boundary does not in itself create peace. Peace only comes by eliminating the hostility behind those dividing walls. God does not merely tear down walls, and expect things to magically work out. No, God is at work uniting people in the One who is our peace, who creates a new humanity, a new way of living.

In the mission and message of Jesus, hostilities have ended, and peace has come. The ancient theologian Justin Martyr once summarized this movement from hostility to peace. He wrote, "We who once took most pleasure in accumulating wealth and property now share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their different customs now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them and pray for our enemies." This is the radical peace and equality of the new humanity created by a loving God who created all things and all people. In this one, new humanity, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, citizen or alien. Christ is all, and is in all.

May we take that lesson to heart. And lest we lose hope, those of you who have been around a while might remember the day the Berlin Wall came down. Many did not expect it to happen in their lifetime. The feelings of euphoria, surprise, and possibility were tangible. If that wall could fall, then what other walls might also be torn down? The walls between black and white? The walls between Muslim and Christian and Jew? The walls between the aisles of our government? With Christ, any wall can be town down.

And so my hope and prayer is that instead of building walls in the name of “safety” and “peace,” we would instead follow Christ who seeks to build us into a temple where God can dwell. A safe haven for all with Christ as the cornerstone. A place where peace is not just the absence of conflict, but a result of intentional dialogue and relationship. In Christ, may we experience that new humanity, where we are no longer separated from God or from one another, but we are all one. Let us pray.

Offering

Doxology

UMH 95

As we enter this time of offering, I want to encourage you to consider this an expression of worship, and a means of responding to what God is doing in your life. Give out of joy, not simply because you feel an obligation to give. If you would like to support our ministry through e-giving, that is set-up on our website, and you are welcome to make use of the pew cards to still participate in the passing of the offering plate. Thank you in advance for your generosity, and I thank you for the other expressions of generosity you share outside of your finances, such as your time, your energy, and acts of service.

***Hymn**

O Church of God, United

UMH 547

Announcements and Next Steps

-Pastor Valerie and myself will be leading a joint summer bible study with our friends at Montrose United Methodist Church. Beginning July 14th at 4 pm at our home here in Hartford, we will begin a study on the book The Story of God, the Story of Us. The following week, Bill & Connie Smith of Montrose will host. There are handouts with a more specific schedule of hosting, but all you need to do if you are interested in show up, ready to listen to the stories of God and God’s people.

-Women’s retreat at Lake Poinsett’s Retreat Center August 23-25th! There is a registration form on our website, and some hard copies here at the church. If you would like to learn more, please talk to Rachel Stearns or Jan Nordlund.

-Montrose UMC Ice Cream Social next Sunday from 5-7 pm!

***Benediction**