

## **“Homecoming Celebration”**

**Psalm 133; Ephesians 2:18-22**

October 22, 2023

In the charming town of Harmonyville, there was a tradition. Every year, a grand potluck dinner was held in the town square. Each family would bring a dish, and everyone would share and celebrate together. But this year, the mayor had an idea to make it even more special. He introduced the "Mystery Ingredient Challenge." A week before the potluck, every family received a random, unique ingredient. The challenge was to incorporate this ingredient into their dish for the potluck. Some got blue cheese, others got pineapple, and some even got seaweed! As the days passed, there was a mix of excitement and anxiety. The Smiths, known for their classic apple pie, struggled with how to include their ingredient: pickled jalapeños. The Johnsons, who usually brought fried chicken, were baffled by their ingredient: chocolate syrup. The day of the potluck arrived, and the townspeople gathered with their unusual dishes. Everyone was hesitant at first. Mrs. Smith's Spicy Apple Pie? Mr. Johnson's Chocolate Chicken? But as people began to taste the dishes, something magical happened. The unexpected combinations led to delightful new flavors. The Smith's pie had a surprising kick that was balanced by the sweetness of the apples. The Johnson's chicken had a rich depth, with the chocolate adding a savory touch. In the end, the townspeople realized that sometimes, stepping out of their comfort zones and embracing the unexpected could lead to wonderful new experiences. It wasn't about sticking to the classics but about coming together, trying something new, and celebrating the diversity of flavors.

Life, like the dishes at the potluck, can be unpredictable. But Ephesians 2:18-22 reminds us that when we come together in faith, embracing our differences and the unexpected turns, we build a strong, unified community in Christ. Our unique experiences and backgrounds are like those mystery ingredients – they might seem out of place at first, but they're essential in creating the beautiful tapestry of our shared faith.

You know, it was around 20 years ago that I wandered into a church for nearly the very first time as an adult. I've shared with you in the past what a grand experience it was the very first time I went to worship. But while that was truly a wonderful experience, I think getting to work and largely live my life within the boundaries of church life have delivered even more blessings than I could've imagined that day so many years ago. It's funny, you know I have friends that really don't go to church and I see what they're missing. I try to tell them from time to time but have largely grown silent through the years. There is just something about being a pastor that makes it nearly impossible to evangelize one's friends. Perhaps it's that they knew me before, I don't know. But what I want to tell them, what I want to tell you, is that if you're not in a church, you're missing something vital for your life.

Just look at the language Paul uses in Ephesians when discussing our lives prior to our conversion. He calls us strangers and foreigners. For good reason. The term strangers 'xenos' is a word for a short time resident—a transient. In today's terminology, we would say "homeless." The term alien or foreigner, 'paroikos', is a word for a person who is living in a country other than the one they were born in. They have no inheritance rights, no secure protection under the law, no voting rights. In our day, we would call them illegal aliens. These two terms together show how much we do not belong. These are repeated ideas from Ephesians 2:12. We were strangers and foreigners. We were homeless aliens, without rights or protection. But we no longer carry that description.

Rather, also in Ephesians 2:19, we are fellow citizens with the saints. We often think of saints as having special rights and privileges, special access to God. But Paul says we are fellow citizens with them. Whatever they have, we have. Whatever rights they own, we own. In fact, in Ephesians 1:1, Paul wrote that all believers are saints, and therefore, all believers are citizens. Citizenship was a prized possession in the time of Paul. Men and women would work their whole lives and pay huge amounts of money in order to become citizens of Rome. But if being a citizen of Rome was special, imagine how great it is to be citizens with the saints?

According to Ephesians 2:19, that is what we are. To begin with, it only makes sense in that we are

social creatures. Even in our beginning God created us, male and female He created us, and put us in union with one another and with Him. Just think about that for a moment. If God's plan necessarily included two and then more people, is it really a good thing for us to shoot for being loners? I mean, I appreciate time apart from others as much as the next guy, but we need only look at the book of Genesis to see exactly why a life spent in solitude is not what God intends for us.

No, as a matter of fact, it's important that we stay together and stay in unity. Psalm 133 remarks on just how precious that unity is from God. The Psalm begins with the proclamation, "*How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*" This statement underscores the idea that there's a special beauty and joy when believers come together in harmony. Unity among God's people is not just "good" in a moral sense, but it's also "pleasant," bringing joy and delight.

**Anointing of Blessing**...the Psalm uses the imagery of the precious oil poured on Aaron's head, which runs down his beard and onto the collar of his robes. This represents God's anointing and blessing. When God's people are united, they are in a position to receive God's fullest blessings, much like the overflowing oil.

**Life Forevermore**...the Psalm concludes with the imagery of the dew of Mount Hermon falling on Mount Zion. This signifies refreshment and life. Unity among believers is not just a momentary or temporal blessing, but it carries eternal significance. The Psalmist declares that there, in that place of unity, the Lord bestows His blessing of life forevermore. In essence, Psalm 133 paints a vivid picture of the richness, depth, and eternal significance of unity among the people of God.

So, unity is what God has designed for us. How are we doing? Well, not so good as it would turn out. In fact, the data suggests that here in America, we're more divided than ever before. Over the past few years, the United States has experienced a palpable increase in social, political, and cultural division. Various factors have contributed to this widening gap. Politically, the nation has seen a heightened polarization between the major political parties, with issues like immigration, climate change, and healthcare becoming flashpoints for heated debates. The proliferation of social media platforms and the echo chambers they can create have further exacerbated these divisions, often limiting, meaningful dialogue and understanding across ideological lines. Cultural and social issues, ranging from race relations to beliefs about the COVID-19 pandemic, have also played a significant role in the rising sense of division. Protests, civil unrest, and disagreements over public health measures reflect the broader challenges of forging unity in a diverse and complex society. While America has historically prided itself on its melting pot identity, the recent years have underscored the need for renewed efforts in bridging divides and fostering understanding among its citizens.

And to make matters worse, we're heading into the political season. It's not so intense this year without a Presidential election but that's coming just next year and I think that means we all know what's coming. Soon, it'll be hard to talk about anything with our neighbors without the specter of politics infringing its ugly head upon it.

That's why one of the greatest blessings in the world is supposed to be right here. That's right, on this Homecoming Day, we're reminded that the best vehicle for unity is none other than Christ's church.

So, why is that? Well, first, we've got to acknowledge what our passage from Ephesians teaches us. One of the reasons the church can be so unified is that it is the one place where the only way we gain access to it is through the shared atonement of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Now remember, in the backdrop of all the early letters from Paul and Ephesians is no exception, is the ongoing conflict between Jews and Gentiles. Now, prior to Christ's coming, these two groups kept pretty much to themselves whenever they mixed. Gentiles were even considered unclean by Jews at the time for they didn't follow the Jewish laws on purity and cleanliness. For that reason, a fair degree of animosity existed between Jews and Gentiles. But now, in Christ, these divisions were no longer tolerable. Paul and a great deal of the New Testament goes out of his way to point this out.

In fact, if we'll but listen to the numerous occasions when the New Testament talks about the church, then we'll see how vital a force in our lives and in the lives of others it should be. The church

is to be the site of what I'll call Holy Unity. The unity that comes from Jesus, that binds us to others to help still others is a blessing we cannot fully comprehend. Listen and hear from the Word:

**Galatians 3:28:** *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* **Ephesians 2:14:** *"For He Himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility."* **Ephesians 4:3-6:** *"Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."* **I Corinthians 1:10:** *"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment."* **Romans 12:4-5:** *"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."* **Colossians 3:11:** *"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."*

In listening to this litany of scripture verses that all directly touch on the role of the church in our lives, it's clear that the New Testament desires to see all Christians operating within the bounds of a church and that the church should be unified. So, it's obvious that the New Testament desires us to be unified and the place where that unity is within the bounds of the church. Built on the foundations of apostles and prophets, the church is the place where God's energy and focus become manifest through the work of His disciples. Jesus Christ bore the full weight of our sin on the Cross. He accepted the punishment for our sin so that we could be free, so that we could live life so freely as to find ourselves laughing even in doctor's offices.

Church does so much for us it: **Spiritual Growth and Nourishment** - regular participation in church services, Bible studies, and other spiritual activities provides individuals with consistent exposure to God's Word. This helps deepen their understanding of Scripture, fosters spiritual maturity, and strengthens their relationship with God. Worshiping together as a community also facilitates experiences of the Holy Spirit, leading to renewal and transformation.

I met Howard at my first church. He was marrying a woman in our congregation and I got the sense that he was coming back to church primarily to be with his new fiancée. But, as we got to talking, I learned that there was a larger story. You see, this man was the son of a pastor. Unfortunately, he and his dad had issues and, as a result, Howard hadn't been to church in decades. But once he started coming, he adjusted back into the life and witness of the church, even joining the choir. He came so alive that the Presbytery had a lay pastor's training course which he took. He's now ordained and pastors a small congregation in North Dakota. But it all came as the result of him returning to church.

**Community and Fellowship** - active church membership fosters a sense of belonging and community. Being part of a church provides opportunities to form deep and meaningful relationships with fellow believers. These relationships offer support during challenging times, celebrations in joyous moments, and accountability in one's walk with God. The church community becomes an extended family where members care for, encourage, and uplift one another. The church can become for us such a wonderful support system, really unlike any other I've ever known.

I'll never forget the time where one of the ladies of the church I was serving was undergoing a large number of medical procedures and tests. I know just how tiring and draining that can be over a period of time. I mean, when your most exciting activity is going to see the doctor, you know things aren't going in your direction. So here was this woman and she was forced to go to doctors all the time to fight cancer. So, I asked her how she was making it. I assumed she'd have a story or two of woe to share with me. Imagine my surprise when she said she'd been laughing a whole lot. "Laughing" I wondered. It didn't seem right until she told me why. It turns out, one of her dear friends from the church was taking her to every single one of her doctor's appointments. The two of them would just chat and laugh their way the time waiting. Can you imagine that? Having fun in a doctor's office? But

what's even better is to be free of the fear of death. That's something that we can do through our awareness of what Jesus Christ has accomplished for us and for our salvation.

**Opportunities to Serve and Discover Purpose** - being an active member of a church often provides opportunities to serve others, both within the church community and in the broader community or even globally. Serving in various ministries—be it in children's ministry, outreach programs, music ministry, or mission trips—enables individuals to discover and utilize their God-given talents and gifts. This not only benefits the recipients of these services but also instills a sense of purpose and fulfillment in the individuals serving, as they become instruments of God's love and grace in the world.

I met a woman at First Presbyterian Church of Mount Holly. She volunteered with our youth as her boys were in middle school at the time. Finding some enjoyment in doing it, she eventually became our primary youth leader, leading the kids on Sunday nights. What's amazing to me is that I see her on Facebook. She's still active in those kids lives. But, perhaps better still, this woman changed her whole life based on her experiences within the church. Finding real enjoyment in assisting kids with their adolescent journeys, this woman went back to school and then to graduate school. She's now a certified counsellor, working with scores of people on a daily basis to assist them in their life journeys.

I'll never forget being at my last church, River Hills Community Church. They've changed their name, now their Community Church at Lake Wylie, but regardless of their name it's an interesting church. I started getting a taste of it through my Facebook account. When I first got there, I started getting all kind of friend requests. Happy to oblige, I accepted them all. But what I quickly discovered was that this was a very politically active congregation. But surprisingly, they were politically active on differing sides of many political issues. What made things so strange was that every Sunday, some of the most politically active and vocal people congregated in the same room to talk about Scripture. They may not have always agreed about politics, but what they did agree on was that Jesus was Lord and that we needed to be listening to His Word and following His Ways all the days of our lives.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.