

July 18, 2021 – Ephesians 2:11-22

What makes a Christian... a Christian? It's a question that's as old as Christianity itself. For example, one of the last things that Jesus teaches his disciples is the Great Commission. And what is the Great Commission? Well, it's a set of instructions for making disciples of Jesus Christ. Go make disciples, and do it in this way: baptize them and teach them. This makes a Christian, a Christian.

Of course, that sounds easy, but it's a little more complicated in practice. And so one of the oldest Christian documents, other than the New Testament itself, is a text called the Didache. The Didache is a training manual for making new disciples. What you should teach them. When and how they should be baptized and receive the Lord's Supper for the first time. This is what you should do to make a Christian, a Christian.

And this question continued throughout the early church. Hundreds of pages of early church fathers discussing this very thing. What does a Christian believe? How does a Christian behave? What are the essentials of the Christian faith? What makes a Christian, a Christian?

So it's not terribly surprising that it comes up in Paul's Epistles as well. In our lesson today, Paul is writing to the church in the city of Ephesus in what is now modern day Turkey. He knows the Ephesians quite well. He spent three years at that church. Building it from the ground up. He knows the people in it. He knows the struggles they face.

He's now held as a prisoner in Rome. But he's decided to write a letter to this congregation that he loves so much. Continuing to pastor them from afar. And Paul knows that, like many churches at that time, there are two very different groups taking part in it.

First, there are converted Jews. We don't think about it much anymore, but Christianity started out as a sort of Jewish reformation. Jesus was a Jew. All of the apostles started out as Jews. The entire church to begin with was Jews.

Pentecost was a Jewish festival. The people in Jerusalem were all Jews who had gathered for it. And the three thousand people who became Christians that morning were all Jews. There were a lot of Jewish converts in the early church. And Ephesus was no exception.

Yet, at the same time, Ephesus did not have a huge Jewish population to begin with. It was a Greek city. In fact, Ephesus was best known for its massive temple to Artemis. Which, in fact, was not just a religious institution, but also served as the largest bank in the world at that time.

So there were people coming from all over the world to worship and do business in Ephesus. Very few of them were Jews. They were Greeks and Romans and Persians and Egyptians. They were Gentiles. And they were also among the people who heard the good news and converted to Christianity.

So now Paul has these two completely different groups of people in one church. They have completely different cultures. They have completely different lifestyles.

The Jewish converts are circumcised. They follow kosher laws. They dress conservatively. They have isolated communities. They have nothing to do with the Greek temples or festivals or food. They know the Old Testament inside and out. They pray and sing and worship in Hebrew exclusively. For them, these things are what makes a Christian, a Christian.

The Gentile converts are not circumcised. They don't follow kosher laws. They dress in the current Greek styles. They're scattered around the city. They work and play and socialize and buy their food from the Greek temples and during Greek religious festivals. They know very little about the Old Testament. They pray and sing and worship in Greek, because they don't even know Hebrew. And for them, these things are what makes a Christian, a Christian.

What do you do with a church that deeply divided? Well, first you bring them all down a peg. And so Paul opens his letter by addressing the Jewish converts. Telling them that they have an inheritance in heaven given to them by God. But it has nothing to do with their ethnicity or the food they eat or their community or whether or not they know Hebrew.

It's given to them by God's grace alone. God chose to love them. God chose to give them salvation. God chose to forgive their sins. They didn't have anything to do with it.

But then he turns to the Gentiles at the beginning of our Epistle lesson. And he tells them, you better not think any more highly of yourselves either. You are here by the grace of God too. In fact, you were even farther off than the Jews. The Jews at least knew to be watching for a Messiah. You didn't have a clue he was even coming.

But even though all of you in Ephesus are so different from one another, there can still be peace between you. You just need to lay a new foundation. Like a builder constructing a house, you need to start from the ground up with something new and different. Something far more important than food or clothes or language. You need to lay Jesus Christ as your cornerstone.

Every building in the ancient world started with a cornerstone. A massive block laid at the corner of a building. That was there not only for its strength in supporting the building, but for its shape and position. A cornerstone marked the dimensions of the building. It guided the builder in making straight lines, vertically and horizontally.

A weak cornerstone meant weak walls. A crooked cornerstone meant crooked walls. An angled cornerstone meant angled walls.

To be a Christian is to have Christ as your cornerstone. To tear out your old foundation, whatever it was, and make him the guide for a new foundation. Built on his laws to reshape your life and behavior. Built on his love to reshape your relationships and view of the world. Built on his grace to reshape how you see yourself and your future in His Kingdom.

And only once you have that cornerstone laid, can you then lay the rest of the foundation. A foundation built on the apostles and prophet. Built on the men and women who came before you and taught you that law and love and grace. And wrote it down in God's Word. That is the foundation laid for us.

And it is also the foundation we must lay for every new Christian who comes through this church. From the tiny infant baptized at this font, to the elderly man or woman sits in our pews for the very first time.

We baptize them into Jesus Christ. Make him their cornerstone. And having baptized them, we teach them everything Jesus commanded: the apostles and prophet, who complete that foundation.

So that God willing, they will grow into a holy temple in the Lord. With a sure foundation. And once that happens, answering that question, "What makes a Christian... a Christian," will be easy for them to answer.

Because they, like us, will know that being a Christian has nothing to do with who your parents are, what you eat, what you wear, where you live, or what you do. Being a Christian has nothing to do with whether or not you grew up as a Jew or Gentile. A Lutheran or an atheist.

Being a Christian means knowing that you are loved by a God who would give his very life for you. And you have placed that hope, that certainty, as the very cornerstone of your life.

Being a Christian means knowing that there are answers out there, even when life is at its most confusing. And they are found in God's Word. Among those apostles and prophets who tell us everything that Christ wants us to know.

Being a Christian means knowing that you are a dwelling place for God. You are a temple to the Lord. That the Holy Spirit is with you every day.

And that if you ever doubt that. If you need to be reminded of it. If you want to find hope and purpose and love. You don't need to look any further than this church. A community with one foundation. Who call themselves Christians. And Lutherans. And Missouri Synod Lutherans, if you want to be really specific.

People who have proved that you can be completely different from one another. And yet live in peace. Because we have all been brought near – we have all been brought together - by the blood of Jesus Christ. Who is our peace. Amen.