

# *The Practice of Community*

## *Part 2 – Living Stones*

### **Ephesians 2:11-22**

**Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 11, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church**

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<sup>11</sup> So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. <sup>15</sup> He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup> So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup> for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

<sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup> in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:11-22, NRSV)

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If you asked any Jew in ancient Israel, "What is the most important place on earth?", you would always get the same answer. The temple in Jerusalem was widely considered to be the absolute center of creation. I know Christians consider certain locations to be sacred, but nothing compares to how Israel saw the temple.

As a reminder, in Jesus' day it was Temple 2.0. The first temple, built by King Solomon, was destroyed in

the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. The second temple, the one still standing in Jesus' day, was built when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon about 100 years later. But long before even the first temple, God had instructed his people to build a tabernacle in the desert after they left slavery in Egypt. The tabernacle, sometimes called "the tent of meeting," was a portable structure, and essentially served the same function as the temple before Israel had a home where they could build something permanent. Basically it signified God's dwelling place on earth among his people. It was God's home. Not his prison cell, because of course God is everywhere at all times and cannot be confined. But the tabernacle was the place uniquely dedicated for God's people to come and meet with him. You might say that it was the place where heaven and earth came together.<sup>1</sup> Eventually the temple in Jerusalem came to serve the same purpose.

By the time the second temple was built and expanded in Jesus' day it was a massive structure. The whole complex covered about 36 acres. That's the size of about 27 football fields! And it wasn't just impressively large, it was considered to be the religious heart of Israel, and the place to which Jews from around the ancient world would make pilgrimage. It was the unparalleled political, social, musical and cultural center of Jewish life. Which is exactly what you would expect from a nation which believed that this was the place where one was most likely to encounter the living God.

But not everyone was welcome there, at least fully welcome. Various courts surrounded the center of the temple and offered restricted access. The innermost court, the Holy of Holies, was where the presence of YHWH dwelled, and only the high priest once a year could enter on the Day of Atonement. Just beyond that was a court only priests could enter. Next was a court for ritually pure Jewish men. Then beyond that was a court for ritually pure Jewish women. Finally, the outermost court was open to Gentiles, non-Jews, who were welcome there but forbidden to go any further inwards towards God. A sign was posted there with this not-so-subtle warning: "Foreigners must not enter inside the balustrade [i.e. fence] or into the forecourt

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: The Prison Letters*, (Westminster John Knox, 2002), 29.

around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”

Now, anybody in Israel who had been paying attention should have known that this was not going to be a permanent arrangement. All the way back to the beginning when the Lord first made Israel his chosen people by calling Abraham and telling him he would make of him a great nation, the Lord clearly spelled out that he would indeed bless that nation, eventually called Israel, but ultimately *so that Israel could be a blessing to all other nations*.<sup>2</sup> That blessing, of course, became reality through Christ who, though a descendent himself of Abraham, died and rose to forgive *all* people and welcome *all* people fully into his family. Not just Jews, but Greeks, and Arabs, and Russians, and Japanese, and even Americans. You might remember that at the moment Christ died on the cross, the massive curtain which separated off the most holy part of the temple from even the Jews was torn in two, from top to bottom.<sup>3</sup> Among other things, this was a sign that God, in Christ, had made himself far more accessible than ever before.

If you’ve been reading along with us in the book of Acts this month you know that this radical inclusion was not easy to swallow for the first Jewish Christians who had been taught their whole lives that Gentiles were outsiders. Even Peter had to experience supernatural signs and visions before he became convinced!<sup>4</sup> And as I said last week, this inclusion became the life’s work of the apostle Paul. Right here in Ephesians, we hear him working hard to persuade the church in Ephesus that the Gentiles among them are now in the family. In verse 13 he writes, **“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”** He goes on in the next verses to talk about how any “dividing walls” between these two groups have now been broken down, and that now one humanity, one family, one people has been created. Peace – literally, shalom – was now available to all, a peace that offered not only reconciliation with God, but also reconciliation with one another. We explored this unity of the church in depth last week.

This change was so radical that Paul says here it necessitated the building of a brand new temple, a temple not constructed with stones, but with people. Paul describes this new temple in stunning detail in verses 19–22. The cornerstone, he says, is Christ

himself. This designation is not something Paul pulled out of thin air. The Old Testament, in places like Psalm 118:22, compared the coming Messiah to a cornerstone: **“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.”**

In ancient buildings a cornerstone was the most important stone in the whole building, and the first stone set, because it determined the placement of the foundation and, in turn, every other stone built on the foundation. It was the focal point, the stone upon which the whole building depended for structural integrity.<sup>5</sup> In calling Jesus the cornerstone of the new temple, Paul is making clear that Jesus is not only the one who makes the whole temple possible, but is the pattern or prototype by which everything in this new temple is oriented. Translation? The people who are a part of this new temple called the church are to increasingly live lives which look more and more like Jesus’ life. Around here we talk about discipleship all the time, which is essentially the process of allowing Jesus to teach us how to live life as he would live life if he were in our shoes, every stone in the temple oriented around the cornerstone.

Paul also tells us here that the foundation of the new temple is the apostles and prophets. There is some debate among biblical scholars as to what Paul means here, but I agree with those who believe this is Paul’s way of speaking about the scriptures, the Word of God. The Old Testament is often referred to as “The Law and the Prophets,” and every part of it, either directly or indirectly, points to Christ. The New Testament, of course, was written entirely by the apostles, or by their direct associates, and all of it directly points to Christ. The whole Bible, therefore, is a book about God, and Christ is the main character throughout. With Christ as the cornerstone, therefore, the message of the scriptures serves as a foundation upon which the church is built. In our Reformed tradition we speak of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, which is Latin for “by scripture alone.” This is that same idea, that the Bible is the means by which the church’s faith and practice are built up.

To be clear, God alone is the builder of this new temple. We talked last week about how the unity we share in Christ is not something we have engineered. No, Christ alone has done this, and done this all by grace. In the previous section of Ephesians, the first 10 verses of chapter 2, Paul famously articulates this grace. His

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 12:1–3 reads, “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’” Unless otherwise noted, this and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 27:51 reads, “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.”

<sup>4</sup> Read his story in Acts 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Interpretation: Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* (John Knox Press, 1991), 38.

explanation culminates in verse 8-9: **“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”** We can take no credit for the building of this temple. God did it all through the person and work of Christ. You don’t deserve to be a stone in this temple and neither do I. By his mercy and love, however, God has included us, along with anybody else who comes to him in faith.

God’s purpose in doing all this, in building this new temple, is made clear in the next verse: **“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”**<sup>6</sup> Why is God shaping us in this way? So that we can do good works, so that the stones in the temple can take on the pattern of the cornerstone, who is Christ. This is just another way to talk about how the purpose of our lives together in the church is to reflect Christ’s love in this world. We were made in God’s image, and in Christ that image is being restored in us. And so let me ask you, if we are to reflect Christ to the world, what is the main characteristic of Christ that the world needs to see in us? It must be love. Specifically, *the way we love one another*. That is the main “good work” we are called to do for God’s glory.

Let me try to unpack this in a very concrete way. Pun intended. It’s one thing to build a structure out of bricks or stones which are all uniform. That’s hard enough. A well built brick house is to be admired. But when you come across a structure skillfully constructed out of stones which are all very different from one another, that’s a marvelous thing to behold. Each stone not only needs to be set in line with the original cornerstone, but in line with all the others stones around it. I have no idea how somebody constructs a building like this. But if I stand in front of a structure like this, I don’t stand there marveling at the stones. They are just ordinary, often oddly-shaped, rocks. Nothing more. But the fact that they fit together so beautifully, makes me marvel at the master builder, the person who had the skill to make such different stones come together in such a way to create such uniform architectural beauty.

In Paul’s context, he is essentially saying that only the Lord, by his grace, could take both Jews and Gentiles, such different people who have been long separated and at odds with one another, and make them into one unified, loving, beautiful community. And not just Jews and Gentiles, but all sorts of people. If you lived in the first century and walked into a local church community and you witnessed not only Jews and Gentiles loving and serving and worshipping together, but also women

right alongside men, slaves right alongside masters, rich right alongside poor, sick right alongside healthy, social outsiders right alongside social insiders, you would have thought somebody slipped something into your matzo ball soup. It wouldn’t have been that the stones of this very exceptional temple themselves were impressive, but that the Master Builder, whoever he was, was somehow able to fit all these very different stones together into one beautiful structure.

It’s no different in our day. Jews and Gentiles being together, that doesn’t carry such shock value anymore. But if somebody walked into a local church in our city and found people of different races, different economic stations, different politics, different personalities, different preferences – *the sort of differences which everywhere else divide people!* – and yet found that in this community such different people nonetheless love one another, that person would have to wonder, “Who in the world could create such a community?”

Remember that I said that the temple in Jerusalem was considered to be the most holy place on earth because the temple was the dwelling place of God, the place where heaven and earth met together so that people could come to meet with God. That has not changed with the new temple, which is the church. The church is not a building or an event. We don’t “go to church” or “do church”. We *are* the church. God doesn’t make his dwelling place in buildings like this one, or show up in our lives only on Sunday mornings. God, through the Holy Spirit, makes his dwelling place *in us*, and shows up in this world wherever or whenever we show up. That means that the best place for the lost and searching world to meet the God who made them and loves them is in us, assuming that Christ remains our cornerstone, that the scriptures are our foundation, and that we are allowing God to unify us in ways that nobody would ever expect such different people to be unified.

And though this God-glorifying unity is something God alone creates, as I said last week it is also something that we are called to maintain for the sake of others in this world who are watching. That’s why community is something we, as the living Temple of God, have to practice. And so in light of all that I have said so far this morning, let me offer four practical implications for our life together as the new temple of God.

First, we must not forget our cornerstone and foundation. Our life in the structure of this temple *only* makes sense in relationship to both. Our Mission Statement gets it right: *We are a community loving Christ,*

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:10, from the New International Version (NIV). Emphasis mine.

*building disciples, serving all.* Loving Christ is first, and must always remain first. I love this quote from American philosopher and writer, Dallas Willard: “The purpose of God within human history is nothing less than to bring out of it...an eternal community of those who were once thought to be just ‘ordinary human beings.’ God’s precreation intention to have that community as a special dwelling place or home [i.e. temple!] will be realized. He will be its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.”<sup>7</sup> Every aspect of our lives in this congregation must always be rooted in and focused on Christ and his Word. Without this unifying cornerstone and foundation, we are just a random and very unimpressive pile of rocks.

Second, once our lives are rooted in Christ they must then be lived out in community. The idea of a temple with one cornerstone and one foundation supporting only one stone makes no sense. And yet, the idea of a private faith, or even a private Christianity, is very popular today, and being made even more popular because of digital access to church communities. Lots of people, even people who might show up in person from time to time on a Sunday morning in worship, practice a faith that is mostly private and in isolation. This is true of some of us. Ask yourself, who else in the church really knows me? Who else knows the honest truth about the hidden sin and failures in my life? Who else knows my doubts and struggles in faith? Who else knows me well enough to help me discern the personal things Christ may be teaching me right now? If the answer is nobody, you have made your faith a private matter.

That sort of private faith would have been unrecognizable, even unimaginable, to the apostles and the early church who understood from Jesus right off the bat that discipleship to him meant a life lived in community. The early church fathers had a saying: “One Christian is no Christian.” Think about it and it makes sense. You can’t be a part of a temple if you’re just one isolated stone. Furthermore, what is all that impressive about one stone? Again, our very purpose is to be built *together* as ordinary, odd-fitting stones in such a way that we display such an uncommon, even other-worldly unity that the world cannot help but pay attention. I’m sorry, you lose your very purpose in this life if it’s just you and the cornerstone. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once put it, “Christianity [by definition] means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

Third, we have to embrace and practice proximity in the church, lives that intersect in real and regular ways. Again, think about the image of a temple. Imagine yourself as one of these stones. Your wall, of course, is

just one part of the whole structure. But indirectly, your stone is not only tied into the cornerstone, but also tied into every other stone in the whole building. If you’re on the north wall, you are indirectly tied into all the stones on the south wall, though you will never directly interact with those stones. But it’s different with the stones right around you. Your connection with them is close and constant. They are supported by you as you are supported by them. You bear the weight together. Your rough edges are worn down by their rough edges, and vice versa.

Apply this to the church. When looked at on a historical and global scale, there is no community in the history of the world which is as diverse *and* unified as is the church. I’ve worshipped and served with brothers and sisters in Christ on the other side of the world, people with whom I have almost nothing in common other than Christ, and still I have experienced a deep unity with them that we did not create. The unity in diversity of the church is a marvelous thing to behold. But on a day-to-day basis in my Christian life, I’m not able to be in regular community with Christians in Kenya or Albania. I have to find that with you, with brothers and sisters next to me in the “wall”.

But even in our small context, I can’t be in close relationship with all 400 people in this congregation. And this is why we believe we must find smaller groups of people within the larger congregation where we can intentionally embrace and practice close communities where are really known by one another. And these groups can’t only be based on natural affinity, people only gathering with others just like them. These must instead be groups of people who are different in all sorts of ways but who, in spite of those differences, learn to love one another and serve and worship alongside one another in ways that might make a passerby stop and marvel at what sort of builder could bring such different stones together in such a beautiful way.

This is why Life Groups, or other similar small communities, are not just an option in our church, but something we have identified as one of our core practices. If you are not a part of one of these groups, I encourage you to join one. And if you are, or when you do, give these groups a place of high priority in your life, not just showing up when it’s convenient to do so, but making sacrifices to be with one another. And work hard not to just limit your time together to an hour or so a week, but look creatively for ways to connect with one another even daily, praying for one another, serving one another, meeting the needs of one another. It’s why we call them Life Groups, because they are places where we live out our lives in Christ together, and for his glory.

<sup>7</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (Harper, 1997), 385-386.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper, 1954), 21.

Finally, as we do this, I believe one of the results will be that our community here at Faith will increasingly display a hospitality which is not only tangible to others, but also strikingly uncommon. People should walk into this congregation and sense that something different is going on here, and not just this congregation but any community which claims it is gathered around Christ. Newcomers should discover a hospitality here which is strikingly distinct from what they may experience anywhere else, and discover this hospitality no matter who they are.

Is this about greeting guests with a smile when they show up, or remembering their name when they show up again, or fetching them a cup of coffee and helping them find their way around the campus? Yes, of course, that sort of basic hospitality is essential, even though it can be found elsewhere outside the church. And so, beyond these basics, what will really make an impression on people is when they begin to get to know this community and discover people here who, in any other context, would probably never choose to associate with one another, but who are here, in the church, loving each other as brothers and sisters. I'm talking about personalities which normally repel one another, politics which generally offend one another, backgrounds which almost never mix well with one another, ages and races and genders which usually segregate off from one another. And yet here in this temple such wildly different stones are all built together in astonishing unity. Not perfect stones by any means, except the cornerstone from which all the other stones find their place. No perfect people, but grace-filled people, forgiven people, and people who in turn are learning to extend grace and forgiveness beyond themselves to anyone they encounter. Can you see how incredibly attractive that sort of hospitality is to people in this world who may have given up hope that such unity exists anywhere?

I won't lie to you, this is not easy. It's so difficult, in fact, that only the Lord can build such a structure among us. But this *is* who we are. And this is who we are called to be. We are no longer strangers to each other, or aliens to one another. By the grace of Christ, we have been made members of the very household of God, beloved sons and daughters of our Father in Heaven, brothers and sisters to one another.

Christ is our cornerstone. His Word is our foundation. In him and through him we are being built up and joined together as a holy temple in this world, a place where heaven and earth intersect, a sacred place where the world can come to meet the resurrected Christ himself who has made us his dwelling place. And not just meet him, but find that all are welcomed by him!

For this temple is not finished. More stones are being built into the structure, each one as oddly-shaped and rough-edged as the ones before, adding even more to the wonder of such a builder who can take such stones and fit them in with the rest. All for his glory.

Amen.

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### The Next Step

#### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Ephesians 2:11-22 again. What stands out to you from this passage?
2. In those days the division between Jews and Gentiles showed up in the church and Paul had to work hard to teach people that this division did not exist. What divisions do you see showing up in the church of our day? How have you felt divided from others in the church, people who are different from you?
3. What is the basis of Paul's argument here for unity, rather than division, in the church? According to Paul, what is the reason for our unity?
4. Ancient Jews believed that God's home on earth was the temple in Jerusalem. This was the most sacred place on earth, the place where heaven and earth met. Paul says here that the church is now the new temple, God's new home. What do you think about this? How are we like a temple?
5. Is our congregation united in such a way that it would strike outsiders as unusual in our day? Why or why not?
6. Consider this saying of the early church leaders: "One Christian is no Christian." What do you think they meant by that? Do you agree?
7. How can your Life Group do a better job of practicing the unity that exists between you in Christ? How can you strengthen that unity? What can you do to guard against division?
8. What is the main think you hear Christ saying to you in this message? How will that lead you to think or live differently?

**Table to Table: For kids and adults to consider together.**



*What is the church?*

