

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 12
August 16, 2026
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Built as the Church of Christ

But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace. He made the two groups one by destroying the wall of hostility that divided them ¹⁵when he abolished the law of commandments and regulations in his flesh. He did this to create in himself one new person out of the two, in this way making peace. ¹⁶And he did this to reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by putting the hostility to death on it. ¹⁷He also came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹So then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household. ²⁰You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the Cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²²In him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

—Ephesians 2:13-22

I have a question for the children here today. Adults, you can think of the answer, but don't say it, unless your child needs help, of course. What story are these words from? **"Little pig, little pig, let me come in. No, not by the hair on my chinny chin chin. Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in."**

What's the story? **"The three little pigs."**

And do you recall what three types of building materials the three little pigs used to build their houses? **"Straw, sticks, and bricks."**

And which building was the big bad wolf unable to blow down? **"Bricks."**

When we build a house or a building, it's important to use the right material, right? If you build a house in Arizona out of straw, it wouldn't stand up to the monsoons, right? It's important to have the right material.

Today we hear the apostle Paul talk about a building. It's a place where God makes his residence. It's a home where God dwells. But the material that God uses to build this house isn't your typical material. In fact, we might be inclined to think that it's quite a strange material that God uses. It's not straw. It's not sticks. It's not even bricks. No, the building material that God uses is *you*. *You* are the house of God. *You* are the place where God writes his address on and says, "I'm going to live there." *You* are **built as the Church of Christ**.

Now, why is that strange? Well, first of all, the Bible tells us that you and I aren't the best building materials. You see, God is holy and perfect, and we aren't. How would a holy and perfect God take up residence in a sin-filled person like me and like you? What's more is that by nature, you and I and other people don't fit well together. People clash with each other. By nature, we are self-centered. We have a tendency to think that we are superior to other people. Just observe what you see among people in our world. Hostility and animosity are prevalent.

But that's nothing new to *our* day. That sort of thing was going on throughout the ages. The apostle Paul references that clash of people in our text for today. He talks about the hostility that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. During the days of the Bible, there was a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. These two groups of people were very different, religiously and culturally, so different that there was hostility between them. The Jews were hostile toward the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were hostile toward the Jews.

Now, understand that that was never God's plan. Oh, yes, God had chosen the Jewish people as the group through whom the Savior of the world would come. But he never intended that they would be the only people in his household. God had always planned on building his Church through the people of every nationality.

Just think about when King Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem. At the dedication of the temple, he prayed, **"Also for the foreigner, who is not one of your people Israel, but who comes from a distant land because of your great Name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm, and who comes and prays toward this house, for that foreigner, hear in heaven, which is your dwelling place, and do everything for which that foreigner cries out to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your Name and fear you, just as your people Israel do, because they know that your Name is proclaimed in this house that I have built"** (2 Chronicles 6:32,33).

God's intent was that through the Jewish people, other people in the world would come to know and believe in him as the only God and Savior.

Or look at our first reading for today from Isaiah 56. God says, **“Then the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him and to love the name of the LORD and to become his servants, every one of them who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, those who take hold of my covenant—I will bring them to my holy mountain, and I will make them glad in my house of prayer. Their whole burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar. For my house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples of the world. This is the declaration of God the LORD, who gathers Israel’s dispersed people: ‘I will gather still more people to my house besides the ones already gathered.’”** God’s plan was to use the Israelites as his witnesses to gather people from all the nations.

Think of it like this. Some of you know that my wife and I have housed students from the Apache Reservation and from Tucson and even a student from Spain. Imagine if my wife told our son, “Dinner’s ready. Please go tell the others.” What is my son’s responsibility? He’s to go and let the others know that dinner’s ready. What if he just sat down at the table without letting them know? What if he didn’t tell them? He would be self-centered *and* the others would not know about dinner. Right?

You see, God intended that the Jewish people would be a bright beacon to the other people in the world. He wanted them to invite others to come and know and believe in the only one and true God and Savior.

But sadly, over the years, the Jews had begun to act like a self-centered child. They didn’t think the Gentiles were worth inviting to the banquet of God’s salvation. They began to see themselves as superior to the other nations. Instead of being the light for the nations, they separated themselves from other people. I suppose I can understand that to a point. Many Jews did not want to give in to the pagan religion of many of the Gentiles.

The apostle Paul spoke about those pagan religions when he said to the Gentiles in Ephesians 2:12, **“Remember that at that time you were separated from Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise. You were without hope and without God in the world.”**

What Paul writes is important for us to grasp because there are many today who insist that one religion is just as good as the next. You even will hear some who call themselves Christians say that the Jews and Muslims worship the same God as Christians do.

But that’s not what Paul taught here in Ephesians. He says that if you are without Christ, then you are without God, and you are without the hope of salvation. You see, only Christ can bring us into the Church of God. Paul explains *why* that is when he wrote in our text: **“But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.”**

Remember that there was once an invisible wall of sin between God and people. Think of how sin interrupted the perfect relationship Adam and Eve once enjoyed with God. They used to walk and talk with him. But after they sinned, they hid from him.

Ironically it should have been God who hid from Adam and Eve. Or at the very least, God should have folded his arms in disgust and in righteous judgment and said, **“How dare you!”** But he didn’t do that. Instead, what did he do?

He went looking for his wayward children with open arms. He then opened his arms wide again in the person of his Son, Jesus. Just picture that scene on Mt. Calvary. When the Roman soldiers grabbed hold of Jesus to nail him to the cross, Jesus could have frowned, folded his arms, and said something like: **“How dare you!”** As the Almighty God, those soldiers wouldn’t have stood a chance against him. But he didn’t do that.

Instead, he opened his arms to them, willingly letting himself be crucified. Why? Because it was only through the shedding of his sinless blood that the wall of sin which existed between God and us could be dissolved. No other religion offers such a savior.

That’s why Paul writes, **“But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace.”** You have peace with God. No more barriers, no more walls, nothing separating us from him.

But Jesus’ death on the cross has not only brought peace between a righteous God and sinners, it also was meant to make peace between sinners themselves, both Jewish people and Gentile people. Paul put it like this: **“He made the two groups one by destroying the wall of hostility that divided them when he abolished the law of commandments and regulations in his flesh. He did this to create in himself one new person out of the two, in this way making peace. And he did this to reconcile both to God in one body through the cross by putting the hostility to death on it.”**

In Jesus’ day, the Jewish people had created a barrier between themselves and the Gentiles. There was actually a physical barrier that they built around the temple in Jerusalem. It was called the **Soreg**. Anybody who was not a

Jewish person had to stay outside of that fence. In fact, they had signs on the posts of the fence that essentially said, **“Gentiles cannot go further than this. If you do, you will be responsible for your death.”** It was like a death threat against Gentile people, anybody who was not Jewish. That’s how bad this hostility had become between Jewish people and Gentile people.

All of that was manmade barriers. God didn’t prescribe them. But I wonder if the apostle Paul had that fence in mind when he said that Jesus came to destroy the **“wall of hostility.”** Of course, he wasn’t just talking about that fence. He was talking about any barriers between people. There was to be no such wall around Christian churches—visible or invisible. The gentile Christians had as much right and freedom to approach God as did the Jewish Christians. They were both full citizens and members of God’s household *through faith in Jesus*. **Jesus knocks down the wall between us and God, and Jesus knocks down any wall between human beings.**

You see, at the foot of the cross of Christ, all barriers go away. Here’s why this is an **unexpected truth**. By nature, our sinful nature creates barriers and separates us from God and each other. But the **unexpected truth** is that **“The Church is for all people,”** and you are **built as the Church of Christ**.

The apostle Paul writes, **“So then, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household. You have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the Cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”**

Do you see how God builds his Church? Jesus is our focus. He’s the most important person in our lives. And we are built on the foundation of the teachings of God’s Word, the Old Testament and the New Testament, the apostles and the prophets. The entirety of Scripture is focused on Christ. And the Holy Spirit builds his Church through God’s Word by placing you as living stones as the temple of God. You’re part of his family, and therefore part of the temple in which the Holy Spirit lives.

Let me close by asking you a question. This isn’t just for the children. This is for all of us. How do you see yourself? **Are you someone who goes to church, or are you someone who is the church?** There’s a big difference. There are people who just go to church. They talk about attending church. Once in a while they get their act together and show up. They hear the Word of God, and they find it somewhat interesting. Then they go home and continue on in their lives. Nothing is different. Nothing has changed. Their beliefs are the same. Their lifestyles are the same. They talk about going to church again sometime, and sometime, maybe they will. Is that you? Are you here today because you go to church?

Or do you see yourself as someone who *is* the church? Do realize that God builds you as part of the Church of Christ through his Word? If you see yourself as the church, then God isn’t a distant stranger to you, but he’s someone who lives in you. He’s written his address on you as the home of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. You pray to him regularly. You listen to him speak his Word to you regularly. And when you live your life during the week, your beliefs are different. Your view of the world is different. You know that you are forgiven because of the blood of Jesus Christ. And so, you live your life forgiving others, showing kindness and mercy and love to others, just as God has shown to you.

Is that you? Does God live in you? My prayer today is that all of us will see this **unexpected truth**. God has built his Church. He doesn’t build it out of straw or sticks or even bricks. He builds his Church out of you. You are **built as the Church of Christ**. Live that way. Amen.