

**READ THE TEXT**

On a trip to Helena, Montana,  
Sue and I took an evening walk down a country road.

The mountains and trees surrounded us with a quiet, lovely grandeur.  
It was a scene spoiled by only one thing...  
the fences two of the homeowners had erected to protect their property.

One of those was an electrified barbed-wire barrier with intermittent signs  
that said, “KEEP OUT”

Further up the hill was a wood fence patrolled by two enormous dogs that howled  
at us like wolves!

Both yards said the same thing: “STRANGER, STAY OUT!”

That’s where we live – in a world of fences and locks and warning signs,  
a world of STRANGERS.

A beautiful world that has been fractured by forces that divide us –  
whether it be generational or political, ethnic or religious.

Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland  
Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda  
Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds in Iraq

It happens here, too, where we are caught in a cultural crossfire:  
gay and straight  
pro-life and pro-choice  
liberal and conservative

In the movie MISSISSIPPI BURNING, which tells the story of three murdered  
civil rights workers,

FBI agents are surveying the damage at a burned-out black church.

One says to the other,

“How can people live this way? How can they treat each other this way?”

It is, for both of them, a question without an answer. They cannot understand  
such deep-seated hatreds.

Our human estrangement runs deep – all the way to the core of our being.  
Neither race nor age nor sex nor political persuasion explains it.

For it is a SPIRITUAL problem. We are STRANGERS because we are SINNERS.

**“Your sins have caused a separation,”** wrote Isaiah long ago.

A SEPARATION FROM GOD that results in a SEPARATION FROM  
EVERYONE ELSE.

You married folks know about it.

Most of you can remember nights where you went to bed and lay there  
only 3 feet apart, yet felt like strangers at the opposite ends of the earth.

You parents and children know about it,  
for you have encountered that WALL of misunderstanding or just plain silence  
that can separate the generations. “They just don’t get it!” each says.

There are even times, I must confess, when I look in the mirror  
and ask the face that stares back at me, “Who ARE you?”  
Times when I cannot understand my actions, my powerful emotions. You too?

St. Paul knew about estrangement from his experience as a Jew.

For, as a rule, Jews in Paul’s day hated the Gentiles (non-Jews) – called them “dogs”  
and said that God had made Gentiles as fuel for the fires of hell.

That estrangement took concrete form in a literal wall at the Temple in Jerusalem  
that separated the court of the Gentiles from the court of the Jews.

Signs were posted along that wall warning Gentiles to stay back  
at the risk of being stoned to death if they trespassed.

But St. Paul had discovered to his everlasting joy  
that into a world of STRANGERS had come wondrous Good News:

There had come to be a people who were NO LONGER STRANGERS  
to each other.

They had been bound together into an intimate COMMUNITY  
that dissolved the barriers –  
a community that embraced slaves and Roman citizens and,  
wonder of wonders, joined even JEWS AND GENTILES!

Paul had discovered it personally.

He had found Jesus Christ, or rather been found by Him!

He had been made a part of Christ's Church, a community unlike any other on earth.

Here in Ephesians, Paul gives us two PICTURES of this intimate community.

First, He calls it a FAMILY – God's "household"

where all are brothers and sisters who have a common Father

Second, He calls it a holy TEMPLE

in which people are joined as closely as the bricks inter-layered in a wall, where God himself has taken up residence.

Both pictures say the same thing.

These people are closely joined. They are NO LONGER STRANGERS.

Isn't that what people are desperately seeking?

CLOSENESS? COMMUNITY?

A place where they can be accepted and genuinely loved?

Methodist minister Kennon Callahan

says that the two things people come looking for in a church are COMMUNITY and COMPASSION.

Isn't that why you are here?

Isn't that why some of you, even though you have been "burned" by some terrible experience with religion, have come back to try again?

But desperation can be careless.

We get so hungry for closeness

that we may accept ANY kind of community – even a counterfeit or dangerous one, rather than remain estranged and alone.

The existence of GANGS and CULT GROUPS is a testimony to that!

So Paul takes pains in this letter to describe GENUINE community – the real thing God designed – so that what we find there will be to our LASTING joy.

Where is the GENUINE community?

It is not where everyone has the same color or income, or similar values.

It's not enough that the people are all intellectuals or are all reasonably well-behaved...

for SIN runs deep – deeper than all these things,  
and so a community must have a deeper foundation or it will collapse.

Where is the GENUINE community?

It is, says Paul, “**built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets**”

It is that community that started with the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ,  
the community anticipated for centuries by Israel's prophets.

These Apostles and Prophets, though long dead, still speak in the words  
they left – the words of the Bible.

The GENUINE COMMUNITY has that Bible, those Words,  
as its foundation.

That's why, here in this church, we make so much of this Book!

Why we preach from it every Sunday  
and urge all of you to study it in class and at home.

This book tells the community's story – records God's gracious dealings with us.

But even having the Bible in common is not enough for genuine, lasting COMMUNITY

For there are churches who pay lip service to the Bible  
but ignore what it says.

There are churches who make it a WEAPON to clobber each other  
and anyone it disagrees with.

And many a church winds up just as divided/ estranged as the world outside!

There is one more thing crucial to GENUINE Christian Community...  
a CORNERSTONE to hold it together.

Here it is, says Paul: **Christ Jesus Himself is the Chief Cornerstone.**  
**In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple.**

Since buildings today are not constructed like those in Bible times, this picture may be hard for us to imagine. So let me use one I saw at a summer camp...

At that particular camp, the campers were challenged to accomplish a number of COOPERATIVE PROJECTS – or “Co-Ops”

In one, 10 or more kids were required to pile themselves on top of a smallish wood block. It’s hard because the space on the block is way too small for 10 people, even squeezed together.

The secret is to have the largest person stand in the center, and then have successive pairs of kids hold on to him from opposite sides. That way they can hang out over the edge without falling off.

**IT ALL DEPENDS ON THEIR HANGING ON TO HIM.**

He’s the “Cornerstone”. As long as you hold on to him, you are safely connected.

Jesus is the one to whom we cling, who indeed holds on to US!

When He is in the middle, even people who are “opposites” stay connected. For He is stronger than FEAR and PREJUDICE, stronger than the SINS which divide people.

HIM I proclaim to you who are lonely and estranged.

HIM I proclaim to you who are fearful for the church’s future and distrustful of change.

The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.  
Christ is our Cornerstone – on Him alone we build!

In Him we are NO LONGER STRANGERS,  
but fellow citizens and members of the household of God!

Many years ago Bruce Larson wrote a book entitled NO LONGER STRANGERS.

The book made a big impression on me, because it called for the kind of church I had been wishing for, aching for –

a church in which people could find the CLOSENESS we so much need – with God and with each other.

Basing his whole book on this passage from Ephesians,  
Larson called for the church to commit itself to doing TWO THINGS.

First to be VULNERABLE...

That is, to risk putting ourselves openly, honestly before each other,  
telling the truth about ourselves, even if it's UGLY.

Doesn't Paul himself do that? Over and over?

**“I persecuted the church...I am the chief of sinners.”**

Vulnerable comes from the Latin word for WOUND.

A vulnerable person puts himself in a place where he risks being wounded.

We can do it here, can't we?

We don't need a “pious conspiracy” – we don't pretend to be flawless.

For Jesus is here, and He takes our wounds, our warts,  
and our ugliness to the cross.

I came across a poem that expresses one man's willingness to be vulnerable...

**That's my soul lying there.  
You don't know what a soul is?  
You think it's some kind of ghostly sheet-like thing  
you can see through and it floats in the air?  
That's my soul lying there.**

**Remember when my hand shook because I was nervous in the group?  
Remember the night I argued too much and got mad  
and then couldn't get myself out of the whole mess?  
I was putting my soul on the line.**

**When I told you that my mother didn't love my dad and I knew it  
as a kid.  
When I said that my eyes water when I hurt even though I'm 34 and too  
old to cry,  
I was putting my soul out there in the space between you and me.  
That's my soul lying there.**

**I'll let you pick it up.  
That's why I put it there.  
It'll bruise if you want to manhandle it.**

**But if you want to put your soul beside it, there will be love.  
There will even be God.**

It isn't easy to do that here in this large-group setting, where the order of the day is INSPIRATION and TEACHING  
so I urge you to take part in a smaller group we offer –

like a home Bible Study group,  
or the men's breakfast  
or a marriage retreat  
or even just a time of openness with someone on the phone  
or over coffee

The SECOND thing Larson urged is that we speak WORDS OF AFFIRMATION.

Tell the other person of his worth to God and to us...to take time to observe and describe what God is doing in that person's life.

A small boy in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, felt lost at church. Other children ignored him because he was small for his age. Adults acted as if he were invisible, or was in their way.

Until a new pastor came.

Early on, that pastor spotted the little fellow, knelt down, and said,  
"You're Dale Milligan, aren't you?" The surprised boy said "Yes".  
Then something even more startling: "I like you! Let's be friends!"

Dale Milligan later reflected. "That day in church, my life changed. I was somebody at last."

He eventually became a pastor and designed a ministry program for kids called LOGOS. Countless kids have been blessed by it.

We too CAN say such things, do such things, can't we?

For Jesus has done this for each of us – called us by name,  
pardoned us fully and freely  
made us his friends.

**"In Him you are being built together,"** says Paul.

Such words! Such a message! Such a glorious COMMUNITY He has placed us in!

May we become what He has planned...

NO LONGER STRANGERS, but FELLOW CITIZENS  
and MEMBERS OF THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD.