

“Gathered and Graced: The Thriving Church”

Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-22

“Those who were far off” and “those who were near,” the writer to this first century church wrote in such beautiful phrases, those who were far off and those who were near, heard a similar message of peace. And they were gathered - not just by their own responses, not just by their own volition, but through the grace of God who called that church into being.

Gathered by God. And not all the same kinds of people, Ephesians makes clear. In fact two distinct groups, gathered together into this early church. From the beginning the church has not been about cultivating like-minded people, or enshrining one viewpoint or one cultural background, but blending those who were near with those who were far off.

Those first century churches had two distinct groups - Jewish followers of this Jesus, people who knew their scriptural stories, had grown up within the covenant, followed religious rituals and celebrated religious holidays and observed religious rules. But there were others, Gentiles. Non-Jews. Who came from a variety of religious traditions or none at all, but found the teachings of, the stories about, the community of Jesus persuasive and inviting and they took the leap to get involved. So those first century churches had two groups that did not necessarily share the same language or landscape or outlook. Nevertheless, gathered together.

Does it feel that way here? I'm not sure. I don't think there are two distinct factions. I'll admit that it doesn't feel that way to me, but it might to you. That first time you come down to the Dining Room for Third Sunday Lunch and it seems like everyone else knows each other . . . and then there is you. Or the choir streams down the center aisle and suddenly it feels like there are amazing singers, and well, others. Or in this year when political conversations are unavoidable and ever-present, you feel like there are my people and those people.

I do know that we get dispersed. Just this week I was in touch with people in our community in Florida, New York, and at Mayo Hospital in Rochester. So even as we gather here today, we know that we are not all here. Within our hearts, within this very community are homebound members and jetsetters. Snowbirds and springbreakers. And yet . . . through prayers and technology and the work of the Spirit, we are gathered.

This passage also reminds us that we are graced. We are created for good works, the letter writer reminds us, but at the same time insists that we are not here because of our good works, but because of the grace and love and in the mystery of God. "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" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Gathered and graced - to add beauty to this city.

Gathered and graced - to learn from our differences and in that process to learn more about ourselves. Gathered and graced to do good work.

It may not be all that visible, but so much work goes into the brief annual meeting. Written reports from committee chairs with highlights from the year past. Photos selected to take the place of a thousand spoken words. Statistics that hint at lives lived and love lost and promises made. As we prepare for this morning's annual congregational meeting, I have been thinking a lot about the church at its best. A thriving church. Gathered and graced not just to survive, but to thrive.

I'm thinking a lot about a man some of you know well. Family members have known him your whole life. Others didn't know him well, but saw his name printed on financial statements and gentle reminders. When I came here in 2005, in what was viewed as one best last chance to live or die with courage and grace, people said, "Thank goodness Bill Zopfi was there. He kept that place going."

Bill was the institutional memory. Knew how to keep the heat going and that trick to try when basement odors grew strong. He knew the story about where that thing we last used five years ago was stored and all about the decision-making in different decades of decorating the sanctuary. He was a numbers guy who has a heart of gold. Someone who would receive lunch donations on Wednesdays, but had cans of Dinty Moore Stew for hungry people at other times of the week. Bill Zopfi, who served as Treasurer here at Central for decades. Today we are thanking Bill, celebrating his service, and honoring his change in status to Treasurer Emeritus.

I've also been thinking about a new opportunity in front of us. As we have announced, and as Matt Ehling will share in his Treasurer's report, we received an unexpected and unusual gift - \$1.65 million dollars. And this gift can help us launch and boost our mission and ministries.

Since we received this gift, I have heard great ideas about what we could do. How we could be more of what we want to be. Stories about how the church has impacted our lives, and hopes expressed of having an even greater impact in the future. What is so exciting to me is that there is such good energy to reflect and dream and desire to live into the future. To ask questions about what is vital within this congregation's DNA that suggests what we can and should do in the future.

With this gift we now have financial resources to fund some of these ideas. But one of the things that the Session has discussed is that money does not always make people happy. That lottery winners often make bad decisions. So I have been pleased to hear people say that how we make decisions may be just as important as the decisions that we make.

This eloquent passage from Ephesians ends with this description of who and what that church was and could be. Very first century - but rather timeless as well.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and

prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. A dwelling place for God – the final words of the passage from Ephesians

We are about to sing a hymn [“Let Us Build A House” by Marty Haugen]. It’s about more than a building, although it talks about the work of the church as building a house. A house for God, but also where our intention is that earth is as it is in heaven, as the prayer puts it.

Building people up. Building on the faithful work that has been done in the past. Building meaning and offering hope and singing songs and praying prayers and built with tears and cries and laughter. A dwelling place for God.

May it be so here. Among us. Even now. Amen.