

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday after Trinity, July 4, 2010

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Hymns: 551, 466, 307, 315, 473:1-2.

Lessons: Isaiah 28:14-23, 1 Peter 2:1-17, Matthew 21:42-46.

Text: Ephesians 2:19-22.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Near the beginning of our worship service with the Lord's Supper, we confess "I believe in one Holy Christian and Apostolic Church." On Sundays when we don't have the Lord's Supper, we confess that we believe in "The Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." You may even remember how that was explained in Luther's Small Catechism: "But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers."

That Holy Christian Church is what our sermon text today is talking about. Last Sunday we talked about the text that points out that Jesus Christ has united both Jews and Gentiles in this way: "*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*" Ephesians 2:13-18.

It is through the blood of Jesus Christ that anyone can be saved eternally. That same blood and suffering of Jesus Christ is what believers rely upon for salvation. Today we are reminded that

BELIEVERS ARE MEMBERS OF GOD'S HOUSEHOLD

1. Believers are "*fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household*".
2. This is the Holy Christian Church, with "*Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone*."

Because Christ has reconciled you – a Gentile – to God and to all Christians, you now belong.

The words used here are "foreigners" and "aliens". A foreigner and an alien is an outsider. He or she doesn't belong. He or she can't speak the language, and doesn't know the customs and manners expected.

I think that all of you have recognized the importance of belonging. You know the feeling of belonging, of being part of a group, part of a team, part of a school, part of a church, part of any kind of group. Humans tend to be social creatures. In reality, people usually want to belong. It is rare that someone wants no contact whatsoever with other humans. Someone once said that "No man is an island". While the words may not come from Scripture, the idea is reinforced in places like our text, which reminds us that all believers – and that includes you (who believe) – are part of a unit, of a group, of something greater than yourself. You belong.

Perhaps you have recognized the importance of belonging, of being part of a group because you were excluded in some way or for some reason. That is one of the cruel realities of sinful people in this sinful world. People exclude others from belonging. Often it is an intentional cruelty. People think that they are better than someone else who may be different in some way. People think that they are better than someone else just because they want to show their supposed power, or their supposed “betterness” than someone else. Literature and movies have often used this theme to show how cruelly some group excludes someone. Sometimes the excluding is unintentional, that someone else is excluded from a group simply by thoughtlessness. But how often haven’t we heard even children bluntly say that they don’t like someone and don’t want to play with them or have anything to do with them.

But we know it is human nature to want to belong, to be part of a group, or to be part of many groups.

And that wanting to belong is solved here, by belonging to a very important group. Everyone who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior belongs. He or she is no longer a foreigner and an alien, but a fellow citizen **“with God’s people and [a member] of God’s household.”** By faith in Christ they belong. They no longer lack a place in the kingdom of God. Now they are fellow citizens with God’s people.

They are not only citizens of the same kingdom, but they’re even closer than that. They are members of the same family. God is their father and Gentile believers have access to him just as the Jewish believers do. They are members of the household, not servants, not day laborers who go to their own homes when the day is done, not just guests touring the mansion. They belong. They are members of the family. They don’t just look at the mansion and kind of wish they could share, but they are sharers.

Now St. Paul switches to the picture of a building and has you think of the unity and coherence between the various structural parts of a building: the foundation, the cornerstone, the walls rising to form the superstructure.

The firm foundation is the doctrine Christ gives through his Old Testament prophets and his New Testament apostles. Throughout the ages there has been only one plan of salvation. Old Testament believers looked forward to the Messiah, the Savior who was to come. Believers in our New Testament era look back to the Savior who has come. Thus the apostles and prophets, those who brought to the world God’s Word about the Savior can accurately be called the foundation. The Christ they preached is the cornerstone of the church.

“In [Jesus Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” It is only in Jesus Christ that this building is built. Most of you have watched some building being built, or have seen television documentaries that show and talk about famous buildings being built. Such buildings require many people to do the work. Such human buildings require architects, engineers, designers, to create the concept and the design. Such human buildings then require many various tradesmen, such as carpenters, plumbers, electricians, heating and air conditioning workers and maybe even steel-workers. But the picture from scripture is more than just a simple building. It is a temple.

The temple to which our text is referring is the Holy Christian Church. It is the sum total of all believers, those who in past ages waited in faith for the Messiah to come and those in the present who trust in the merits of the Savior who has come. As the gospel progresses through the world, new believers are added to this church.

In the same way that many various craftsmen add more and more of the parts of a building as it proceeds toward completion, so too Christ is building his church – one believer at a time, into a temple. The picture is not just a simple church such as we worship in today. But the picture is of a temple – a grand and glorious building.

Each believer is carefully fitted into his or her niche. All are known by name by the builder. All are important to the builder. All fulfill a purpose. After all, God told us just a few verses earlier, **“For it is by grace**

you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Ephesians 2:8-10. When we think of the good works – everything that a believing child of God does in the fear and love of God – we realize that every part of the Holy Christian Church, every believer has his role and place and part in this temple put together by God! Christians aren't simply placeholders in this temple. Everyone has a function and a purpose. We all have a role and a job in the Holy Christian Church. I think of a beautiful stone church we saw on a recent vacation, and wondered how the large stones stay cemented together to support the thick walls. If any of them stopped doing their work, the building would crumble. Or I think of how every beam, reinforcing plate, and every little rivet in a huge bridge has its role. If one fails, what a catastrophe could happen and has even has occurred! (As in the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis, MN, August 1, 2007) Now the Holy Christian church won't fail if one believer stops believing or striving to do God-pleasing works, because Christ holds it all together. But I use the human illustrations to show that everyone has a role and a job in the Holy Christian Church.

All belong! All believers are part of that ***"holy temple in the Lord."*** It is holy because Christ has washed us clean – not with laundry soap and bleach but with his holy precious blood and his innocent sufferings and death! And it is in the Lord, not built on any human, that we are joined together in this magnificent edifice that we will finally be able to see in eternity, in heaven.

"And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." There is the reminder that You – each believer – is being built together to become a dwelling place of God the Holy Spirit. And we have this admonition from God: ***"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."*** 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

In worship services in which we celebrate the Lord's Supper, those who have learned and confessed through instruction and confirmation make another special display of unity. We are being joined with Jesus Christ by taking into our body his true body and his true blood. And we are being joined together with one another and all believers through all eternity by eating and drinking the same body and blood of Jesus Christ, in, with, and under the bread and the wine, and becoming one with another as well as with Jesus Christ.

The Lord's Supper is a visible sign and seal of the Lord's presence in our midst, and especially of the forgiveness of our sins. His body and blood were shed FOR YOU for the remission of your sins. This is the same forgiveness of sins announced through the word of the Gospel.

What a blessing that God created the Holy Christian Church, that we are joined with one another. May God keep us all in that unity to be revealed on the last day! Amen.