



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Poland, Ohio 44514
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8th Sunday after Pentecost

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

The Architecture of Faith

Ephesians 2:11-22

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—¹² 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. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

"We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us." It is a well-known quote from Winston Churchill. The architecture of the buildings that we inherit often shape the programming and function that occurs in them. What about faith? Can't the same be said for faith? I am not merely referring to the individual private faith that we each hold. I am speaking about the faith we declare as a community: the faith that we, the people of God, worshipping at 2 Poland Manor, believe and act upon. What is the structure of our faith? Is it strong? Will it withstand the elements and demands of post-modern life?

Together, we shape our faith. Together, we shape it in creeds and mission statements. Together, we shape it in strategic plans, worship and sermons. Together, we shape our faith in mission projects and Christian education. Together, we shape what we believe and how we show our beliefs.

Then faith shapes us.

- It shapes the lives of our children and future generations.
- It shapes our interactions with each other.
- It shapes the quality of life in our community.

The early church did not have buildings. They gathered in homes and other places, because there were no places exclusively dedicated to worship. The church was solely identified with the people and the community of faith. The letter I read to you was attributed to Paul writing to a congregation in Ephesus. It was probably read to the community as they gathered for prayer in someone's home. Paul used compelling imagery to describe the community of faith. In the second chapter of Ephesians, he employed the language of architecture. He challenged the church at Ephesus to think of themselves as a building. Then he extended the image to address the challenges they faced.

Today, I want to use this section of Ephesians to examine the "*architecture of faith*." **First**, I will look at the nature of the community of faith. **Second** I will articulate a specific mission of faith. **Finally** I will invite you to join me in applying it to Poland Presbyterian Church in the summer of 2015.

I

There are three important ingredients to the architecture of faith. The **first** is the foundation. The foundation is the part of the building we seldom see, yet it is vital to the total strength and resilience of the structure.. When one is constructing a house or other building, the first consideration is the foundation. If the foundation is weak or poorly made, the structure, (no matter how glorious), will not last. But a foundation must not only be strong, it must also be flexible in order to withstand the movements of the earth.

Paul wrote: "you are the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets." This seems like a curious assertion. What could he possibly mean? We know that the prophets of the Old Testament had a special gift to speak God's word to the community and to offer guidance. The Apostles of the New Testament were the inspired leaders of the church. They were the guides and the missionaries to the fledgling Christian community. Common to both prophet and apostle was **the Word**. The proclamation of the gospel, the Word of God, is the foundation in the architecture of faith. It is a strong foundation. It is also flexible and therefore resilient to the movements and changes of time and history.

The **second** is the cornerstone. This might be translated as *foundation stone* or *keystone*. Scholars differ on the role of this piece, whether it was used to hold an arch in place, or was the center piece of the foundation itself. It was obviously important and crucial to the structural integrity of the building. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone in the architecture of faith. A vital community of faith has Christ at its center. Faith is built upon the victory won by Jesus Christ upon the cross.

- Faith - that death has been defeated on the cross.
- Faith - that the hope of Easter permeates all reality.
- Faith - that where ever and whenever two or three of us gather in his name, Christ is present.

The corner stone of the architecture of faith is Jesus Christ.

The **third** component to the architecture of faith is mortar. This is what joins us together in a community of faith. It is what makes us sisters and brothers. The Spirit of Christ is the mortar. The hymn *Blessed Be the Tie.*, captures the strength and resiliency of this mortar.

*Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.*

*We share each other's woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.*

The Spirit is the power that us together in a community of faith.

II

The architecture of faith also has a clear purpose. We have a mission in the world. Paul wrote "Christ has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." This was an architectural reference to the Temple in Jerusalem. There was a courtyard where people would gather. Even the non-Hebrew or *goyim* could enter this area. But then there was a wall with a sign that directed that no non-Jew could step further under penalty of death. This was called the "wall of hostility" or dividing wall. This dividing wall symbolized the things that separate us from one another and from God.

Our purpose, (indeed our mission), as a community of faith is breaking down these walls of hostility. Our mission is reconciliation. It is a mission of renewal: renewing and celebrating the ties that bind us together.

One of the ironies of the modern technology and travel is that while we are brought much closer together, we are also confronted with the challenge of all the differences that exist between human beings. The "buzz word" is *diversity*. Diversity is a given. But these differences should not be a cause for division, enmity and the artificial walls of separation and hostility that we erect between human beings.

We know them all. We know all the differences that exist. I know that on any given Sunday I am preaching to old and young, Republican and Democrat, male and female, conservative and liberal, rich and poor, happy and sad... and the list goes on and on. We should not despair these differences... but we also need to be a community of faith where we don't let these and all the other things that seem so important be reasons for erecting walls between us. One of the great quotes of the 1980's was when President Reagan said to the Soviet Union: "Tear down this wall." Ephesians looks at all the walls that exist between human beings, the ones that we erect in the name of ourselves, in the name of God, in the name of ideology...etc. and declares to each and all of us: "Tear down these walls."

III

I am humbled by the challenge that is in this passage. The challenge is not merely to declare the faith we hold, but to examine it. What is the foundation of our faith? Ultimately, what is it that provides the foundation for the faith of this community called Poland Presbyterian Church? The challenge is to rediscover and reclaim our foundation... in the words of the old hymn:

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in God's excellent Word!

The challenge is to listen again to the cornerstone of our faith, Jesus. Listen again to his words, and allow ourselves to be challenged by them.

The challenge is to rediscover the Christ of the cross... and also the true cross which we too must bear for faith.

The challenge is to live each day as Easter... preaching to the merchants of death doom that "he is risen!"

I am humbled by the challenge of the differences that exist between us. It is so easy to exclude. It is so easy to discriminate. It is so easy to let diversity be an excuse for discord. I humbled by the challenge of reconciliation...

We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us.... The architecture of faith concludes that we shape our faith, and then it shapes the way we act. Our faith shapes the generations of the future. This is the challenge of God's Good News. Amen