

Pentecost +9
Household of God
Rev. Jack King

I am so pleased to be at St. Brendan's this morning! I am grateful for the invitation to worship with you and preach today, and I also apologize that it has taken me so long to be with you. From time to time, we've had Apostles pastors preach and celebrate Eucharist with you. I'm usually covering home base while they're visiting here so Fr Doug can have a breather, but today is different! I've been looking forward to today's service for some time.

I've been excited to be with you because I miss those St Brendan's friends from Apostles, and I'm eager to meet new friends who belong to St. Brendan's without a prior Apostles connection. I speak on behalf of Apostles when I invoke St. Paul's words, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." I am regularly asked at Apostles, on Sundays, at Vestry meetings, in day-to-day conversations, "How are things going at St. Brendan's?" A year and a half after your commissioning as a church plant, you remain on the hearts and minds of God's people at Apostles. We celebrate your devotion to the places and towns of Blount Co., your creativity in mission and liturgy, your partnership with other churches.

You are where God has called you to be, but I want you to know that one of the new experiences we have had as a mother church, as a sending church, is learning how to release those we love for the sake of the Gospel. We miss worshiping together, catching up on Sundays, the sound of Doug's laughter.

You have a wonderful pastor in Fr. Doug Floyd. I've said this to him personally, but I want you to know that Doug is one of the best teachers of the Word I've ever met. What's better is the way he loves the people God has entrusted to his care. It was a great joy to serve with Doug at Apostles for four years. I'm grateful his church planting call was Maryville, not Memphis, so I can still see him regularly.

I bring you one final greeting, but this will carry us into the scripture this morning, as well. I greet you on behalf of our bishops, Archbishop Foley and Bishop Frank. You may or may not know that I assist our bishops as Dean of the Tennessee churches, which means I'm an extension of their care and support for Anglican churches in our state.

I was so pleased that Bishop Frank came to visit St. Brendan's earlier this year. We were talking about Bishop Frank at our dinner table last week and my daughter, Madeleine, said, "Bishop Frank loves to talk about two things: heaven and chocolate. And he said there's going to be plenty of chocolate in heaven." Maybe that's evangelism the Anglican way!

So an extended beginning with greetings and such, but such is the Anglican way when you belong to a diocese. So I don't take the time for these kinds of greetings as some kind of formality, or an exercise in manners; no, I want you to hear firsthand that St. Brendan's belongs to a family. That family is called a diocese. And a diocese is not canon laws, committees, or

endless debates about Anglican politics or theology; it is a spiritual family of relationships, friendships, and common mission.

I recently heard someone say that the best way to understand and apply what we mean when we say ‘the Church’ is to think in terms of a diocese. We are Jesus people dispersed among towns and cities of a common region, culture, and history, proclaiming the kingdom of God in word and action. When Paul said that the Spirit bestows various gifts upon his Body, I not only see that manifested among individuals in a single congregation, I see that manifested among the churches of a diocese.

Before we commissioned Fr. Doug and the first members of St. Brendan’s to plant a church in Maryville, our Vestry discussed our need to learn from you, our *expectation* to learn from you. That is not only because God has blessed you with creative clergy and lay leaders, it relates to the ways you learn to serve Christ in these places where he has placed you—Maryville, Alcoa, Louisville, Friendsville, Townsend.

I think it’s important that we understand the Church both revealed and transcending local congregations. N.T. Wright describes the Church as a trans- local Body. I think it’s especially important we encourage our church plants in their early years: you belong to us, and we belong to you. Church planting can be an exciting adventure, and it will also be difficult. We need to experience the Church as a way of belonging to one another, though God has commissioned us to love and serve His kingdom in different places.

In the church family that is a diocese, the Lord calls us to inhabit different places—to learn, revere, suffer with, and celebrate the stories of communities in local places. Maryville is a different place than Knoxville. For starters you have the best coffee shop and public library in our region. I’m aware that you have a sermon podcast and I’m just ok being on the record with that statement. You also have a lovely small college campus and community. And your greenway system is better than any Knox County greenway. And of course, the mountains which shape the culture, history, and future of this place.

When Paul writes to encourage Ephesian Christians in the Lord, he addresses the saints in a local place, that great city of antiquity, Ephesus. Yet he speaks about the Church, the household of God, that includes *and* transcends their city. For these Greek Christians, Paul places them in the story of Israel, a story into which they have been grafted by the grace of God. Paul also places the Ephesians saints in the company of saints, apostles, and prophets. He wants them to understand their membership among this great cloud of witnesses. And *this* is how he calls them to grow and mature in Christ, by building from this solid foundation.

I’d like to give special emphasis to the final verses of our Ephesians reading for this morning. I’ll have just a few additional remarks after I read verses 19-22 once more. If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to read along with me:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the

saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

In the short space of these four verses, the Ephesian Christians would have heard Paul reinforcing through a bit of wordplay this message: ‘you belong to the household of God.’ Four key phrases rely upon the Greek root word for house, *oikos*. In our world, Oikos is a brand of Greek yogurt, Dannon to be exact. In the ancient world, *oikos* formed numerous words related to the structure and makeup of a **household**.

The four *oikos* phrases here are: ‘household of God,’ ‘the whole structure,’ ‘built together,’ and ‘dwelling place.’ We don’t see the wordplay in our English translation, but rest assured the repetition of *household* in its varied forms, would have a layering, reinforcing effect to the Ephesian Christians. And Paul’s effect would have said, ‘You belong to Christ; his household is now your home.’

The cornerstone of this household is Jesus Christ. That sounds like good orthodox Christian theology, doesn’t it? But what do we mean? Well, the cornerstone can only be understood in light of the Christ who endures suffering and weakness, yet triumphs over evil. Israel imagined a Messiah who would conquer evil, but she could not imagine a crucified Messiah who would endure weakness and triumph over the grave. This household of God will only remain secure in its foundations insofar as she accepts weakness and suffering in communion with her Lord.

It is not a popular message in our time, but this is the Gospel. It is a message that we particularly cherish across our three Anglican churches in the greater Knoxville area, St. Brendan’s, Old North Abbey, and Apostles. We encourage one another to carry the cross of Christ when suffering comes, to embrace weakness, and seek the sufficient grace of Jesus when we are tired and exhausted. As the old hymn proclaimed, ‘my hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.’

The redemptive suffering of Christ is the cornerstone of this household, but it is not the only feature of its foundation. Paul says the foundation of this house are the apostles and prophets. Without the cornerstone, we have no foundation. With no foundation, we don’t have the edifice of a house that may be built.

But it is the witness of the apostles and prophets that are building our churches just as they built the church at Ephesus—their martyrdom for the Gospel; their letters, their preaching and teaching; their signs and wonders performed in the Spirit; their devotion to prayer; and most of all, their dependence upon the Spirit of God for all things. You and I are fellow members of this very same household.

I remember hearing a story about the great devotional writer, Oswald Chambers, when he moved into his dormitory room at Bible college. Chambers learned that the previous occupant of his

room had been a student widely known for his devotion to prayer and holiness. On that first day, Chambers moved into his new room, he prayed that same spirit of prayer would fall upon him, similar to the spirit of Elisha receiving a double portion of Elijah's spirit. You and I dwell in the same household of faith as the apostles, prophets, and martyrs who served the Lord in spirit and in truth. Here in Blount County, you live in houses, gather in a space such as this, fulfilling the prayers of local saints departed in the Lord that the Gospel would be preached and his sacraments offered for the glory of the Lord.

As we observe this household, elevating our eyes from the cornerstone and its foundation, we begin to see the whole structure, the design and purpose of its architect. This household is growing together as a holy temple in the Lord. And here is where we glimpse Paul's vision of this trans-local Church, both present in its local expression and transcending any one place or congregation. This whole structure is *being joined together*. It is not only individual Christians who are learning to walk in love with one another, it is churches walking together in the Kingdom of God who are being joined together.

I mentioned earlier that the diocese is a very good understanding of what it means to be the Church. But I also believe that understanding of Church isn't large enough. Anglican Christians must partner with other churches and believers devoted to the Kingdom of God revealed in Israel and Jesus Christ.

When I've been asked about St. Brendan's first year, one of the first things I've said on your behalf is the relationship you've established with other churches, such as the Maryville Vineyard Church. I also think of the friendships that Doug cherishes among pastors of other churches in the Maryville area. In these first few years, you have been living witnesses of Paul's teaching that we only become a holy temple of the Lord when *the whole structure is joined together*. May these relationships increase for the glory of the Lord and the expansion of his Kingdom.

Finally, we come to the last verse of this passage and we hear Paul zoom back in upon the Ephesian Christians once more. He expands their vision to place them within this household of faith including and transcending one place or time, but this sequence concludes with a pastor speaking to his flock. '*In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*' In other words, every congregation gathering in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a *microcosm*, a little universe, a local glimpse of that grand household of faith that stretches across space and time.

In your life together, in your local story, Paul seems to say, you are being built together. There's another *oikos* word. You are being 'homed' together into a dwelling place (another *oikos*/home word) for God by the Spirit.

When I think about the mission God has given St. Brendan's, to be 'a circle of friends on pilgrimage for the love of God,' I think you will find much inspiration in the story of the Ephesian church. In a time when many identify as 'spiritual, but not religious,'; in our region when many say they are 'done' with church because they have found condemnation, shame, or

judgment; in our time when loneliness affects so many, you have a story that compels you to make a home for the hurting. You also have a patron saint in St. Brendan the Navigator. Any church that finds meaning from a nautical saint certainly understands the importance of a lighthouse in a time of darkness and storm. That's why it's so important you are 'homed' together, both for yourselves and for those who are homeless, whether physically or spiritually so./

'In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.' Yes, these words set the course for the story of this church, a story when we can trace a bit further in Christian history. The early Christian father, Ignatius of Antioch, also wrote to encourage the Ephesians, some sixty years or so after the Apostle Paul wrote his letter.

Ignatius wrote after an episode when the Ephesians defended the household from false teaching, but it is his words about their vocation that I find so moving. St Ignatius writes to these same Ephesian Christians:

I HAVE learnt, however, that some from else-where have stayed with you, who have evil doctrine; but you did not suffer them to sow it among you, and stopped your ears, so that you might not receive what they sow, seeing that *you are as stones of the temple of the Father, made ready for the building of God our Father, carried up to the heights by the engine of Jesus Christ, that is the cross, and using as a rope the Holy Spirit.* And your faith is your windlass and love is the road which leads up to God.”

And then he addresses the Ephesian Christians as pilgrims, an identity dear to you. *'You are then all fellow travellers, and carry with you God, and the Temple, and Christ, and holiness, and are in all ways adorned by commandments of Jesus Christ. And I share in this joy, for it has been granted to me to speak to you through my writing, and to rejoice with you, that you love nothing, according to human life, but God alone.'*¹

Dear saints of St. Brendan's, you are all fellow travelers, and carry with you God, and the Temple, and Christ, and holiness. May the Spirit of God continue to build you up together so that you will always be a dwelling place for God and a sanctuary for the weary of heart. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1912– 1913), 183–185.