

Room for us All

September 8, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Ephesians 2: 11-22

Let us pray. Blessed God, thank you for these words of life. May my words now reflect your Word for us here in this place and time, with all we bring to the table, our hopes and fears, gratitude and anxieties, large and small. May your Spirit dwell in us richly through your Word. Amen.

Hi. Wow. Here we are. And this is great. This is great because together God and this congregation are, right now, writing a new chapter in the long life of First Church. The previous chapters have been filled with faith and struggle, and joy and sorrow, and mistakes and rebounds, and friendship and loneliness, and sin unrecognized or hidden, at least for a time, and sin acknowledged, and forgiveness given. The previous chapters have been filled with the Spirit hovering, nudging, indwelling, moving. And my friends, all of those threads of the narrative of the past now continue. One of the characters has changed, but this is a new chapter, not a whole new tale. The story is your story, or rather it is God's story written through the people who have made up the First Church of Cambridge by whatever name, people of the past, the present, and the future. It is good to be with you, good to be together, for this part of the story.

But maybe you noticed the conceit in what I just said. That whole analogy of a new chapter in the life of a congregation is based on the assumption that a transition in the role of Sr. Minister marks the beginning of a new chapter. Given that there have been I don't know 10s of thousands, more than 100 thousand, members of this congregation over 388 years, it is a pretty bold move to mark new chapters that way. Now, I don't want to deny the importance of pastoral leadership. After 35 years of doing this work, I am more convinced than ever that good pastoral leadership is needed to help congregations embody faithfulness in the world today. But this is your story and it is God's story, and it's good, especially for the pastor, to be a little humble about when one chapter ends, and another chapter begins.

Still, something new is beginning today, if only because this exact gathering of First Church of Cambridge has never happened before. Never have all of us been worshipping together in this place, never have each of our personal stories been brought together and formed one thread, one prayer if you will, offered to God. One of my favorite forms of music is improvisation. Whenever people ask that ice breaker question, if you could go back to one point in time what would it be?, I say I would want to go back to a summer's evening in Vienna in about 1795 to listen to a piano improvisation by Beethoven – he was a master of the form, and each work was creative, brilliant, and unique. Well, that's today too. This is a beautiful moment that has many precursors, and will have many echoes, but because exactly we are together, it is also creative, and brilliant, and unique.

So, there is something new today, and we are Re-gathering not just today, but Re-gathering for whatever is next in the life of this congregation. Maybe it's a new chapter, maybe just a paragraph or a sentence. In God's eyes, it may be just a word in a grand epic, or the space after a comma. But whatever it is, I will work with you to make the next 18 months or so, creative, brilliant, and unique, and faithful.

It is good to think about the newness of this day, the newness of the next few months, because thinking about newness helps us understand the New Testament better, especially today's passage from

Ephesians. It is easy to lose sight of when your congregation is 388 years old and you are part of a 2000-year-old branch of an even older faith, but all those years ago Christianity was something insanely new in the world. The church has certainly had long ages of stultifying traditionalism and ossification, but Jesus, and the movement that arose in his name, was new. As a faithful Jew, Jesus took the threads of his ancient faith and wove them together in new ways to infuse them with new life. In his teaching there is clear continuity with the ancient faith of Israel, yet like a musical improvisation, he created something new and different. And the difference lies not so much in the content of the teaching, which honestly, can almost entirely be found in the pages of the Old Testament, but in his vision of who the story was about. And if you've picked up on our regathering theme, you'll know that the point is that there is room for us all in this story.

You see, the early church was not just a religion based on a new set of teachings about God, it was a new type of people, a new political reality. Christianity emerged in a world of empires. In Jesus' day it was the Roman Empire of course, and before that the Greek, and before that the Persian, and before that the Babylonian, and before that the Assyrian. What it meant to be a people was to be under the rule of a king, an emperor, and empires of course are built on military conquest – war is at the heart of it all. But Jesus, drawing on developments already at work among the Jews, conceived of a people that was not defined by empire, but by a common vision of the good, grounded in God. But what was the Jesus movement to call this new type of people? It wasn't an empire, it wasn't an ethnicity, it wasn't a nation, or even a family, and it certainly wasn't just a bunch of isolated individuals. The early church tried out a variety of vocabulary to describe the nature of this new community, using lots of adjectives to make the words do something new: a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a chosen people, but the image that really comes to the fore in the letters of Paul is that of a household. The household of God.

A household is like a family, but especially in the Biblical world, a household is more. A household included extended family members of all sorts, by birth, by marriage, by necessity, by generosity. It included workers, servants or slaves depending on the level of financial desperation. It included those we today would call “found family,” people you can trust and enjoy, your people, the first people you text when your car breaks down and you need a ride to doctor appointment, or when the school calls and says your child has a fever and you have to pick her up, but absolutely can't get away from work. A household was a unit of economic production as well. Indeed, our word economics is rooted in the Greek word for household, how to make a household work.

Maybe the best way to think of a Biblical household is as a group of people who share a common life and a common fate. People with a common vision of the good, people who make it work, together. And in Ephesians, Paul's point is, “Yo, look what God has done! God has brought together this crazy household. People that used to be totally different, some were tight with God, some were far, far away. Some were mainstream, some were swimming in the eddies along the edges of the river. Some were wrapped up in the patriotic identity of empire, some were crushed by that empire. Some were the cool kids, some the math geeks (not that the math geeks were actually cool, of course, but you know what I mean), some the venture capitalists, some the drive through workers, some the queer folks, some the same old sexuality, some the protesters, some the protested. Some the sinners, well, all the sinners, and all the forgiven. Look at the crazy household God has brought together, a household where there is room for us all – and room for all of us, all of who we are.

We are, of course, not just any household, but we are the household of God. That means God is the head of our household, the clue that binds the whole thing together, the Spirit that infuses each member. In

Jesus's day the head of the household was nearly always male (but not always, as is clear from the story of Tabitha in the book of Acts, among others) - but in Jesus's day, usually, so Jesus taught us to call God Father, as in the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer. We substitute "creator" in what we write out in your liturgy, but honestly that word does lose the personal, household imagery that is so important to Jesus. Say what you want in the prayer, creator, mother, father, opa, granny, momala, but remember that the one to whom we pray is the head of our household, the glue that binds us together, the one who, through Jesus, anointed for this very task, has made room for us all in the household of God.

So, wow, here we are. This is great. It's a new...something - a chapter, a word, a breath, a new day? It's something new, emerging from all that has come before, a new household of God, called into being by Jesus, with room for us all. Amen.

