

2026-09-13 Built together into a dwelling place for God

Two weeks ago we started this new series called “God’s Shalom for Our Common Home”. It’s a 5-week worship series focused on “the deep relationship between God, humanity, and the rest of God’s creation that is evident throughout the biblical story.” So I started this series two weeks ago and then last week dear Timothy came and shared with us about Camp. So, I’ll spend a little time here reviewing.

That first week we talked about the vision of God’s shalom as it’s described throughout the Bible using the image of water and how water is one of the primary sources of life. The first step for all of us in trying to understand and helping to create God’s shalom is to acknowledge our thirst – our need for the life-giving water that God provides – spiritually, metaphorically and literally.

I suppose we’ve all had experiences or times in our lives that have felt dry – hard times, times of illness, times of uncertainty or struggle, times when it felt like God was nowhere to be found and our faith felt hollow or shallow. Times we might call a spiritual desert. There are also literal experiences of thirst and the need for life-giving water. Many of our forebears who lived through the dust bowl here in Kansas and Oklahoma experienced that very literal need for water. We know a bit of how that feels right now! We’re *grateful* for the rain we’ve had recently, but still... it’s dry! And not just on the surface – the Ogallala Aquifer is quickly running out of water.

The KU Geological Survey that was first published in 2001 and then revised in January of 2023 says, “the Ogallala Aquifer is the most important water source for much of western and central Kansas, supplying 70-80% of the water used by Kansans each day. The majority of water from the High Plains aquifer is used to support irrigated agriculture, but the aquifer’s water is also the primary source of supply for the region’s cities, industry, and rural domestic uses. However, large-volume pumping from this aquifer has led to steadily declining water levels in the western portion of the region, and the area faces several critical water-related issues.”

The report goes on to try very diplomatically to describe how much water is yet in the Aquifer and then how many years might be left until it runs out. There are some interesting caveats in the report. Generally, it’s abysmal and the warning is that the aquifer will run dry soon. But the writers are careful to say, “These estimates... are based on past water-level trends and a host of additional assumptions, so they should be considered as an illustration of just one possible aquifer future.” Okay – fair enough.

The last section of the report is subtitled, “Where Do We Go From Here?” It describes Kansas law in terms of water rights and usage. This was particularly interesting to me and is a segue into today’s topic – “Living in Relationship”. The report says, “By Kansas law, water is a public resource that is dedicated to the use of the people of the state. Individuals, companies, municipalities, and other entities can obtain permission to use water... by obtaining a water right, either new or existing. In general, all beneficial uses of water, except most domestic use, require a water right. Kansas water law is based on the doctrine of prior appropriation. That is, when there is insufficient water to meet all water rights, the date of the water right determines who has the right to use the water. This doctrine is commonly expressed as “First in time, first in right.”

But of course that doctrine does not take into account the folks who were here “first in time” and they most certainly do not receive “first in right”. In fact, the Indigenous folks that were here first experience the most severe shortages of water, food, health care, necessary community services, and so on.

This kind of “doctrine”, of course, has been used globally and historically as peoples have conquered and colonized other peoples. Since the beginning, it seems, the human desire for conquest has been insatiable.

But what if humans once learned and finally grasped how to live with one another in the kind of relationships that our Creator intended? That’s the topic of this second session of our series. The writers of this curriculum wrote, “Shalom grows out of right relationships with our creator, ourselves, each other, the land, and all other creatures. As God’s faithful love takes root in our lives (and) communities, (Jesus) draws us to cooperate across dividing lines, for the flourishing of our common home (the earth).”

You’d be hard pressed to find a biblical text better than Ephesians to address this issue of Jesus’ followers living in relationships that reflect God’s intention of shalom.

In the section that Sandy read for us, Paul explains that Jesus makes and proclaims peace and he IS peace. Shalom. “Well-being and wholeness, encompassing all the concerns of human life – individual, personal, social, and religious.”, as Tom Yoder Neufeld writes in the Believers Church Bible Commentary on Ephesians. He goes on, “At the same time, shalom is often found in close proximity to conflict and warfare. God the peacemaker is also God the warrior, as is God’s Messiah. This (section of Ephesians) celebrates both the creative energies of the messianic peacemaker – with references to making, creating, reconciling, but also his militancy as he talks about breaking, abolishing, killing. The destructive reference is ironic, used most forcefully in the phrase killing the enmity or murdering hostility.” (pg. 112)

The challenge here is that this is a strong Jewish leader trying to communicate to a Jewish community that the Gentiles had been allowed – no, *invited*, no, *adopted* by Jesus to join the Jewish people in the work of bringing and building God’s kingdom. The Jewish law-interpreters and law-keepers of the day were having a hard time getting their heads around this idea! For them, strict segregation and eventual domination had become the strategy. After all, for hundreds of years already, they had understood themselves to be the chosen people, God’s favorites, the ones through whom God’s laws would be kept and the world would eventually be ordered. They were the blessed ones, the righteous ones, the right ones.

Paul’s words are corrective and terribly challenging – the law was given to help humans pursue and exemplify God’s covenant and intentions. This included being a light for the nations, a people who would demonstrate God’s love in the world. It was never meant to separate and segregate. It was never meant to be used to alienate or dominate. And by using words like abolishing the law, killing enmity and murdering hostility, he was making the point that this kind of **destruction** was being used for **construction** of a new humanity, destroying the things that divided them so that together Christ could reconstitute them and fuse them into one people who could carry on and be the peace, the shalom that Jesus had come to be. As Yoder Neufeld writes,

“To be ‘one in Christ’ is to begin again what it means to be human – together with those who have been our enemies.” (pg. 119)

He continues, “The irony of the cross being the salvation, as Paul writes about it here, is that “killing enmity as the work of peace clearly reflects the reality that peace does not come about without a life-and-death struggle. Though it certainly implies the death of the ‘enemy’, in this case enmity itself, it costs nothing less than the life of the one making peace. The endlessly wide embrace of peace that characterizes the vision of this letter and this passage... is extended by the divine warrior whose warfare in this case is waged against (hostility) itself by means of his own blood.” (pg. 121) His death on the cross “is an expression of Jesus’ personal engagement on behalf of humanity (that is) caught up in (hatred) with each other and with God.”

Finally, in the last 4 verses of our text Paul explains that because of Christ’s peacemaking you all (Jews and Gentiles, women and men, Blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats, wherever you are on the sexuality spectrum or any other spectrum...) because of Christ’s peacemaking you who follow him are ALL part of the family of God. No strangers. No outsiders. Everyone has been welcomed into the house. And everyone brings their own God-given gifts that they’ll be expected to use for the building project. And everyone will be expected to see and honor the gifts in others as they’re being used for the building project. Because “in him the whole structure is joined together... and all of his followers are built together into a dwelling place for God.” In closing, I’d like to share a brief story that I recently learned from my friend and journalist Mark McCormick that I think illustrates beautifully a relatively modern example of the vision of this passage in Ephesians.

Mark researched and wrote about the community called Quindaro, a settlement along the Kansas River some 170 years ago just across the Missouri line. The community was multiracial, made up of white abolitionists who had come from Massachusetts, Black freedmen and freedwomen, and Indigenous people. Together, they established this town in 1856. The name Quindaro comes from the Wyandot language and means literally, “a bundle of sticks” but figuratively, “strength in unity”.

The people of Quindaro helped birth the state of Kansas, organizing themselves five years earlier. They also helped create the narrative of Kansas as a “Free State”. Enslaved people who were fleeing bondage in Missouri followed the western Underground Railroad that passed through Quindaro and received help as they moved towards freedom.

Quindaro became a thriving community and along with businesses, schools and churches they also established a hospital – Douglass Hospital, named after Fredrick Douglass – where everyone was welcome to receive medical care, regardless of their pigmentation. Also, Western University was chartered there; it was first called Freedman’s University. It was the first Historically Black college west of the Mississippi and Black gospel music in the Midwest traces its root to Western University and Quindaro.

Eventually, the racism and segregation that tore through the rest of the country found its way to Quindaro and in the 1960’s Interstate 635 was built – through the heart of this community.

Nevertheless, Mark writes, “Quindaro represents our greatest aspirations as a state but also the fragility of our democracy.”

The writer of Ephesians didn’t know or care anything about democracy as a way of governing, but as I read about that community of Quindaro, I saw some glimmers of what the writer of Ephesians was talking about being lived out. It was a multiethnic and multiracial group of people who lived and worked together for the common good. They took care of one another, they helped to free those in bondage, they embraced one another’s gifts and they, I think, offered a reminder of the words in our sending song – “Nothing is lost on the breath of God, nothing is lost forever.”