

After my Dad passed away in 2018,  
it became the task for me and my sister  
to go through his house and his things  
and figure out what to do with all of it.  
Who wants his collection of DVDs?  
What to do with all these plastic  
containers  
full of quarters?  
Do I want this folder of recipes  
he printed off the internet?

But the most wonderful thing we went through,  
were of course, pictures.  
Pictures of our childhood and family.  
Pictures of *his* childhood and family.  
And we found so many old black and whites photos;  
those were the real treasure.

Fifteen years ago,  
two of my Dad's aunt's,  
Louise and Jackie  
had begun the valiant effort  
to explore the Stanley family tree—  
my paternal grandmother was a Stanley.  
And so, my sister and I were suddenly  
gifted  
with a binder full of old photos,  
some brown and white with age,  
cracked at edges  
and smeared with old ink writing.

Kathie and Claude,  
my wonderful in-laws,  
have lots of old family photos  
that we have looked through as well.  
We have a copy of Tripp's paternal grandparents,  
Bobbie and Claude Sr.,  
standing next to a large swordfish they caught

on their honeymoon in Cuba in 1952.

Not long-ago Kathie found a picture  
of her mother Mildred,  
when she was about 4 or 5 years old  
in 1920 or so.

Young Mildred looks so much  
like our daughter Huntley,  
right down to expression on her face,  
it is...well ask me to show you sometime,  
I've saved it on my phone.

We've put up  
several of these old pictures  
in our living room.  
I love looking at them.  
Trying to imagine what life was like  
for my great-great grandparents  
as watermelon farmers in south Louisiana and  
Texas.

Thinking how different life was  
when I look at Tripp's grandparents,  
as young newlyweds.

There are black and white photos  
(and surely all of us have them)  
are very well pictures  
of family we may have never met.  
Yet now our stories are tied together;  
no matter how different our lives are and were.  
On some level I like knowing  
that this is where I've come from.

It wonderful to think  
that family that wasn't mine before marriage  
now becomes part of my story  
in such a large grand story of life.  
It is important to remember how we got here.

When we were at the Highland Games

a few weeks ago  
it made me wonder  
if I might have any Scottish heritage  
in my family bloodlines.

I thought about the myriad of  
ancestors  
most of us can claim,  
that crossed oceans and seas to get here.

Who each of us have become  
is intimately tied  
to the stories of people  
in those old photographs in our houses.

Who we are,  
is intimately tied up  
with family stories of  
boundaries encountered and crossed in the past,  
that have become the stories  
that shape our present.<sup>1</sup>

So, reading Ephesians  
is like looking at a really, really,  
old family album.

We don't know our Christian family in this  
letter,

but these are our people.

We'll have to imagine what life was like  
—and think carefully about the differences  
that existed in the first century  
as compared to now.

But when we do that,  
it turns out that not everything has changed.

When Paul wrote this letter  
to the Ephesian Christian community,  
he was keen to make sure

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<sup>1</sup> Brain Peterson <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-ephesians-211-22-5>

that two groups of people  
who had never come together before,  
Jews and Gentiles  
knew they were now a family.

There were very real boundaries  
that had to be crossed.

Now it's true,  
it is hard for us to understand  
the extent of disparity  
that existed between 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews,  
newly Jewish Christians  
and complete outsiders  
who ate shrimp and worship false gods—namely,  
Gentiles.

The Jews were a chosen nation  
that maintained their distinctness.

So, the divisions to overcome  
were real and pronounced.

As Jews, “there was no more wide and deep  
a chasm in life  
than the one  
that separated them spiritually  
from all other people  
... the difference between them  
and anyone else you could name  
could not have been more significant.

...This was a spiritual Grand Canyon...”<sup>2</sup>  
And quite frankly, that's a big gap to get over.

A spiritual Grand Canyon.

I love that.

Yet after his Damascus road conversion,  
Paul's life revolved around one thing—  
closing that gap—and ***the only way,***  
***the only thing***  
that could cross that kind of boundary

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Hoezee, <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-11b-2/>

... was Jesus.

Listen to Ephesians 2:11-16 from the Message:

**11** ... It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways

**12** had no idea of any of this,  
didn't know the first thing about the way God works,  
hadn't the faintest idea of Christ.

You knew nothing  
of that rich history of God's covenants  
and promises in Israel,  
hadn't a clue about what God was doing  
in the world at large.

**13** Now because of Christ  
- dying that death, shedding that blood -  
you who were once out of it altogether  
are in on everything.

**14** The Messiah has made things up between us  
so that we're now together on this,  
both non-Jewish outsiders  
and Jewish insiders.

He tore down the wall we used  
to keep each other at a distance.

**15** He repealed the law code  
that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes  
that it hindered more than it helped.

Then he started over.  
Instead of continuing with two groups of people  
separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion,  
he created a new kind of human being,  
a fresh start for everybody.

**16** Christ brought us together  
through his death on the Cross.  
The Cross got us to embrace,  
and that was the end of the hostility.

I would guess that most of us agree

that the dividing walls  
have been torn down  
between Jews and Christians.  
I know that's not true in all places  
but hopefully more often than not,  
we can see each other  
as brothers and sisters of the family tree of faith.

And don't we wish that, that was the end of hostility.  
But I know we are also aware  
that for all the good we've done  
belonging to each other as Christians and Jews,  
we've managed to put other walls  
in place of those.

Walls we've put up between ourselves  
like political parties,  
perspectives and polices,  
gender, sexuality, and economics.<sup>3</sup>

Paul is trying desperately  
to tell our forebears of the faith  
in his letter  
that if we let those kinds of things get in the way,  
we aren't being true  
to whom Christ is in our lives  
and what Christ does for the world.  
In a word, we aren't being true Christians.

When we let ourselves  
be more divided than united,  
it's like we are looking at our old photographs  
and deciding that some family members  
really don't deserve to be called  
our family after all.

And what Paul is trying to get us to see  
is that in Christ there really cannot be walls

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<sup>3</sup> Brain Peterson <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/ordinary-16-2/commentary-on-ephesians-211-22-5>

or lines drawn or gaps  
that divide us anymore.  
There is only a really strong bridge  
that spans that spiritual Grand Canyon,  
that unites us all together;  
that let's us all be  
on the same side so to speak.

Everyone is in!  
Everyone is welcome,  
Everyone belongs  
...those who were insiders  
and those who were outsiders,  
to put it in the language of Ephesians.

Paul goes on to say this;  
again, from the Message starting in verse 17,

**17** Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders  
and peace to us insiders.

**18** He treated us as equals,  
and so made us equals.

Through him  
we both share the same Spirit  
and have equal access to the Father.

**19** That's plain enough, isn't it?

You're no longer wandering exiles.

This kingdom of faith  
is now your home country.

You're no longer strangers or outsiders.

You belong here,  
with as much right to the name Christian as anyone.

God is building a home.

He's using us all

- irrespective of how we got here –  
in what he is building.

**20** He used the apostles and prophets  
for the foundation.

Now he's using you,

fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone,  
with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone  
**21** that holds all the parts together.  
We see it taking shape day after day –  
a holy temple built by God,  
**22** all of us built into it,  
a temple  
in which God  
is quite at home.

Did you hear it?  
Did you that line?  
You belong here.

We just baptized three sweet baby boys.  
Though it's hard to call them babies  
when they are walking and jabbering  
and busy making teeth.  
But for the church  
baptism is such a tangible sign of belonging;  
claiming them before God and everybody,  
that in the name of Jesus Christ,  
they belong to this family of faith.

They were never, not,  
part of the family.  
But today marked on the outside  
what has always been true on the inside.

Friends,  
brothers and sisters,  
you belong here.  
We belong here  
in the family and household  
of God.  
In fact, everyone belongs here!

I love how Eugene Peterson translates this,  
God *is* building a home.  
He's using all of us  
—irrespective of how we got here—



God *is* using all of us  
in what he *is* building.

It's in present tense.

God is building a home.

God is shaping us brick by brick.

God is doing this through Christ.

We belong here.

We belong to this household.

I may have to check into Ancestry.com  
to know for sure if have any Scottish heritage  
in my family.

And I will have to continue to imagine  
the lives that were lived  
in those old photos on my walls.

But one thing I know,  
is that our stories  
are tied up together now  
all of us right here right now,  
are being built into the household of God.

And you know what makes a house feel really cozy?  
Pictures.

Miles, Hunter, Monroe,  
belong.

And so do we.

In the name of Christ who makes us family, amen.

### **Benediction**

You belong here with as much right to the name Christian as anyone

There is an Avett Brothers song lyric that goes like this,  
"Always remember there was nothing worth sharing  
Like the love that let us share our name."