

“Designing Houses”
Ephesians 2:11-22
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In our family, when cable news gets too weird or depressing, a favorite default mode is HGTV. (For the uninitiated among you, that’s an escapist diversion whose official name is House and Garden Television).

There, you are treated 24/7 to the latest in design or renovation of houses and apartments.

For example, one quickly learns that the *“open concept” floor plan* appears to be the order of the day—both here in the U.S., and elsewhere around the globe.

In the living areas, interior walls are kept at a minimum, in favor of free-flowing spaces. The *kitchen*, in particular, seems to have morphed into the open centerpiece of the entire dwelling—even for guests and visitors.

(In fact, you regularly get to hear self-absorbed buyers gushing about how this design fits their unique ‘life style’—as if everyone else isn’t doing the same thing)!

Now, like any architects, builders and designers, the ones on these programs know that the most basic consideration guiding residential design is,

“Who is going to be living in this space, and how do their lifestyle preferences guide the plans we are making?”

And it looks as if everybody is opting for “open and welcoming.”

But it hasn’t always been that way. In fact, it wasn’t that long ago that even the living areas of houses and apartments were divided into more distinct spaces,

with formal entries that intercepted guests before they even got that far.

And these open kitchens that are now the centerpieces of so many dwellings? Fifty years ago the kitchen frequently occupied one end of an informal family room

that was clearly separated from the more formal living room and dining room and entry hall;

and less than 100 years ago, the kitchen was—for a variety of reasons—a separate room altogether.

So when it comes to the renovation projects on HGTV, ‘opening things up’ is the order of the day.

If an older house or apartment is thought to have ‘*good bones*’ (that is, structural integrity and pleasing lines), then it is a prime candidate for updating it into an ‘open concept’ floor plan.

But the two key factors appear to be the *walls* and the *foundation*.

Which walls must stay in place because they are *loadbearing*, and which can be opened up to create the desired effect?

Is the existing foundation strong enough to support the structural changes;

and does the *footprint* of the structure need to be expanded in order to create more space?

And in all of it, the key questions remain: Who is going to live there, and what are their relative needs for separateness and togetherness?

Now, HGTV is not the only place where new construction and renovations are going on. In today’s scripture reading from the Letter to the Ephesians,

it appears that a divine construction and renovation project has been underway for some time now.

And this project involves the *household of faith*.

The renovations appear to have begun around 2,000 years ago, although the household had been there for much longer.

What changed is when God, through Jesus the Christ, decided to move into the household and live there among us—as Immanuel, “God with us.”

Until then, the residents knew who lived there, and who didn’t.

It had been a smallish group, all things considered. They knew they were a minority among their neighbors, but that appeared to be a good thing. There were lots of reasons to keep themselves separate,

and as pure as possible from the influences of the broader world.

So the walls that had been erected in the household of faith were substantial. They were loadbearing walls,

carrying as they did the weight of centuries of tradition.

And they also functioned to hold Israel inside, and the world outside.

Moreover, this edifice had a strong foundation, based in the laws of God and the work of the prophets. A foundation built to last.

But now, with the arrival of Jesus, he brings with him lots of *new* family members

—so many, in fact, that the numbers are far greater than that of the original residents!

So to accommodate this expanded family of faith, many of those walls need to come out of there. Not only that, but the foundation is no longer adequate.

Now, according to the letter to the Ephesians, there is an expanded foundation consisting of the apostles and prophets—and a new cornerstone, which is Christ himself!

Now, it's a heartwarming story of a growing household. But as usual, growth brings growing pains.

Foremost of which is that neither the old residents nor the new ones can figure out what to make of each other!

The former outsiders now seem like insiders, because there are so many more of them;

whereas the former insiders are so much smaller in number that suddenly they kind of seem like outsiders.

So it is that this second chapter of Ephesians is one of only a few places in the New Testament that attempts to address

how Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians might understand this new household of faith in which they find themselves living.

And the metaphor that the writer of this letter comes up with is an *architectural* image:

“... in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall ...”

“... you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are ... members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone ... in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

So here we are today, you and I, also claiming residency in that expanded household of faith.

And by now it's an awfully old structure, constantly in need of renovation.

Some say it's best days are behind it.

But those with eyes to see the work of the Holy Spirit can discern that the renovations somehow manage to keep pace with the needs.

And remember the basic architectural question: “For whom is this dwelling space designed?”

In fact, on this first Sunday of our annual Global Mission emphasis, we celebrate that the foundation of this household continues to expand around the globe.

And even some of the walls that once were thought to be load bearing have now come down

—not just the ones that welcomed new residents from Bangladesh and Malawi and Guatemala,

but also walls of gender and race and sexual identity.

Every time it appears that the household might lapse into decay or collapse of its own weight, the breath of the Spirit stirs new renovations.

And as HGTV reminds us, “open and welcoming” is the order of the day.

Now, the theme of this first Sunday of Global Mission emphasis is on the *life of the mind*. And so today we celebrate the fact

that the contributions of this congregation have aided in educational efforts in Bangladesh, Malawi, and Guatemala

—such that old walls that prevented opportunity are coming down, and expanded foundations are being laid upon the cornerstone of Jesus Christ.

So on this World Communion Sunday, we celebrate with Christians around the globe that this old house continues under construction and renovation.

Each time we eat this bread and drink this cup, the ties that bind it together are strengthened.

And against all odds, its best days are still ahead. Amen.