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An Architectural Wonder  
Ephesians 2:19-22

The Church is a gathering of individuals who have chosen to allow God to dwell in their hearts and to be the architect of their lives.

Indulge me for a moment if you would. I'd like to ask you to look down at the floor. You should see a beautiful pine floor. Look around this room at the soothing colors. Observe the solid woodwork that houses the baptistery. Look above you at the heavens brought into this very room. Note the stained glass windows that tell the story of the Christian faith. This room in its newly remodeled fashion could be considered an architectural wonder! We are indebted to the sanctuary committee for their hard work in transforming this space. Yet, even before their work, well over 40 years ago there was another group that brought the "dream program" of remodeling this sanctuary to being. And even before that group, there was an architect by the name of Mr. J. M. McMichael. Mr. McMichael, who designed both First Baptist and Spirit Square, was commissioned to design the architectural wonder that opened its doors for its first service in this building on May 7, 1922. Mr. McMichael was commissioned to bring the vision of the charter members of this church to fruition and that he did. If you enter by the front sanctuary doors, you notice something of that vision---something that invites you to realize that there is more to this architectural wonder than bricks and mortar. There you see two large "cornerstones." They boast the scripture that is our focus this day:

Hear these words from Ephesians 2:19-22.

In a village near Haifa in Galilee, there was a catholic priest, Father Elias Chacour. He came to his new parish with great excitement and high hopes. When Father Elias arrived, he spent many a Sunday preaching and feeling as if were preaching to the wall and he may as well have been. For in that congregation there were four groups of people that kept their distances from all of the other groups. Those four divisions were rooted in the disagreements among four brothers in one family. Each of the brothers developed a group that offered their allegiance to that one. No matter what Elias had tried, nothing had seemed to be a trigger to bring these brothers back together. So what Father Elias saw when he rose to preach each Sunday morning were grim faces that reflected hearts of hurt and hatred.

This was not an unfamiliar picture in the world of the apostle Paul. In his time the Jewish temple was divided into sections. There was a wall that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Jews. Paul was thrown out of the temple in Jerusalem on the charge of taking uncircumcised Gentiles beyond the dividing line. So, for ages, separation had existed between the Jews and Gentiles. The author of the Ephesians text is asking the Ephesians to remember those days and to release them to history. Let them be a thing of the past. Times have changed. And times had changed. By the time of this scripture's writing they had come to grips with the fact that they were to be united. They

understood what Paul himself had understood so long before. That Christ Jesus, by his coming, had broken down the walls. He had taught by his living that it is better to focus on the things that unite us rather than on the things that divide us. So while they may have been aliens to each other at one time, there was one factor that now united them: Jesus Christ.

I know very little about architecture and construction but from what I understand each building has what is known as the lie. This is the place where the first stone is laid that sets the pattern for the rest of the building. It is at that location that the cornerstone is laid. It is this stone that is the key for holding the building together. The writer wants the church at Ephesus to understand that Jesus Christ, as the one who unites them, is like that cornerstone. Just as the cornerstone supports the building so Jesus Christ supports the church. What they cannot miss is that the church is not a building. The church is a gathering of people who have chosen to allow God to dwell in their hearts and to be the architect of their lives. Their success or failure has nothing to do with the building in which they reside and everything to do with their choice for relationship with God. If the Ephesians could understand this, their hearts would be shaped into architectural wonders.

On his first Palm Sunday in the church near Haifa, Father Elias looked out at the solemn faces, and as if inspired, he marched to all of the doors of the church and locked the people inside. He returned to the front of the sanctuary where he said to them:

*“Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a divided people. You argue and hate each other. You gossip and spread lies. Your religion is lie. If you can’t love your brother whom you can see, how can you say that you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the Body of Christ to be disgraced. I have tried for months to unite you. I have failed. I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus. He has the power to forgive you. So now I will be quiet and allow him to give you that power. If you will not forgive, then we stay locked in here. If you want, you can kill each other, and I’ll provide your funeral gratis.”*

It took about 10 minutes before one of the brothers stood to confess that he had hated his brothers and that he had wished to kill them, but he understood himself as the worst sinner of all. He pleaded with the people for forgiveness that day. He asked Elias for forgiveness and Elias embraced him with the kiss of peace. The church erupted in the chaos of confession and forgiveness. What had happened in that place was that a group of unconnected individuals had gathered in a building, but with their choices to mirror the life of Christ they chose to become the church. The church, you see, is a gathering of people who choose to allow God to dwell in them, to transform them and to be the architect of their lives. The first of those four brothers stood for a remodeling of his heart and that was all the others needed to claim the same choice. The brothers and the church became architectural wonders!

It had to have been a difficult thing for the Jewish Ephesians who were so accustomed to their separation from the Gentiles, to even contemplate breaking down the barriers that existed between them. There is safety and comfort when we surround ourselves with walls. We don’t have to know change and we think that life is peaceful. It may not be perfect but we can deal with it. But, like the brother in Elias’ church, someone among the Ephesians had to take a stand. Someone, for whatever

reason, had to take the risk to tear down the walls and on the other side they found unity, love and peace. They found the ability to work together simply because they first trusted God to transform them individually and then corporately.

When Elias arrived in the little village near Haifa, there was nothing there to speak of—just people keeping to themselves. After the bravery and risk-taking of the one brother, the church came together. They built a community center. They created a library and formed a regional high school. All of this because they chose to let Jesus Christ transform their hearts and be the architect of their lives.

Sometime in late summer or early fall of 2007, I suddenly became observant! I began watching our senior minister, Dr. Richard Kremer. There was something different about him, something I couldn't name. The only thing I was sure of was that something was not normal. It took me a while to realize that the light was missing from his countenance. What I didn't know, was that even as I noticed these things about him, he was in conversation with our Personnel committee asking for permission to have a sabbatical leave. Once it was granted, the joy suddenly arose in his eyes again. He seemed to have hope in a way that he hadn't had it in a while and it gave me joy to see that in him. We never talked about my observations or why he felt that he needed this. Our conversations in the weeks that followed were business-like. Who will take care of this? How do we do that? I was masquerading and in part trying to convince myself that I could handle the load of extra responsibilities that were destined for me by professing outwardly to others that I wasn't worried and that all would be well. On Sunday, December 23<sup>rd</sup> the words of assurance that I offered others finally found a home in my heart. I walked into Richard's office and stared at him. He looked at me like "What in the world are you doing?" I said to him, "I don't want you to go. I am happy for you but I'm not happy for me and I'm feeling a little teary today—I love you and I don't want you to leave!" The next moments are a bit of blur but I remember tears streaming down my face and Richard holding my face in his hands saying, "I love you! You can do this! And I'm around if you need me!" With those words, I lost any fear for his soon to be absence and I knew that he was right. He reminded me in those moments that I have to trust God and allow God to be the architect of my life and all will be well.

I know that God is the architect of Richard Kremer's life and that in the next six months of that life, God is going to do great things in him. I know that God is the architect of my life. I arise every morning, practice my listening to God technique, meditate, study the scripture and realize that my life is so easy and smooth and free when I let God work his architectural wonders in my heart. I know that about some of you. I am also aware that there is a part of my heart that I have not fully given to God and that I am afraid to fully surrender. There are some of you who are like that too and there are some of you that still will not let God be the architect of your lives to any degree.

What does that really mean for God to be the architect of your life? What does that look like? This is what it looks like. Individually it looks like Father Elias who awakes daily—careful to take care of his body through exercise, careful to take care of his mind through the study of scripture, careful to take care of his spirit through prayer, meditation and listening for God's direction, careful to observe his need for community by fellowshiping with like-minded Christians, careful to mirror the

image of Jesus by reaching beyond himself to meet the physical needs of others but also particular to share his experience of Christ and allow God's Spirit to open the heart of another. Father Elias' heart is an architectural wonder.

What does it mean for God to be the architect of the church's life? What does that look like? This is what it looks like. Corporately, it looks like a group of people who live their lives like Father Elias and who happen to gather in a building in Charlotte, North Carolina. Even though they gather in a grand building, they understand that they are connected to like-minded people in Warrenton, North Carolina, in Helena, Arkansas, in Kiev, Ukraine, in Southern Sudan and in the uttermost parts of the earth. They know that they are connected by one allegiance—that God through Jesus Christ has become the architect of their lives. They know that they refuse to see the church as a building but understand it as people who have chosen to allow God to dwell in their hearts and to transform them. They become the household of God and by so doing they allow their decision-making processes to be guided by the Holy Spirit. They understand that the church is not a democracy. It is a household of faith. In any household it is not the children who rule the roost. The parents make the decisions, they set the direction, they guide the family. In the household of faith, God is the parent. God makes the decisions, sets the direction and guides the family. The children that call themselves the church understand this so they seek the Holy Spirit's guidance. They hold each other accountable in their relationships with God and with each other because they understand that they have been knit together with love—that love is their guide so it is always better to be kind than to be right. They require their ministers to be people whose lives are daily being transformed and in whom it is evident that God dwells. They are driven to share their faith story with everyone beyond the comfortable walls of their building. They regularly erupt in the chaos of love and forgiveness. In the practice of all of these things, they know growth, freedom, daily renewal and all manner of goodness.

The church is the gathering of Christian individuals who have chosen to allow God to dwell in their hearts, to transform them and to be the architect of their lives. The church is an architectural wonder. So now the question is are you? Have you allowed God to make you an architectural wonder? What about this church, this gathering of the believers? Have we let God be the architect of our lives? Have we let Jesus be our cornerstone? Would the charter members of this church see their vision fulfilled in us? Do they see us being built together as a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit? In our weeks and months ahead, may God and the world look upon us as an architectural wonder! Amen.