

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

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SPEAKER

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Grace Unleashed

PART

10

TITLE

We Are Fellow Citizens

SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 2:17–22



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Well, it's so good to see you, Providence, and all the venues where we're at this morning. Welcome. We're really glad that you've joined us. I hope you've had a really good week. For all of those who are here with us, who are live, perhaps even live-streamed, and our guests, welcome. I'm really glad that you have joined us, as well. We love the Bible here at Providence, because it speaks about Jesus, and we love Jesus more than anything or anyone.

If you brought one, if you want to head over to Ephesians chapter 2. What we like to do most of the time here is to work through a book, go verse by verse. We're in this book, and we're up to chapter 2, verses 17 to 22. If you did not bring a Bible, then there should be one on a chair near you, and if you don't have one at home, we would love for you to take that one home as a gift.

We just sang a song that speaks of realities. What it speaks of is that we live in a broken world. Last week, you know what happened there in that church. When we come to this book, you have to remember that its author is sitting in prison, and these circumstances that are so difficult ... Paul didn't ask for this. He didn't quite understand what God's place was. He didn't understand God's pace. He didn't understand all of God's ways, and yet, there's an affirmation in this that life is hard, and yet God is faithful. It's always a joy.

When we come and we sing these songs, you have to remember that this time is not a mythical pause button from a world of reality. It's that we're affirming our faith in things that are real and true and noble, and that is that God is King over the universe, that He really is sovereign over us. We're really glad that you have come to worship Him. If you would, let's bow and let's pray together. Let's ask for help.

Father in Heaven, Your Word tells us that we cannot understand what we're about to read, without Your Spirit's work, and so I pray that You would open up our eyes to see wonderful things in Your Word, that You would help us to understand it with our heart. I pray that You would help us to believe and then that You would give us courage to apply it to our life. God, for a time such as this, a topic such as this, we thank You, God, that Your Word is timeless, that all of these years later from when Ephesians was first written, God, it speaks directly to where we're at in our lives, in our culture, at our time. We love You. We need You. Would You speak through weakness, for the glory of Your Son, Jesus Christ? I pray, amen. Amen.

Well, this month ... This month; this month has been long. This week has been really encouraging--I'll be honest with you--in that, after months of foundation work on the new room over there, we actually saw steel hoisted up into the air, and it was actually tied together. It was so cool to watch. In fact, on Wednesday, I learned that this was going to be happening, so I showed up early, and I set my jeep up in the very top parking lot and just watched. It was really fascinating to see the process unfold.

You see, months and months ago, somebody sat down and engineered the steel to be fabricated specifically that way, lots of different sizes of pieces, lots of different kinds of pieces. Then they were brought to our site here. They were placed in the parking lot, and then they were grouped together by like kind. Joists were placed over there, and the beams that would support everything were over here in a pile, and then there was a bunch of beams that actually connected the supporting beams, and they'd be placed over here, and bolts, and all these different pieces. They all look different, and yet, in their own little places in the parking lot, they all looked just alike.

Then, on one specific day, a huge crane and a bunch of people came, and they started taking pieces out of each pod that was all alike, and they was connecting them to other pieces that didn't look alike, and what they were creating was a facility that one day people would go in and worship. It really is an exciting thing, and, as I was watching this, I was thinking, how am I going to start this sermon on Sunday? I need an example of how God takes different things and brings them together and connects them, and there it was. I was looking at Ephesians 2 in action.

You see, what the Bible tells us is that every single one of us was created in the image of God, and He created each one of us differently. We look differently. We have different languages, different families. We come from different places, different ethnicities, different races. We're different.

Then the Bible says that we sinned against God. We broke fellowship with Him, and so we were separated from God, but then something happens to the heart when sin enters, and that is that the heart becomes very selfish. A heart that's selfish becomes a heart that is suspicious, in particular of people that aren't like us, that don't look like us, that don't sound like us.

What takes place in this fallen world is people, who were created in the image of God to be connected together, they form groups by like kinds. We call them ethnicities. We call them races, languages, families, countries, nations, and they separate. The reality is, because we're sinful, these groups, in time, they form rivalries. Because the heart is selfish, it's suspicious, and so the people who aren't like us, aren't like us, so what are they like? I'll bet they're like this.

What's so sad is, over time, rivalries eventually boil over into hostilities, and these hostilities, they stack upon each other, one upon another upon another, and this continues to build through time. What you need to understand is this: it is that Christ came to bust all this up. Christ came, literally, to reconnect to God and to each other.

Even for believers, the ruts--the cultural, ethnic ruts of our sinfulness--they're so deep that unless they're filled with the grace of God, they'll continue to steer our directions, which is why, when people are starting to come to faith in Jesus Christ in Ephesus, there was Jews and there was Gentiles. The first believers were Jews. They start telling people about Jesus, and Gentiles hear this and they go, "That's good news. I think I believe that."

Then they started looking at each other and like, "Wait a minute. We're different kinds. Should we form different piles? We'll start a Jewish Christian Church of Ephesus on this side of the street, and over here, we'll plant/form a Gentile Christian Church of Ephesus, and we can have a potluck every once in a while, but that's about it. We'll be different."

This is what you see, not only in Ephesus in the first century, just literally a few decades after Jesus rose from the dead. You see it in Raleigh today. You see it everywhere in and around the world.

Paul went to work. He looked at what they were thinking, what they were asking, and he said, "Hold on a second." This is the third sermon, from chapter 2, verse 11 to verse 22.

In the first message, what we looked at was just verse 11 and 12, and we learned there that he just affirms that there really is a separation. There really is a gap between people. In verse 12, he says, "Remember, we were separated, alienated, strangers. We had no hope, and we were without God."

Last week, what we looked at was the next installment. The first, he says, "It's true. We're all separated. We're all different. We're all suspicious, and this suspicion creates hostilities over time." Then, the second thing he says is, "But Christ came to reconcile not only us to God, but us to each other." He came to break down/bust down all these walls of hostility that we built between God and us, and between us and other people, who are unlike or who look unlike us.

Now, we get to verse 17 to 22, and what we find here is Jesus' motive in doing this. Why did He break it down? He didn't break it down to leave it in ashes and leave it in broken bricks around the ground. He intended to build something back up in its place, and what was that thing?

This is what he says, starting in verse 17. He says, "And he came and preached peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father, so then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus, himself, being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God, by the Spirit."

What I want to show you here is two very specific things that were on the heart of Jesus, when He came to this earth, when He died on a cross, and when He rose from the dead. What was His motive that all of His methods were trying to accomplish? Two things, the first is this. Jesus came to provide access to God for all peoples, all peoples. When I mean peoples, I mean every ethnicity, every group, every pod that we on earth said, "You're not like me. You belong over there."

Jesus created to bring us and give us access to His Father. You see, we just read about the walls of hostility in verses 14 and 15. He talks about how Jesus said there was a wall of hostility between God and man, because of our sin, but there was also a wall of hostility between ethnicities and races on the earth, because we're suspicious, because we have animosity towards people that aren't like us. We don't ... What he does is he broke them down.

Now, what I want to do ... I want to show you, because why he broke the down is to give us access, and so I want to show you each of these two things, right? One, a real live example, here in the world, that takes place where people do not have access simply because cultural walls between people are built up. Then, the second one is between God and man, this wall of hostility that's between us and God.

Let's just imagine that we're in the 1960s, and there's two little boys, all right, a little white boy and a little black boy, and they're playing together. They're friends. They're friends like Sean Taylor and I were best friends when we were this big. We didn't understand that there was a war of hostility, racially, going over our head. We just enjoyed playing together. He was a good friend of mine.

Let's just say, all right, that these two boys, they live in the '60s. They live in the South, and they hear that the President of the United States is going to come and give a speech at a local center, a little gym, right there in their own city, in their own community. They're like, "Hey, we should go to this," and so they walk over to it.

As they get there, security guards come out, as you would expect. It's the President of the United States. They come out, and immediately they look at one boy, and without even having to ask a single question if he has a ticket, they immediately say, "You can't come in. The reason is because this is a segregated community center. This is the white community center, and you happen to be a black boy. You can't come in."

The security guards look at the other boy, and they say, "Do you have a ticket?"

He says, "No, I don't have one." He can't go in either. The reality is neither had a ticket. Neither were granted access, but for very different and degrading reasons. Jesus intended to break these walls down.

Now, is that example didn't cause you a little bit of angst, let me give you another one. Maybe I'll be able to offend you with this one, or make you uncomfortable, okay? Let's just say ... Most of us in this room are Gentiles, okay? We're not Jews. Most of us in the room--I would probably go out and just say all of us--have never been a high priest, as a Jew, okay?

Let's just say that you're a Gentile, like most of us are, and we're living in the time of the Old Testament. Solomon builds his temple. It's an amazing temple, and you're told, as a Gentile, that you were created to find your joy in being in a right relationship with God, that being near Him is your greatest good. All of a sudden, they tell you that God has chosen to actually place and plant down and dwell, to allow His glory in a manifest way to dwell on the earth in a very special place called the temple, in a room called the Most Holy Place, which is a curtain behind another place called the Holy Place.

You want to go, and you think, well, if that's where my joy is, if that's where my peace is, then that's where I need to be, and so you go to the temple. Suddenly, you're not given access, and this is why. The temple ... It looked like this. Now, this is not the actual temple. This is just a model of it, okay? This is a model of it, but what you see ... Okay, the tall thing with the little gold points at the top, that building, is called the Holy Place. In the Holy Place, if you could look in that door, there's a curtain--or there was a curtain--and it separated one section of it from another. The Most Holy Place was behind the curtain, okay? Then there was a curtain ... That was the Holy Place.

Then you notice that there's a place just outside of that, that's walled, and you have to go through the gate where the little stairs are, and it goes into another court area. Then you go through the outside doors, which you see at the bottom right, and that goes into another area, which, if you could look far enough back out, that's even inside a wall. Okay, so there's places among places among places.

Now, this is the reality of the temple. One time a year, the high priest, and only the high priest, went into not just the first door and into the second door and into the Holy Place, but actually went through the curtain into the Most Holy Place, one man, one time a year, in order to make atonement for the sins of the people. Everyone else ... No access. The priests, the common everyday priests, they got to go into the Holy Place, but they couldn't go beyond the veil, that curtain. They would go in, and they had a few duties every day that they would go in and do.

Well, outside of that big door, there's a little section. That was just for the Jewish men. You had to be a Jewish man, in order to get into that section. Outside of those doors, this was the court for the women, the Jewish women. If you were a Gentile, you basically got to be where you're at right now, looking in. It was called the Courtyard of the Gentiles.

My point in this is to say that nearly everyone was denied access, but for very different reasons. Jesus came to tear all these walls down, in order to give all of us access to the Father. We have to ask the question, well, how did He do it? How did He accomplish this?

What verse 17 says is this was His motive: He came and He preached peace. You're saying, "Well, that's not a big deal." That's because you're not the offended party. Slap the person in front of you right now and see if they turn around and preach peace or judgment, right?

We have to remember, in this whole story, that God was the offended party. He was the victim of our sin. Psalm 51, verse 4 says, "Against you, and you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." Yet, Jesus came over the wall of hostility that was separating us from God, and He preached peace. Notice who He preached it to. It was to those who are far and those who are near. What does that mean.

Well, in Luke chapter 15, Jesus is hanging out with a lot of people, and they congregate into their like kinds. Over on one side, there's some really religious people. Over on the other side, there's some really, really immoral people. It says that they were prostitutes, tax collectors, thieves. Jesus was interacting with both.

Well, the people over here, the good people, the ones close to the law, the ones who they believe close to God, they became really irritated and frustrated that Jesus was interacting with people that were so loose and so immoral and so irreligious, so lawless. Jesus looked, and He says, "I'm not going to be able to teach you anything, because you're too proud, but let me give you a parable, and maybe I'll be able to get into the backdoor of your imagination and then be able to drop a bomb on you."

He says, "Once there was a man, and he had two sons" ... Now, this is a paraphrase, okay? The man has two sons, and the younger son looks at his dad, and he says, "Dad, I wish you were dead, but you're not, so let's go ahead and act like you are. Why don't you give me my share of the inheritance, so that I can leave and not have to be near you anymore."

The father says, "Well, here's your share of the inheritance." This son goes and he blows everything in sin, just a wasted life that left all kinds of holes in his heart, in his mind, in his clothes, in his body, his reputation, everything. He was a hopeless man. He gets to the end of his rope, and he says, "What am I doing?" He puts together a little speech, a little speech or confession. He gets ready, practices it a couple times, so he can get home. He says, "Dad, this is my speech."

He comes home, and his dad sees him from afar. It says that the dad runs out, minimizes his shame by giving him new clothes and a ring, and forgives him, and then he throws a party. Well, there's another son, and the older son, the good son, the one who stayed home, he won't come into the party, because he's irritated.

Now, don't forget the context that Jesus is speaking into. There's religious people, good people, who've stayed close to home, and they're irritated, because bad people are being able to be near Jesus. The story is not about the first son. It's actually about the second son. It's about people like us, who come to church all the time. Jesus says of this son in His story ... He says this son, he wouldn't come into the party, so Dad goes out. He says, "Son, what are you doing? Your brother, my son, he's come back. He's repented of his sin. We need to celebrate!"

His son says, "Dad, I have been good all these years. I've obeyed you. I've worked hard. I've served. You've never given me the means to leave you, to be able to go celebrate with my friends." Do you see what's happening?

Jesus is saying that all of humanity is one of these two sons, far or near, religious/irreligious. One son left his father. Another son wished he could. Every one of us is one of those sons at some point in our life. It says that Jesus came, in order to preach to both of these two sons. You see, Rembrandt, even painting this whole picture, this whole scene ... It's right here. You can see it. You see the father. You see the son, who's come back, all of his nasty clothes, and you see over the right, the man, whose face is lit up. This is the older son.

I want you to notice the irony of this event. One son stayed close to home, but he was farthest from his father. This is what it says Jesus did. It says that He came to preach peace, not only to those who were Jews, but also Gentiles, religious and irreligious, moral and immoral, good and bad. Why? Why would He do this? Because apart from trusting Christ, he who dies in a brothel is no worse than he who dies at a church.

Do you know Christ? He came to bust down the wall of hostility between you and God, to give every one of us, no matter what we look like or where we came from, access to the father. What you under have to ... Let me back up. I just said about five words that had no order whatsoever in them, okay?

This truth ... The fact is it may help our hearts to even be happy and accept other people coming to Jesus, but unless we repent of another sin, and unless we see something deeper, we may not appreciate them joining us in our worship of Christ. You see, thus far, the only thing he's said is that Jesus did this in order to give all people access to the Father. When you hear of people going on a mission trip, and people who are unlike you, maybe where there's a historical hostility between you and that people, and they come to faith in Christ, you may say, "Oh good, so long as they don't come here and be with us." That's possible. In fact, you look at ethnic wars around the world, and that's exactly what you see.

There's another thing He did, and I need to show you, and it's this: It's that Jesus came to create one new temple from all peoples. First, He came to provide access to God for all peoples, but then He came to create one new temple from all peoples. See, at the very moment when these Jews and Gentile believers were considering separating, like pieces of steel in our parking lot, Paul reminds them of Jesus' desire when He hung on a cross and when He rose from the dead, and that is that we would no longer be strangers and aliens. He says, "But you would instead be three things."

He said, number one, he says that you and I would literally become citizens of a new nation, citizens. There's a lot of people in America, isn't there? You're a citizen in America, at least most of us are, but you don't know everybody. Yet, there's a common loyalty. There's a commonality in being a citizen of this place.

Well, the Bible says, for those in Christ ... He says that our citizenship is in Heaven, and from there we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. What this means is that part of this country, this heavenly country, we're a citizen. That there's just inherent loyalties. It doesn't matter where you live. It doesn't matter what you look like. It's that it creates a loyalty, a fondness, one to another.

Well, then he goes, "Well, that's good, but let me go a little bit deeper. Not only are you a citizen of Heaven together," he says, "but I'm going to make you members of God's household," so now he's talking about family. Now, under your roof, you probably know everybody's name who lives under your roof, right? You're family. You know your kids names, your parents names, your brothers/sisters, maybe aunts, uncles, cousins. They're family. This is what he's saying. He goes from big to really intimate, and he says, "Not only that, but you're a family. You're brothers and sisters in Christ."

Then he takes it a step further, and he says, "You know, there used to be this temple, with all these different places where you could go, on the basis of who you were." He goes, "But I'm going to create a new temple," and that new temple, he says, will be made out of us, the people. You see, when Jesus rose from the dead, He created a brand new temple, which is why we can meet absolutely anywhere, because the temple is our heart.

Providence has met in grocery stores. It's met in ... if we meet in a hotel, right? The building is not the holy thing. It's the people, who have the Spirit of God within us. When we come into a room, all of a sudden, now, God is here with us. He says, "This is the new temple, and it starts with the cornerstone." All buildings start with a cornerstone, a place where you know, okay, this rock here is plumb; this one is level. We can build off of this one, and he says, "Jesus is the cornerstone." He's the place where we start. He's the rock upon which every one of us either rest upon or resist. He's the cornerstone of all of life.

Have you ever noticed how no empire in the history of the world has endured. No sociology has ever endured. No psychology has ever endured. No philosophy has ever endured. You know why? Because Jesus is not the cornerstone of those things.

I want you to think about the amazing thing that you're a part of right now. If you're a part of a local church on this earth, you're part of the only institution on the earth that will last forever. Do you know why? Because Jesus is its cornerstone, Jesus. It says that those people who believe in Jesus, when they hear the Scriptures ... That's what he means when he says that it's built on the apostles and the prophets. These are the people that wrote down, that were inspired by God to write down the Scriptures. It says that He stacks us up like stones on this cornerstone, in order to make a temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Peter says it this way. He says, "As you come to him, you, yourselves, like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." You see, just like that steel in the parking lot right now, every single person here is different, but when we're connected together, the worship pleases and glorifies the Cornerstone, who is recognized as the One who has all authority and sufficient power to hold up and harmonize such great difference.

In other words, what I'm trying to say is that a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial church is not a cultural fad. It is a biblical mandate that flows from the very heart of Jesus, when He was on the cross, and when He walked out of His tomb. Now, I build sermons in this way, okay? I try to teach you something that you see specifically in the text, so that when we get to the application, the application should never surprise you. It should be the obvious response to what I just taught you. If you ever get to an application and you're like, "I just don't see it. I don't know where that's coming from." Well, then, just ignore it, okay? Just ignore that one, okay?

What do we do with these truths from God's Word. Number one is this: Let's believe the Gospel and be forgiven. If, indeed, Jesus Christ has given you access to the Father, then come. Come today. Stop waiting and stop wondering. No matter where you've spent the majority of your days, whether in good or bad, sin, righteousness, being religious, being at a church or being far from a church, you need Jesus. You need Jesus.

Come to Jesus today. Believe in Him. He will change your whole life. He is not just the most, He is the only soul-satisfying reality Person in the entire world. If you don't go to Him, you'll be hungry your whole life.

Second thing is let's ask God to stir our heart with what stirs His. If indeed that He had motives behind why He was dying and rising again, we should consider what those motives are and ask, is what was on His heart, is it on ours? Let me just go straight to the point, okay?

Do you long to see and be in a multiracial, multiethnic church? I'm not asking if you're okay with being a part of one. I'm asking is do you have an emotional investment high enough to pray for it to happen? If not, I would urge you to pray that God will change your heart. You see, Jesus wants us to be emotionally invested in this, for whatever is on our hearts finds its way into our prayers. This is why Jesus told us to pray--what?--Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. In other words, let me see the realities of Heaven, and then be so stirred by what I see that I pray that reflections of that, traces of that, would be seen on the earth.

What do we see in Heaven, as it relates to race and ethnicity? Revelation chapter 7 says this: "A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from every tribe and people and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb, crying with a loud voice, Salvation belongs to our God." Providence, let's plead with God to see reflections of this day on earth and at Providence even today.

The third thing is let's pursue the racial harmony that we will enjoy in Heaven. Let me tell you something. We have one mission: that's to make disciples, to introduce all peoples to Jesus Christ and to grow them up to love and worship Him. We have one boast, and it's the cross of Christ, but if it's true that the cross of Christ is the only harmonizing power of racial and ethnic diversity on the earth, and if it's true that the cross is the only thing that not only brings us and connects us to God, but also to each other, then to pursue that harmony is also to boast in the cross of Jesus Christ.

Let it be known that there will be opposition to those who pursue racial harmony. There will be. Satan hates this, and hateful people hate this. Satan is stronger than us, as a people. The Gospel is stronger still. First John chapter 3, verse 8 says the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil, so do not fear, Providence, for Christ is with us in this.

What can we do to pursue? A few things ... I think one is by repenting for rebuilding what Christ has torn down. If you see the bricks on the ground from those walls of hostility between us and God or us and each other, and your heart inclines you to pick those bricks up and stack them back up, the New Testament would simply say this: Stop it. Repent, whether that's hatred, whether it's animosity, whether it's suspicion, or whether it's indifference.

Our past does not have to define us, but isn't it true that it often explains us? Early in my life, I got to travel a whole lot, and my very first best friend, sleepovers and everything, was Sean Taylor. Ethnically, racially diverse. In my life, my sin, when it comes to race, has been more in the area of indifference, because I simply don't have a problem with people. I don't have enormous historical scars built up against me, but if Jesus cares about the injustices to other people, then His people do, as well, so let's repent for rebuilding what He's torn down.

Second is by building relationships across cultural lines. I want to urge us, as a church family, to greet one another and be hospitable to one another, to build relationships with one another. You see, when racial flareups occur within our culture, learn from these friends, and when pain comes in life, you can lean on these friends. Be the church.

The third thing is by praying for greater racial diversity in our leadership. I realize that this is a bit sensitive, but I think it's needed. You see, no matter what I say today, if people join us, who don't know what we're really about, and when, all of a sudden, we leave this topic, and we move to chapter 3, and he stops talking about racial diversity, people will come in here and, seeing nobody singing or leading who looks like them, that perception often and easily can reinforce cultural presuppositions of what takes place inside this place.

I would encourage you to pray. Pray for diversity on our stage, in our elders, in our deacons, and in our pastors. You see, my belief is it's easier to get diversity, if you have diversity in leadership, simply because, when you make decisions, if you don't have other perspectives, sometimes you don't make decisions that are sensitive to all peoples.

The third thing--or the fourth thing, I should say--is by sharing the gospel with all peoples. See, when we seek to reach every ethnicity and people group in the world and receive each one with outstretched arms, just as Jesus has reached us with outstretched arms, then we live out the Gospel in a world that is desperately in need of Him. What I want to do right now ... I want to show you a little video.

I'm going to show you a video of a friend here at Providence, of many of ours. His name is Jon. He's a leader at Providence, and he tells his story, all right, not only where he came from, but what can take place when grace is the primary fuel behind our relationships with one another. Why don't you watch this?

My name is Jon Roberson. I grew up in Wilson, North Carolina. I grew up in Wilson. In the late '60s/early '70s, I would say, were my "growing up" years. At the time when I grew up, there were two recreational centers. One was in our community, so to speak, at Reid Street. The other, we honestly just referred to it as the white rec. It was almost just understood that that was hands off. As I grew older, I realized that the Reid Street Community Center that we went to was actually created from a "separate but equal" standpoint, that they wanted people in the black community to have their own recreation center to keep them separate from the majority of whites that went to the other recreational center.

I wanted to be just like my dad. He truly is my hero. He was someone that, even today, strongly believes in the Constitution, that all men were created equal. He also believed strongly in the Gospel, that in the creation, that man was created in the image of God. He didn't make a difference between anyone and their skin color. All colors were created by Him. All were stamped with the imago dei, the image of God,

and so that was something that was firmly instilled in us, even to the point of my father telling us that if we decided to make a determination of who could be our friend, based upon skin color, we would miss out on some of the best friends we could have.

When I first came to Providence, I don't recall any large resistance to coming to Providence. I knew it was going to be a church unlike any of the others that I have attended, from the standpoint that it was going to be majority white parishioners that came here versus my experience of always attending somewhere where you were ... everyone looked like you. The question that I had was how were we going to be treated? That was more than anything else.

Coming here, we were treated extremely well. In fact, I remember asking Angela after one Sunday, "You know, I don't even know if they've recognized the fact that we're black," which was great. There was no resistance that we had of coming to Providence.

Our life class, for my wife and I, has ... Honestly, I couldn't even articulate how much it has come to mean to us. It's the first time in church that I really and truly felt what the Gospels teach us to do, of people that invest in your life, that bear your burdens with you, that laugh/cry with you. There's probably no other reason why we would ever be friends than the common love of Christ.

To see an increase in the diversity, from a racial standpoint, at Providence, from where we first started here, I think is wonderful, not just because there's an increase in diversity of race, but because, to me, it is now moving towards what the Apostle John sees, when he says that he looks into Heaven, and he sees people of every nation, every tribe, kindred, and tongue. It makes me joyful, because I believe that the church is moving towards what honors the Lord. It is evidence and proof that He is tearing down those dividing walls of hostility, in His grace and mercy, to bring us together as one people. He's coming back for one singular bride, people that worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

Okay, you can clap. Providence, if indeed it's true that these realities were on the brow of Christ, on the mind of Christ, when He died and rose again, to provide us access and then to build us into a temple, a place, a people, who give themselves to worship the one true, living Christ, then I want to encourage us, as a church family, to pursue this with all of our heart, to be praying for it, to be giving yourself to it, to break through insecurities that you have, to learn about people that you don't know, circumstances in life that you don't know, to repent of sin, hostilities that you don't have any reason to have or every reason to have, and that you would seek, with the grace of God, to move towards what we see and one day we will experience forever and ever and ever. Because of the grace of God, we can experience reflections of what we will one day know here on the earth. It's His power that's available to us, so let's pray for it, okay? If you would ..

Father in Heaven, thank You for Your grace. Thank You that You came for us, that You rescued us. We pray for those in the room, who've never trusted You. We pray that today that You would open up their eyes, that You would help them to see and believe the Gospel, to believe that Jesus died and rose for them, and that, no matter how good they are, they are far from You unless they come to Christ.

I pray for us, as a church family. We're built together out of different pieces to become a place of worship, a people of worship, to glorify You, the one, true Cornerstone of Life. We pray, God, that You would give us strength and courage, that You would give us sensitivity and patience with one another. Now, Lord, as we give to You, not only out of our heart in worship, but out of the resources, in giving, God, we pray that You would be pleased, that You would be glorified, and the name of Jesus would be spread, the Gospel would be spread to the ends of the earth. We pray, in Christ's name, amen. Amen.



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