

# Sermon Transcript

## January 3, 2016



## Future Impact

### Ephesians 2:11-22 and 3:14-21

*This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on January 3, 2016, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Pastor Scott Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church web-site at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).*

## **Sermon Text**

### **Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:14-21**

#### **Ephesians 2:11-22**

<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

#### **Ephesians 3:14-21**

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family(1) in heaven and on earth is named, <sup>16</sup> that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, <sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

## An Invitation to Imagine

Over the next four weeks, I am inviting you to “imagine” with me. I want you to “imagine” with me what God might want to do through us. I want you to “imagine” with me what God might have in store for this local church we call Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church. I understand we can’t predict the future. But I do know what God has done in the past and what God is currently doing in our church family and that causes me to look to the future with some anticipation and excitement about what God has in store for us. God has been doing something special here and I want you to “imagine” with me what God has next for us.

I believe we are invited to “imagine.” Dare I say, I believe we are invited to even dream about what God may have in store for us. I think of that familiar verse in Ephesians 3:20. *“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”* That word “*think*” can be translated “*imagine*.” God can do far more than we can even “imagine” or think. Do you notice in the text that it does not just say that God can “do more” than we can “imagine?” Rather, the superlative is used here. God can “*do far more abundantly than all we ask or think.*” So imagine what God might want to do with this church all you want and God can do abundantly more than that. In fact, I don’t think this text just gives us permission to “imagine” what God might want to do through us. I think this text invites us and encourages us to dream and to “imagine.”

There are two reasons in this passage why we should feel free to dream and to “imagine” what God might have for us as a church family. The first reason is simply that this is God’s work. God is unlimited in his power to accomplish his work. In fact, the verse concludes by saying that God “*is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us.*” It is God at work. Consequently, with great faith we can attempt great things for God.

Andrew White is affectionately known as “The Vicar of Baghdad.” He has become the face of the church in Iraq as he has remained visible and present in an increasingly difficult and hostile place to minister. Not too long ago there were over 300 churches in Iraq and now there are just a few dozen. From the Persian Gulf war in 2003 to the recent expansion of ISIS, the Christian community has been persecuted and widely scattered. He said that one Sunday on his way to church he counted sixty dead bodies discarded along the way to church. And yet, he loves this community and has sought to be a voice for reconciliation. He has a saying he likes to say that I think applies to us and to our passage this morning. It is in response to the common statement we make when

we are saying goodbye. Often we say, “Take care.” Andrew White responds to that statement by saying “Don’t take care. Take risks!”<sup>1</sup> He tells others that this is what he hears Jesus saying to him: “Don’t take care. Take risks!” Why? We can take risks because we have a God who *is able to do abundantly more than all that we ask or think.*

We don’t live in Baghdad. We live in Connecticut. We don’t pass sixty dead bodies on our way to church. But the saying applies to us as well. As we think of expanding our ministry reach by expanding our facility and building, we are putting ourselves in a position of taking risk. We are asking you to take risk. We are not “playing it close to the vest.” We are not taking a “take care” approach to maintaining the ministry. We are taking risk. We are doing so because we believe God is leading us in this direction and it is “safe” to do so because if God is in it, he can do beyond what we can “imagine.”

The second reason why I feel we as a local church are invited to “imagine” what God might want to do through us is because the focus of this verse has to do with the church. When Paul talks about God doing *abundantly more than all that we ask or “imagine”* he is talking about what God is doing in the church. These last two verses in Ephesians 3 are the end of a prayer for the church. Paul ends this prayer with a “doxology.” A “doxology” is a song of praise to God. We are familiar with the song that is called “The Doxology.” *“Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above, ye, heavenly host. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”* That is a “doxology,” a song that gives glory to God. In verse 21, Paul bursts forth with a similar song, *“to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.”* Not only is this the end of a prayer that Paul is praying for the church, it is also the climax of all that Paul has said in this letter to this point. Do you know what Paul has been talking about up to this point in this letter? He has been talking about the church. Whatever he has said about the church up to this point has caused him to burst forth with praise to God. *“To him be glory in the church!”*

Whenever you talk about the church, there are two realities you need to keep in mind. First of all, there is the church universal. When we talk about “the church” we are talking about all those around the world who are believers in Jesus Christ and followers of Jesus. When we confess in the Apostles Creed that we believe “in the holy catholic church” we are not referring to the Roman Catholic Church. The word “catholic” with a lower case “c” means “universal.” The universal church is not an organizational unity with everyone under Rome. Rather, the universal church is a confessional unity, made up of all believers and we are all under Christ, who is the head of the body. In order not to confuse the issue, when we recite the creed we say that “we believe in the holy

Christian church.” In other words, all believers are made up of one body as we confess faith in Jesus. And so in this sense, God is doing *abundantly more* than we can imagine with his church around the world. In fact in Ephesians 3:10, it says that the angels are watching what God is doing with “the church” around the world and they marvel at the incredible wisdom of God as a result. But here is what I want you to keep in mind when you think about “the church.” What God is doing around the world through “the church” is accomplished through local churches all over the world, just like WEFC.

Whenever we talk about “the church” we need to recognize the second reality about the church. “The church” is made up of local churches of all shapes and sizes and coming from many different denominations. We, as a “local church” are part of what God is doing around the world and in New England and in Connecticut and in the Central Connecticut River Valley. Therefore, when we are invited to “imagine” what God is doing in and through “the church”, it is right and good for us to “imagine” what God is wanting to do through this local expression of his body. What is our part to play as a local church in God’s kingdom? What unique things has God equipped us for and called us to? Just like individuals have different gifts and abilities and collectively they serve their local church, so it is with churches. Based on the people God has assembled together in this local church, God has called WEFC to a unique role in this community and this region and God’s kingdom. So, what is it? That is what I want you to “imagine” with me over the next four weeks. What is the unique role God has called this local church to as we live out our faith in this community?

So here is your invitation for the next four weeks. I invite you to “imagine” with me what God might want to do through us based on who we are and what God has already been doing in us. Here is the piece I want us to think about this morning. There is no doubt in my mind, that God has used WEFC to have “impact” for the kingdom of God. We have seen God use this church family in powerful ways to change and transform lives. As we consider expanding our facility, I want you to “imagine” with me the growing “impact” there can be for the kingdom of God and the advance of the gospel.

### **The Church in Common: God’s Presence in This World**

Before we talk about the unique role of this local church, let’s look at what we hold in common with all churches. I want to start with just a basic question. What is “the church?” If we were in a community group right now, I would ask for feedback and opinion. I would be interested in knowing how the group would answer this question and what kind of a definition would begin to emerge from this question. I might even be

tempted to ask everyone to take out a piece of paper and a pencil and to write down how they might answer the question to see what impressions there are and what kind of a collective definition would begin to emerge. What is “the church?”

I would imagine, rather quickly we would begin to weed out some of the obvious things that the church is not. The church is not a building. The church is not a collection of programs. The church is not even a Sunday morning service. Now all three of things are often utilized by the church to do what it does, but they don't give us the definition of what a church is. And so it probably wouldn't take too long for someone to bring up the little children's rhyme to help define the church, “This is the church, this is the steeple. Open the door and see all the people.” Therefore, it may be suggested that the church is not a building but it is the people. “We” are the church. With that insight, we would be getting warmer and closer to a good working definition for the church. It is a good starting point, but it would not be complete. The definition for the church is more than just “the people.”

At the end of Ephesians 2, Paul gives us a much more robust definition for the church. Granted, it is a definition filled with nothing but people. Here we find mentioned the apostles and the prophets. Jesus is mentioned in this description of the church. In fact, you and I are also referred to in this passage. No doubt, this picture of the church is all about people. But what you find in this passage is that we are not just a collection of people. We are not just a bunch of people who gather for a service. We are more than a group of people who happen to believe the same things about God and our need for Jesus. There is something more mystical about the church than just membership in an organization.

I remember when I was a pastor in the Philadelphia area, our church was across the street from an art center. Every now and then, I would look over at the art center and wonder to myself, what is the difference between the art center and the church. They have programs and we have programs. They have members and we have members. They have people who show up weekly and we have people who show up weekly. They are nice people and we are nice people. What is the difference? The difference is that the church is not just an organization of people.

Here is what you discover in this passage. We are a singular spiritual organism. Look what it says about this “collection of people” starting in verse 20. In verse 20 the apostles and the prophets are described as the foundation. Then in the same verse, we see that Jesus is the cornerstone. He is “the stone” that holds the whole thing together. It even

says so much of Jesus in verse 21, *“in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”* And then it gets personal. And here is where you and I come into play. He says in verse 22, *“In him you also are being built together.”* The key words here in gaining a working definition of the church is *“joined together”* and *“built together.”* What he is saying here is that the church is not just a collection of people who happen to meet together. Rather, we are a singular spiritual organism that is joined together in Christ. There is one church. There is one body.

Donald MacNair describes the church very well when he says this of the church. “We don’t just get together because we have some things in common . . . We are not individuals or even individuals who happen to get along.” MacNair argues that there is something far more mystical to who we are as a church. He says that God does more than just “group us together.” Rather, “he knits us together into a new living entity.” The church is a “single living thing, a living organism.”<sup>2</sup>

To describe this mystical union we have with Jesus and his people, Paul uses the metaphor of a temple at the end of Ephesians 2. It is a wonderful picture because as each “stone” is added to the structure, it becomes a part of the whole and we are all united to Jesus. Earlier in the passage he asks his readers to “remember” back to what it was like before they were part of God’s people. He says to them in verse 12, *“remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”* This is what we were. We were *“separated from Christ . . . alienated . . . strangers . . . having no hope and without God in the world.”* But then Paul says in verse 13, *“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* In other words through placing our faith in Jesus Christ, we become part of God’s people, the church. Therefore, as a result, he says at the end of verse 19 that we are *members of the household of God*. We are *joined together* and *built together* into the people of God.

By using the metaphor of a temple to describe the church, Paul is rounding out our definition of the church. Yes, the church is the people. But it is more than that. The church is the people of God, joined together with Christ into one people. There is a very real union between Jesus and the church. But by using the metaphor of the temple to describe the church, we have to add one final piece to our understanding and definition of the church. As a people joined together in Christ, we become the presence of Jesus in this world. Our union with Christ is so real that it makes the church to be Christ to the world. Paul puts it this way at the end of Ephesians 2, *“you also are being built together*

*into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”* He says it this way at the end of Ephesians 1, speaking of Jesus, he is *“head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* I am not diminishing that Jesus is the unique incarnate son of God. That distinction remains constant. But I am afraid we often diminish what the church is to the world. I am afraid that we are far too casual in our approach to the church. I am afraid we often lose sight of what the church is in this world. Because of our union with Jesus, we are the presence of Jesus in this world. This ought to call us up to be the church.

Bonnie and I had the opportunity to visit Alice this week the day before she died. We had a very good conversation together. Alice couldn't say enough about her appreciation for the many who cared for her over the past few months. As she was sharing with us, this sermon was percolating in my mind and it dawned on me. These people from the church were the presence of Jesus with her. One of the metaphors we often see used for the church is “the body.” We are the “body of Christ.” When Jesus said to his disciples that he had to leave, but that they would do greater things than he did, I think this is what he was referring to. In the body, even Jesus was confined to one place. But now, through, “the body, the church” because of our union with Jesus, where two or three are gathered he is there. Did he not say when he finished giving his parting words at his ascension, *“I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

After reflecting on this, Donald McNair makes the following conclusion. “A good church is one which accurately represents Jesus to the world, one which is a healthy spiritual organism, fully embodying this mystical union.”<sup>3</sup> Every local church has to ask the question, “are we representing Jesus to this world?” In Ephesians 2, Paul is asking his readers to remember the impact Jesus has made on their lives. He is reminding them that through Jesus and the church, God has torn down the “dividing wall of hostility” that existed between Jews and Gentiles and he has made them one body. In the church, we are reconciled to God and to each other. When Paul prays this prayer for the church in Ephesians 3, he prays that the church would together with all the saints grasp the love of God. In doing so, they will be *filled with all the fullness of God*. Consequently, we will represent Jesus to this world through our love God and for people. The love of God that fills us will flow from us.

No church is perfect. But I believe WEFC does a good job at representing Jesus to this world. A few years ago we did an assessment on the church through a tool provided by Natural Church Development. This tool evaluates eight different indicators of health in a church. The philosophy of the test is that whichever of the eight indicators of health

you score lowest on is the area where you need to work and address. In each category, if you scored a 70 or above, you were considered to be healthy in that particular area. You may not be perfect and you may have some things to work on in that area, but with a score of 70 or above, you were considered healthy in that area. This test has been administered in churches all over the world and so it is considered a reliable tool to evaluate the health of the church. About 15% of churches who take the test score above the “healthy mark” in all eight categories. We asked 30 people to take the survey. We split it up evenly between men and women and we surveyed people in every age category starting with senior high students all the way to people in their 70’s and 80’s. To my amazement, we were among the 15% of churches that scored above the “healthy mark” in all eight categories. The most profound thing to me was that the highest score we received was for “loving atmosphere.”

When I was consulting with someone to help me understand these scores, I discovered something that helped me understand why we are growing as a church. It helped me to understand why we are seeing gospel impact and lives changed. The person helping me process these scores said, “when a church is healthy, growth happens naturally.” Another way to put it is like this, “healthy organisms grow.” When we reflect Christ and represent Jesus in a healthy way, there is impact for the kingdom. And that is what we have been seeing as a church. We are a people who are united to Jesus and to each other and as a local church, we represent Jesus to this community. This union with Jesus is so real that Jesus is here. Jesus is among us. Jesus walks among this lampstand. Jesus is using us to have impact in this community for the sake of the kingdom of God. *“To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen!”*

### **Our Unique Place: Expanded Impact**

And so here we are, trying to discern what our next step is as a church as we seek to be the presence of Jesus to this community. Very simply put, God has been using us to make impact for the kingdom of God in this community. By building, we envision being able to expand that impact and to reach more people as we continue to be the presence of Christ to this community. When asked, “Why do you feel we should build?” My simple answer is so that we can continue to do what we have been doing. We need more room. We are running out of space.

Worship Impact: In order to expand this kind of impact, we need to increase our worship space. The general rule is that when you hit 80% capacity in a sanctuary you

limit your ability to grow. It is a big step for someone to take to step into a church for the first time. It takes a lot of courage. A crowded room or a crowded parking lot becomes a barrier to making that step. This is not a very big sanctuary. Once we get up to 180 people it is very full. Between the last two services we are at 90% capacity. Over the years, we have discovered that the 8:00 service is difficult to get above 60% capacity. It is not a service that will facilitate growth. We would like to expand to a facility that will seat 400 comfortably and could accommodate 500 if needed.

We have seen God use our Sunday morning gathering to impact people's lives. Through the time of worship, the preaching of God's Word, the focus we have on Jesus and the gospel, lives are being impacted. Every week we are offering hope and the love of Jesus to people living in a challenging world. I take very seriously what happens in the worship service and I understand the need to proclaim the truth of Jesus in a culture where truth has been lost. David Wells laments how the role of the pastor has changed in our culture. He said that sadly the central function of the pastor is no longer that of "truth broker."<sup>4</sup> We live among a sea of people who need to hear the truth of Jesus and it is in the church where the knowing of Christ is our object that leads to our serving of Christ in this world. From my vantage point in the pulpit, I have seen people come to life as the Spirit of God is taking the word of God and the message of Jesus and bringing about change. We have literally seen lives transformed. Every week we are meeting new people. I believe God is calling us to greater impact and there are more people he has for us to reach with the gospel. Simply put, we need more space.

Community Impact: Through our community groups God is deepening relationships. A community group is a group of 8 to 14 people who meet weekly to spend time encouraging each other and to spend time in God's Word. We have about 250 people participating in these communities and what we are noticing is that as relationships get formed and deepened there is a greater connection to the church. Do you know what most people are looking for in a church? They are looking for meaningful relationship. Why? Because we experience Jesus through God's people. Here is what is going to happen. As these groups grow and deepen, it will widen our capacity to be the presence of Jesus to this world. I have already seen it happen in the ways in which these groups are caring for each other when there is a need and reaching out to others in need. It is powerful and is leading to further impact for the kingdom of God.

Mercy Impact: Finally, if you were to ask me what has been my greatest joy over the past 13 years here at WEFC, I would have to say it would be the way we have taken steps "to cross the bridge" into our community with acts of mercy. About 10 years ago, we asked

the question, “If WEFC had to close our doors for good, would it even matter to the community?” So we began to intentionally look for ways to “cross the bridge” into our community with a constant dripping of the mercy and love of God for those in need. This is how we are to express the presence of Jesus to our community. What thrills my heart is that we have not only “crossed the bridge” through ministries of the church, like Hands Opened Wide, but it has become a way of life. Community groups are living it out. The word on the street is that WEFC cares for the community. I have had people tell me when the church comes up in conversation with someone from the community, the person they are talking to often responds by saying, “That church really cares about the community.” I believe there is more “crossing the bridge” in our future and as a result we will be touching more people in need. Simply put, we need more space for more impact.

## **Conclusion**

The invitation at hand is simply to “imagine” with me what God has next for us. I believe there is a unique role for this church to fill in this region of New England and this step towards building will help us fulfill our role in God’s kingdom. This month we are going to be talking about the details and they may seem insurmountable. Good! I like that! It will require us to really move by faith. But then we get to see God work. It has taken us three years to get to this point. We have not rushed it. As a leadership, we have debated it and tested it and challenged it. At the end of the day, we feel this is the way for us to go as we seek to further the impact that comes as we continue to be the presence of Christ in this community.

*“To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”*

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy George “The Vicar of Baghdad” in *First Things* Feb. 24, 2014

<sup>2</sup>Donald J MacNair *The Practices of a Healthy Church* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1999)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid

<sup>4</sup>David Wells *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 13

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