

Title: To Him be glory in the church
Text: Ephesians 1.1-10; 3.7-21
Theme: Renewing our commitment to one another
Occasion: November 22, 2015
Prop Stmt: The health of our church is a reflection of the joy and growth of each of her members.

This morning I am taking a break from our series in Matthew in order to review together who we are as a church, how we are as a church, and what we need to focus on. Just as you need to examine your life and relationships, we need to do that as well. I pray that this will be fruitful, challenging and deeply encouraging. I preach this morning with immense gratitude for the privilege of being a follower of Christ and the overwhelming privilege of being your pastor. I love being your pastor. I am not sure that I would love being a pastor as much as I do, if I was not your pastor. For many years, we have seen many of our own congregation aspire to go into vocational ministry. This is in large part because of your affection for the gospel and your faithfulness and love for the church. God has been kind to us. We have much to thank him for, and a trust to steward well.

Read Texts:

Cathi went inside a store at a gas station to get a coffee. When she went to pay, the girl behind the counter told Cathi that she could have it for free. Cathi said, "I'll pay for it." The girl said, "I just want to do that for you." Cathi was baffled and yet really touched by that. She didn't understand why. There are things that happen in your life that do not make sense and you wonder why you were blessed. And then of course there are things that happen in our lives that do not look like blessings and we wonder why did that happen? You ask questions like that because you not only long to be part of a story that is bigger than you, but you long to be part of a bigger story that makes sense of all things. Ladies and Gentleman, I present to you the church. I am not presenting to you the church as she is viewed by our culture, but the church as she is seen and known by God. And in so doing, I present to you the story that ties all your stories together and helps you make sense of your life and this world.

We tend to think rather small about the church because we tend to think rather small about God and therefore we do not grasp what the church is, what is going on with her, in her, through her and for her. We look back to that stable in Bethlehem and we say that the world had no idea what was going on that night that Christ was born, right? They had no idea that heaven had come to earth, that God had become man. This baby looked ordinary, in fact, even weak, impoverished and insignificant. But that baby was God! Rome and Jerusalem looked like the political capitals and centers of power, but we all know that those cities only had the illusion of power. The real power was in a manger. Yet, while the world missed what happened then, we fail to understand what is going on when the church gathers. The church is ground zero for the kingdom of God on the earth. Like the tabernacle in the OT, like a shepherd boy with a sling and five smooth stones, like Jesus in the manger, the church does not look like much. But the church is where the action takes place. There are wars in Syria, terrorist attacks around the world, meetings

and resolutions coming from Washington, NY, Geneva, London and Paris, but the real action is in the church. When the church gathers, we have a taste of heaven on earth. And whenever that happens, there is conflict. We can look around and see fellow believers and we can feel some of the conflict that rages for supremacy and worship in our own hearts. At the end of this book Paul speaks to that when he says that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood. We are engaged in a battle that is far more serious than that. We are engaged in a cosmic war and if we really understood the nature of the battle that is taking place even in the air around us, we would not be handing out bulletins at the door, but would be giving out seat belts, flack jackets and helmets. It is easy to lose sight of that. Other things, many of them good take our attention. But, the real story is not only amazing and arresting; it is worth living for and dying for because it will last forever.

1. What is the church?

A. **People called out by God.**

The word that is translated church (ekklesia) means “called out ones.” It is the word that Jesus used in Matthew 16 and 18. His followers were the “called out ones.” The history of God’s people is the history of people who have been called out or as we read in Ephesians 1, chosen and predestined for adoption. This is a pattern that goes back to the beginning.

God called out a man named Abraham from the city of Ur and promised him that he was going to be the father of a nation. Abraham was called by God to believe God and he was called out of his land to go the place that God had chosen for him. Hundreds of years later, God called out Moses and used Moses to call the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt. Later, God called out David from his brothers to be king and to start a royal line from which Christ would come. The OT shows us this pattern of being ones called out by God. In the NT, Jesus is the ultimate One called out by God to be the ultimate Father of a nation, leader of a people, and King. The OT was a preview and a platform for what was coming. God is really big and his plan and vision is really big. His plan was never limited to one people in one piece of land. That was a preview. God's plan is global. God is calling out a people, not to be born into a particular family line or ethnicity, but to be reborn. Jesus told Nicodemus, unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven. The gospel forms the church. And Jesus would be the head of the church, who were people called out from every tribe, language and nation in order to be part of a new nation of people, a people called by His name, to be part of his kingdom that would never end. The kingdom of Christ on this earth is expressed right now through his people that he calls the church. Every genuine church is an outpost for the kingdom of Christ. Every genuine church is an embassy and every believer is an ambassador.

B. **An Embassy for the Kingdom of Christ.**

The church has never been a building. The church has never been a pope, a papacy, a council of bishops, a corporation or a business. From the moment of her birth in Acts 2 she has always been people who by faith alone in Christ alone have been saved from

wrath and saved to God by grace alone to the glory of God alone based on the Word of God alone. The people of God have always been marked by their faith in Christ, and their commitment to one another in local churches. Do see what the church is? We are an embassy of the kingdom of Jesus in a foreign land. We are the representatives of another government. We fly the flag of Jesus in the midst of this world. And in so doing we are telling the world about her rightful ruler, returning King and kingdom without end. But, we are doing more than telling the world, we are also showing the world a preview of what life is going to be like under the King and in the kingdom. In that day, there will be no war, no injustice, no bribes, no terrorism, no hatred and no strife. It will be absolutely joyful. It will be all-soul satisfying. We are not there, yet. But, as we live out the implications of the gospel in our lives and in our relationships, we experience a taste of what is to come. And we not only experience that, we provide that for others to taste.

C. A Supernatural Community of Believers

A while back, I passed out tiny spoons to everyone one Sunday morning. These were the spoons that ice cream shops use so that you can taste a sample of the flavors. I wanted you to remember that your life is a taste, a sample of the kingdom of Jesus. The kingdom of Jesus is like ice-cream for the soul, and this ice-cream is not low fat, it is the good stuff (unless of course you have dairy allergies). When people get a taste of our lives together, they should go, “wow, this is really good stuff.”

Two weeks ago, we welcomed a group of students here from a private boarding school in China. These students have been raised in this school since 5 years of age. They are here for one year of high school so they can get into American universities. As part of their cross-cultural experience they came to our church. They are taught essentially nothing about religion or God. They sat in our classes and came to our worship service. They interacted with many of you and then we ate together and I answered their questions and received their comments. There were two things that really made an impact upon them. 1) What was taught/sung and 2) Your joy and happiness. They started asking questions like, How do you know God? How can I be forgiven? Why did Jesus die? What is my purpose in life? One student said, “I was so moved by the speech and songs, I felt clean.” What happened? They got a taste of some ice-cream for the soul. They got a taste of something that is not from this world, but is from God. They got a taste of something that resonated with their souls. The true church is not man-made, it is gospel-made. A true church is a supernatural community of believers formed and defined by the gospel and established by God to display the manifold wisdom of God. We are the aroma of life in the midst of decay. We are called out. We are different and we should assume that there are aspects of our church life that are difficult to explain to others, but that is because the gospel comes from God and so does the church.

The gospel forms the church and the gospel governs the church and drives the church and gives meaning, purpose and direction to the church. That is why Paul spent chapters 1-3 in Ephesians talking about the gospel and then showing in chapters 4-6 how the gospel drives everything in the life of the church. The church is so important that even your marriage is a reflection of it. And that is why we make a big deal about commitment and

membership. We make a big deal about baptism and communion and we give attention to church polity because we value what the Bible says and we value the unity that these things provide. We emphasize meaningful membership because we are convinced from the Scriptures that each local church is to be comprised of...

D. An Identifiable Community of Believers.

1 Peter 5.2 commands the elders of the church to shepherd the flock of God that is among you. We cannot do that without knowing who is in the flock. Hebrews 13.17 tells the elders to keep watch of the souls of their congregation. We cannot do that unless we know whom we are given the oversight of. The commands to care for one another, have oversight of one another, to encourage one another are all given to local congregations who know who is in the family and who isn't. The elders are responsible for the oversight of the members of this church and therefore, we have to have a way of knowing who is under our care and who isn't. That is the essence of membership. It is a means by which we know who has confessed the same faith and practice that we have and who has made a commitment to be watched over and to help watch over one another and serve one another so that we can encourage each other to be faithful ambassadors who together form an embassy for the Kingdom of Christ.

When the Bible speaks about being a member of the church, as it does in 1 Corinthians 12), it does not mean being a member, like I am a member at Sam's Club, Costco or a Country Club. In those organizations, you pay a due, are given a card that gives you access to the facilities and the freedom to shop. That is not membership in a local church. 1 Corinthians 12 speaks of members, as members of a body. If your finger were to be cut off, it would be dismembered. It would be severed. Membership in the church means to be part of a body of believers who together put Jesus on display. How do we do that? We do that by being committed. This is the pattern that was established from the very beginning of the church. Understanding their identity as the new covenant people of God, drove their commitment to one another and their commitment to reaching others locally with the gospel and globally by establishing healthy churches. So, this sermon in a sentence is this: *Meaningful membership in our church drives our commitment to authentic fellowship and our commitment to evangelism and church-planting locally and the world.* I've attempted to show you that the gospel forms the church because the gospel is the means by which we become followers of Christ. People who follow Christ, follow Christ together with other followers. Following Christ is congregational. That is why every book in the NT that speaks about how we grow as believers was written to local churches and to leaders of local churches. You cannot grow as God intended you to, as a believer apart from being a committed member of a local church.

I was at a church recently that publicly stated on their website, "Hey we know that people are busy so if you cannot be here, we've made it convenient for you. You can watch our services online...." I thought, what are you doing?! Do not apologize for the gospel or for the implications of the gospel. Being a follower of Christ is a sacrifice. It is a commitment. Being a member of a church is a way of expressing that my life is not own, that I not only belong to Christ, but, belong to his people. We are committed.

E. A Committed Community of Believers.

The early church in Acts 2 was described as being committed to the Word (apostles' teaching), to the fellowship, and to reaching others locally and globally. We express our commitment to the Word by making our gathering together as a body of believers on Sunday a priority. This is what we do because this is who we are. I can understand a person who is not a follower of Christ waking up on Sunday and saying, "hmmm maybe I will go to church today." For them, it is not convictional at all. It is purely convenient. For us, gathering as believers to hear the Word together, that is to eat together, is an expression of who we are. It is convictional.

But, we do more than hear, we are committed to the fellowship. That means that we are committed to serving others. We come to a Worship service. What is a service? It is a gathering of people who come to serve. Who do we serve? Well, we serve God, but we one of the primary ways we serve God is by serving one another. How do we serve one another? We pray for one another. We care for one another. We encourage one another. We express compassion for one another. Of course, in order to do that, we have to know one another. But, there is another side to that coin. Being committed to the fellowship means that we are committed to being served. In other words, we have to be willing for people to know us, our needs, our weaknesses, our struggles, so that they can serve us and love us by encouraging, maybe admonishing and correcting us at times.

Our commitment to the community reaches outside of us. As representatives of the kingdom of Christ, we are committed to expanding his kingdom through reaching more people with the gospel to be followers of Christ (ambassadors) and by helping local embassies get established and be healthy, here and around the world.

2. How are we doing at that?

That is a difficult question to answer. But, my sense is that while there are some of you who see it, that there remains many who still do not grasp what the church really is, and therefore, the church remains as a spoke on your wheel rather than the hub of your life. I recognize that we are not saved by the church. We are saved by Christ. But, Christ who saves us, places us into his body, the church, because the church is the plan that he has designed to spread abroad his kingdom throughout this earth. That is why Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Even hell cannot stop the church because the church is the current expression of the kingdom of Jesus that will never, ever end. God planned the church. Jesus died for the church and in his death he secured the salvation of every single person who would ever believe on him. Jesus is building his church. Jesus is going to come for his church. The church will endure. Do you believe that? I don't mean do you intellectually agree with that, but do you place your affections and your passion into the ministry of the church? Do grasp and own her vision? Are you committed through your finances, your interest, your pursuit of your own spiritual growth, your hope and service?

I am helping you when I challenge you to place your affections in and give your passion to the church because Jesus did, not because I do. Think of it like this. You live in a world with enemies. When someone hates you, they seek to hurt you by destroying what is most precious to you. When that which is most precious to us is threatened, we tremble, maybe even panic. We are afraid that we are going to come apart. But, think of this. What if you could place your ultimate happiness somewhere that was out of the reach of your enemies? If you did that, then your enemy could not ultimately hurt you.

Where could you place your happiness and it be guaranteed to be safe? Could you place your happiness in your health? Could you place your happiness in a football team, a soccer career, a retirement plan? Is your happiness safe with your children, your job, even your marriage? The only ironclad guaranteed safe that will guard your happiness is the kingdom of God. That is why Jesus said for you to seek first his kingdom. Only God can carry all the weight of our greatest hope. Your kids cannot carry your hope because they cannot save you. Only God can carry the weight of your greatest hope. So, how are we doing as a church? The answer to that is how are you doing as a member? Is your delight in God? Do you love him?

3. How can we improve?

We can continue to cultivate an atmosphere of one on one ministry. Every member in this church is a ministry. Every member is called to serve one other. If we owned that calling we would gather on Sunday's with a mission to serve others, to pray for others, to help encourage others, to share the gospel with others. There are people who are here who have not yet come to faith in Christ. Do you know that? You want to share the gospel with someone? Start by learning the names and stories of the people who are around you. Many of you are going to discover people who come here who are intrigued by Christianity but have never trusted Christ. God may use you to reach them.

We can continue to strengthen our passion and pursuit of personally sharing the gospel with others outside of the church gathering. One of the benefits of living in a culture that is becoming so hostile to truth is that the light of your life shines a little brighter. If you are living in a way that reflects the gospel, then you had better be ready to some explaining as to why you believe the way you do. I want you ready and eager to share Christ daily. Many will reject Christ. But some will believe.

But, there is another area where I think we can improve and I want to give you something to think about. Our current budget is about 2.1 million dollars. 65% of that goes into this ministry, the breakdown is in the reports. 11% of that goes into missions. 22% of that goes toward our building payment. 22% translates into \$450,000 per year.

When we pay off our building, we will free up \$450,000 for some more exciting ministry. When will we pay off our building? If we keep doing what we are doing, we will pay off our indebtedness in 11 years. I don't want to wait another 11 years. If we increased our giving by 5k per week, we would pay off our indebtedness in 8 years. But, what if we paid this off in 5 years? If we paid this off in 5 years, we could more than double our

missions giving. Instead of giving about \$244,000 per year to missions, we could give about half a million. And we should! I talked to Joel Bengé a few days ago. Joel grew up here. He graduated from Wayne State and now just completed his seminary training at Southern. Joel's dad served here on staff for 14 years and his parents are now in Ukraine. Joel's wife, Rachel grew up in a 3rd world country. Her parents were missionaries and her dad teaches missions at Southern Seminary. Can you think of a young couple that is better suited for missions? Joel and Rachel want to go to Calcutta, India because there are 10 million people in Calcutta. Most of the missions work in Calcutta focuses upon the 8 million Hindus, but very little is done to reach the 2 million Muslims who live in Calcutta. Joel and Rachel have just been approved by Pioneer Missions to go to this field. We need to support them. We should support them, but right now we cannot do it without cutting something else. John and Nicole Demecurio are ready to go serve in the Blind and deaf Home in LA. We want to support them more. They are one of us. But we cannot do that yet. We support the Sherman's in Zambia. They spent these last two years living in a dorm room because they were so underfunded. We would love to raise their support even more. If we paid off our building, we would also be able to pour some more resources into another pastoral internship, and into helping plant and renew churches in Michigan. This fall, we are hosting what we are calling "The Insider." This is a weekend for a group of pastors from MI to spend a weekend with our elders and staff and seeing what we are doing. We are in a position where we can help train leaders from other churches to help their churches be healthy. As many of you have said, we need more healthy churches in this state. We have some good relationships with some other churches that together we can help develop more. There are some good opportunities before us and I want us to be positioned where we can take advantage of them. The vision is this: Pay off our indebtedness so that we can 1) Increase missions giving from 11% to 25%. 2) Add 2 more internships. 3) Designate funds for church planting and church renewal.

So, how on earth could we do this?

Here is my appeal. It is not a fundraising program. I would rather go to the dentist and have every tooth in my head drilled out by hand without painkillers than go through a fundraising program. (Ok, that was a little extreme.) My appeal is actually simple, but it is heartfelt. For those of you who do not give or give miserly, or give excuses year after year after year for not giving, will you repent? Will you confess your lack of love for Christ and his church and man-up and grow up and step-up to your responsibility and give? Some of you cannot give and it breaks your heart. And brother or sister, God knows your heart. Rest assured that he does. Others of you give very inconsistently. Now, there are, praise God, many of you who are faithful in giving. Thank-you! Thank-you! Thank-you! I am not challenging those of you who are faithful and serious about your giving. But, some of you are really hit and miss, which means a lot more miss than it does hit. I believe that if those who don't give, start, and keep it up, and those who are inconsistent start being faithful, I think that we would probably increase our weekly giving by \$10,000. That is a guess, but I think it is a good guess. That would mean that 200 of you who have not made giving a priority to step up for \$50 per week. In a year that would be an additional \$500,000. In 5 years we would be debt-free. And if that level of giving became our new norm, which it should we would have more than an additional \$450,000

for missions and ministry, we would have an additional \$950,000-\$1 million per year for missions, church-planting, internships and church renewal. Now, if some of you want to drop off some large gifts along the way, and speed up the clock, that will be fine. But, we all need to embrace the priority of the church.

Now, I want to throw out one more idea, but I want to be clear that this is my idea. It may get voted down, if it ever comes up, but here goes. I think that once we get the building paid for, that we ought to do one smaller building project. I've told a couple of you about it. I think that we ought to build a commercial sized kitchen on the west side of the building. We are becoming more and more of a training center and ministry center and this would be obviously useful for our many church events but for beyond. I just turned 55, and I would like to get this done by the time I turn 60. That would be in the year 2020. So, let's call this 20-20 vision. Pay off our debt. Double missions giving. Fund church planting, church renewals and internships. And build a kitchen.