

Calvary United Methodist Church
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HOW IMPORTANT IS THE CHURCH?

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Children's Message:

You may be seated and I'll ask that our kids come forward. I have something here for the kids, I have it someplace here. Hope I didn't lose it. No, look, there it is. Hey, good morning! How are you guys?

This is an unusual artifact of years past. What do you think it is? It's a note card. What do you think is inside this note card? (A note.) A note? Yes, eventually. And you know who is going to write it? You are. That's yours.

In years past, before you had email...do you have your own email address already? Not yet. Do you have an email address already? You do. Okay. You can write to me if you have an email address. Not yet. (Not yet.) Give it time. Anyway, we would write a thank you note to someone who does something really nice for us, maybe in the last week, the last month. Maybe, anyone have a birthday recently? When is your birthday? (July 15.) Did you get lots of presents? Pretty much, right? They didn't throw you outside and say, "Sit down out in the cold and eat your cake without me," Right? They didn't do that. Did you send thank you notes? (No.) Well, what an opportunity! I can help you. I'll give you a couple of extra.

Saying thank you is one of the nicest things that you can do. Maybe someone did something nice for you this week. Did anyone do something nice for you this week? What did they do? Besides, cooking for you and, you know, cleaning for you, doing your clothes, that sort of thing. (Our parents took us to the...) They took you, do you remember? Here. Take this card and write a nice thank you note to your mom and dad. Did anyone do something nice for you this week? (Child speaks.) Wow, well you should send them a note. Do you have all their addresses? Well, check with your camp counselor and, do you have her address, his address? They can get you the address. I'll give you this card later on.

It's just that when you say thank you it makes other people feel good, but it also makes things expand in a great way. When you are mad it's pretty easy to make other people mad enough to stay away. When you are thankful or when you are just overflowing with gratitude, it just touches people in such a great way. And you find that it grows and you get more and you find that gratitude becomes something really wonderful.

We are going to take communion and you will take communion today if your parents allow you and in communion we call it the giving of thanks with a special word called Eucharist, which is a Greek word, it is the giving of thanks. And we give thanks to God for what Jesus has done for us. And we also experience His presence when we eat the bread and drink from the cup,

today we'll do it by intinction. And He's right there, closer than the beating of your heart. Is this your sister? Put your hand on her chest, see if you can feel her heart. Feel your sister's heart. No, it's probably closer to the other side. Want to try it with your sister. Do you feel here heart? Jesus is closer to her even than that, than her own heart. It's amazing. And so we give thanks with communion.

I'll give you these notes here in a moment and I hope that you'll write a nice note of thank you to someone, your parent or grandparent, someone, an aunt, someone who took you to Universal Studios, that's a really nice one. Maybe your mom who did your laundry this week and maybe your mom made really great meals. That's the right answer.

Alright. Lord, we thank you for all the folks around us and all the nice things that we experience that they do and that you give us a chance to do too. Thank you especially for all you've done for us. When we come to communion, remind us that not simply gratitude but how much joy that there is and how much joy there is for our kids. Amen.

Okay, so would you help me out here and pass these out? Everybody gets at least one, unless you want two. Camper might need a couple. Would you help me out by passing these out? Okay. Thank you. Then you can go off to kid's church.

Message:

Ephesians 3:1-21

Would you join with me in a word of prayer? Lord, help us to hear from you today and speak to us from your Word. I pray that you would use my words such as they are, but I ask that the Holy Spirit would use them in way that I or anyone else can understand. We ask you bless them in the name of Christ. Amen.

I want to talk to you about Ephesians, the whole book of Ephesians is about being the church, it is about the nature of God, the person of Jesus, the work of the church and what the church is all about. I think it is kind of important, particularly in this part of my ministry, kind of preaching the ABCs and that's what we are doing.

So we read from the Bible and in so doing there is a whole lot we learn, but how carefully do we read so that we can begin to ask the questions, the really important questions of a chapter or book or just a passage. Now, all the books of the Bible are there because God's people were asking vital questions, so these writings are actually in response to those kinds of questions.

For a few weeks we have been reading through this book and this writing is answering questions that the early church had about God, about the person of Jesus, about the nature of the church, including how to be the church. So, it's a very ancient writing, but it's very relevant to our times today. And this third chapter is really asking a very important question: How vital is it to be the church? How important is the church in the world.

And Paul answers this question about why the church is important.

First of all, the church is not just some sociological phenomenon that arose as people in New Testament times rejected the power and authority of corrupt officials and organized to create a power base of their own, choose a symbol of a crucified guy on a cross as their logo.

Paul tells us that the church was in the mind of God from the beginning.

God worked through time and history and through the lives of men and women dedicated to understanding that God is One, that God is the creator of all and that has come to know us in ways that idols and tribal gods and goddesses could never be known because they are really nothing. And these men and women experienced the presence of God in their lives and were gifted in prophetic ways to share God's Word to God's people but also beyond.

Now, along comes Jesus who calls people to follow him and learn from him because he has come from the Lord God. He knows God and is able to communicate with God, which was surprising to everybody there and it still is to all of us. And after his resurrection, he breathed his Spirit out onto his disciples at the first Pentecost and he sent his Spirit not only into his disciples but actually into all the world, that the Spirit moves wherever it wants to in the world, which is good because the church doesn't always do such a good job on doing what God wants us to do. And that's actually a part of it. And Jesus did not envision architectural buildings for his followers to meet in. You will not in 2 Revelations something about church finance and building and architecture. You won't find that. You won't find the robes either, but that's okay. What he envisioned was a people. The word church actually comes from a term that means those people called out in the responsibility to assemble and bear witness to who God is in the world and to do the work of God. From that word ecclesia you get ecclesial, ecclesiastical, we get church in all that. That's the easy way to say it. And what Jesus visions were a people who would go out into the world and his hands and his heart, his voice, his physical body to continue the work that Jesus began here.

The first task of that is worship. Worship is vital to us. That's where our hearts and minds are reoriented to God by the Spirit of God. We worship what we value most. That could be a lot of things. I carried 55 boxes of books here. I like books. Do I worship books? Well, we have to figure that out for ourselves. You get monthly statements from your checking account, your debit or however it comes to you by electronics or the mail and just see what's important to you. People do what is important. It could be money, a sport, an object. None of those can save. Pastor Jeff told me, by the way, that it's acceptable to take my notes and send them to a university or a seminary in Africa. I'm all about that. This is really good. Only God can save and to worship God rightly is to know the salvation of God.

That's our first task. Our second task to create the work of reconciliation.

The cross was where the great work of reconciliation was accomplished, that Jesus mediated

that with his own body. We celebrate that in Holy Communion. That the cross brings together God and all humanity, not just those who believe, but even those who do not. It goes out to the whole world. And Paul echoes that. For, not only were the Jewish people reconciled to God by the cross, in fact, all non-Jews, all humanity, were reconciled to God, who extends favor to all and mercy and forgiveness and grace.

So the followers of Jesus were called to do the same thing, to work together for the healing and reconciliation of all people. That's a mouthful if you really think about it. But it's here in this third chapter.

And Paul is astounded that this is God's plan, because he is astounded that he who once was a murderer breathing the hatred, a fire-breathing crazy man, he's chosen to be an agent of God's reconciliation. And he's blown away that God would use ordinary, broken human beings as vessels of his grace. And you should be blown away by that too, because that's you and that's me. Paul knows that people are sinful, leaders are sinful; community is messy. You probably never experienced that at church, right? God uses broken people to show forth his grace in the world in need of redemption.

If you read the letters of Paul you will not see a perfect church. You will see church fights; you will see disagreements among brothers and sisters. Paul stuck his finger in Peter's nose and really pressed him down and he wasn't being polite about it. He was being pretty pointed. You'll find failed leaders. You will find people who were just out to lunch and you'll see actually people who are disagreeable. And yet God is at work in the church and Jesus is intimately connected to the church because it is his body, to be his presence in the world, and continue the work that he started. So, how important is the church? Well, you can't get rid of the church because if you do you get rid of Christ. You can't have one without the other. You are probably saying but I know a little bit about church and I know about the people in church and they aren't always so nice. The church doesn't always have a great history in this world and is complicit in some pretty awful things over time. Well, that's true, and yet God has not given up on it and Jesus is still in it.

Paul is almost humorous and God desires to make the divine wisdom known through the church. Across history we have seen the church do horrific things. They have been complicit in real tragedies. And in my ears I have known the church to be kind of like that: politics, social attitudes and mores sometimes mean much more than the teachings of Jesus. And yet, God still wants to use the church and Jesus is in it. Truthfully, if the church wasn't from God it would have faded from view long ago. But it has to be from God because it is still here and it is here for God's purposes.

Now, it is not all bad and nothing is really falling apart so badly as you might think because there are a lot of Christian congregations of many different varieties and values, where the poor and homeless and the helpless are cared for, where children are treasured and nurtured and raised in love, where injustices are confronted, where people are reconciled in peace, where el-

ders are respected and valued, where great words are quietly carried on in the name of Jesus every day. This church does that too. On Thursday you gather to give food away to the community. You work really hard at it. Tomorrow you'll probably do something amazing and no one else will ever know what you will be doing. There is a lot of stuff that goes on here in this congregation and so many congregations that I've been a part of and known. There are amazing things going on in church.

We are not perfect, we are far from it, but the fact that Jesus uses flawed people like us to accomplish his work is really a sign not of us but of his presence and his Spirit at work in us.

So God's Spirit is at work here among us. And the Spirit desires that first of all we practice reconciliation one with another. You can accomplish a lot more when you join hearts and hands than when you gripe together. And as we look to Jesus and he becomes the focus and he gives us grace to look upon one another with compassion, with forbearance, with understanding and yes, even forgiveness. We are only better together, not when we are apart. And there is only one person or one being who thinks that we are better together and be called out the enemy of our souls.

Now, I don't have to tell you the church has to change. If we are going to survive into this century bring it on, we are going to have to make a lot of changes. The changes are not simply architectural or having handicap access or you know in some way or another of finding ways to include everybody. Actually what we need is a change of heart: humbler churches, more transparent churches, church willing to wrestle with scriptures, to ask the serious questions and to take scripture seriously, churches willing to dare to love and accept those within their own walls so that they can go out and transform and change the communities they are a part of. We need churches with a lot more Christ and a lot less of self. That goes for pastors, myself included.

So, is the church important? Well, this scripture lifts it up as very important. Where the church is, Christ is there. Christ is either allowed to work through the church or hindered to the church, but he's not going to just walk away. It's meant to change the world. Now, if you are tired of church, I'm glad you are here, but if you are tired of church, it may be because too often we have seen a self-serving church where the energy is not about God's work, but simply about what we like for self-preservation. More than ever the world is in need of the Christ who is in us and looking for us to express who he is to our neighbors. This is a world of pain. We know the Healer.

Where a church puts Christ first, where it seeks to reconcile together, to be agents of reconciliation in our world, where worship is from the heart, where the mission of Jesus is faithfully carried out, we'll never have to ask whether or not the church is important. Amen. Amen.