I Believe in the Church

Membership Sunday, May 19, 2019

# Scripture: Eph. 1:15-23

# Key Thought: God wants us to understand his blessing upon the church.

# Intro:

One of the things I have done over the years is identify some of the very best books that I have read and set them apart. When my grandchildren were born, I gave my daughter and son-in-law copies of the two best books I had ever read on raising children. In Basic Beliefs and Membership Information Class, I bring in my collection of the five best books I’ve read on the basic beliefs of the Christian faith. I also have a very short shelf of the very best books I have ever read about doing church, about what it means to be the church, about what the church of Jesus Christ is and how it should function.

One of the books in that valued collection, is a book called The Body by Charles Colson. Some of you that are my age may recognize that name. Charles Colson was one of the Watergate conspirators and was sent to prison as a result of his actions. While in prison, he became a follower of Jesus Christ, and after his release, he dedicated the rest of his life to improving the lot of prisoners. He founded a highly respected global ministry called Prison Fellowship. He also became a premier apologist for Christian faith. I begin this morning with a very insightful quote from his book about the church called, The Body.

Even Christians who understand their personal identity as followers of Christ will not make a widespread difference – unless we have a high view of our corporate identity as the body of Christ.

Many Christians have been infected with the most virulent virus of modern American life, what sociologist Robert Bellah calls “radical individualism.” They concentrate on personal obedience to Christ as if all that mattered is “Jesus and me,” but in so doing miss the point altogether. For Christianity is not a solitary belief system. Any genuine resurgence of Christianity, as history demonstrates, depends on the reawakening and renewal of that which is the essence of the faith – that is, the people of God, the new society, the body of Christ, which is made manifest in the world – the church. As we will argue in these pages, there is no such thing as Christianity apart from the church.

The church is not incidental to the great cosmic struggle for the hearts and souls of modern men and women. It is the instrument God has chosen for that battle – a battle we are called to by virtue of being members of his body. To bring hope and truth to a needy world, the church must be the church. (The Body by Charles Colson p. 32)

For us here at Copper Hill, today is membership Sunday, an annual day for us to think especially about what it means to be the church together. In America, we are individualists and it is harder for us to think about the collective nature of the church. Our English language does not help us with our myopia, as our pronoun “you” is both singular and plural. So, when we read verses in the Bible like Col. 1:27, “Christ in you the hope of glory,” we are automatically thinking singular and personally, but the Greek form translated as “you” in that verse is plural, and we don’t know that. Now, is it plural as in a collection of individuals or plural as referring to the group together? That question we need to investigate, but the thought of “you” being plural does not even occur to us because of our individualistic culture.

We are facing a time in American culture when many people no longer value the local church. We need to know how to counter that thinking for ourselves and for others. Now we are not going back to the fifties or the 1800’s when families like the one I was raised in were in their own local church 50 or even 51 Sundays of the year. But today there is a big contrast not just in habits but more basically, in valuing of gathering together. This is evident in many ways. There are many people who consider themselves serious Christians, but they hardly attend church at all. They don’t see much need for the organized church. Others in our culture today occasionally attend but take a very casual view of coming to church and of the local congregation. They may attend or they may not, depending upon a bunch of factors. Church becomes just one in a long list of social events and other activities that vie for a place in their crowded schedule. We are also seeing an increasing number who listen to church services regularly online without attachment to a church; not because they can’t come but because they like their online arrangement. In city areas, we are seeing another new thing -- people who attend church regularly, but they do what mega-church pastor and Church Leadership writer Carey Nieuwhof calls church surfing. They have several favorite churches and they go from one to another from week to week without attachment to or significant interaction with any of them.

These situations all point to our need to take time to highlight our collective identity as the church of God. What did God intend for the church to mean to us? What are the blessings that God has specifically given to his gathered body? Why do we need to be a part of the gathered Body of Christ? Why does God need the gathered Body of Christ in order to accomplish his mission in the world? The text I chose for today will help us on this journey.

# The church receives the promises of God

Let’s look first at some promises in the New Testament that are specifically written in a way that we know that God had the gathered body, the church in mind. Let’s begin with our text this morning. Paul in his prayer for the Ephesian church wrote:

I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. Eph 1:18-19 NIV

Paul is implying that there are spiritual riches given to the gathered body of Christ. In this passage, Paul does not explain what he means by the “riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” But by comparing other passages, we can begin to fill out the picture.

Later in this book Paul speaks of how the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles together inherits the promises through Jesus Christ. Part of the riches that we have in the church are promises from God to his elect as a body.

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. Eph 3:6 NIV

One such promise that comes to mind is the promise of victory over the forces of death and evil that Jesus spoke to Peter.

I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. Matt 16:18 NIV

We can avoid the denominational controversies about the first part of this verse by acknowledging that the church is built both upon the confession of Peter that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God and upon the leadership of Peter as the head of the Jerusalem church following the early martyrdom of James. But the point that we need today is in the second half of the verse where Jesus promises victory for his church over the forces of death and hell. And despite the many huge setbacks, wars, divisions, and severe persecutions that the church has suffered over the centuries, the church has indeed marched forward and continues to do so all over the globe. While the church in the northeastern part of the United States and in Western Europe, does not seem to be doing very well right now, the church in Africa and South America, and some other parts of the world is growing very fast. Even in the United States itself, while there are more people claiming no religion than ever before, there are also more very large churches in the United States than ever before. God’s promise of victory for his church continues.

# The church is the full expression of Christ’s presence.

Another reason to be a part of the collected body of Christ regularly is that the church is collectively the full expression of Christ’s presence in the world.

God placed all things under [Christ’s] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. Eph 1:22-23 NIV

If it were just this verse, we might be tempted to let the subject go. But this verse is not alone. Consider also what Paul says in chapter 2.

In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Eph 2:22 NIV

Look also in second Corinthians:

We are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

“I will live with them and walk among them,  
and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” 2 Cor 6:16

While it is true that the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer, according to these verses, there is an added sense in which God dwells fully in his collected church. We cannot escape this truth.

God gave a picture of this in the time of the Exodus. He told Moses how to build the tabernacle in the desert, the tent where the holy things such as the ark would be kept, where the sacrifices of the Levites would be done. The Bible tells us that the cloud of God’s presence was over and in that place. Sometimes God’s glory displayed itself in such a brilliant way that the people could not go near it.

Later, after Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, after his formal dedication, the Bible describes how God’s presence filled the temple (2 Chron. 7:2). The place where he had chosen to put his name was a place of his special presence. That is still true today. But today it is true, not just because the local church is a building dedicated to God, but especially because the people of God are gathered there and in that gathering a greater fullness of God’s presence is found.

Paul says that God has given all power and rule to Christ for the sake of the church. Listen to that verse again:

God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, Eph 1:22 NIV

God’s power is available especially to the church.

Considering all these things, I don’t know you about you, but I desire to be here, in the family of God, where this fullness of the presence of God has chosen to be. The church is where the action begins in God’s kingdom.

# The church is the agent of the kingdom of God

Finally, we need to understand the ultimate purpose for which God has given promises to his church and placed his presence there. It is not just so that we could enjoy a wonderful Kumbaya moment or two, though we often do. It is even not just so we can experience forgiveness, though Jesus certainly wants us to have that experience. God has a further purpose in mind for his church.

God’s collected body of Christ is to be God’s agent for change in the healing and transformation in the world. That is why the vision for the United Methodist Church is, “To make disciples for the transformation of the world.” God has more for us to do than sit and enjoy spiritual warm fuzzies.

Consider some of the amazing language that we find in the Bible about the role of the family of God. This purpose begins with our witness to those around us.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8 NIV

Classic writer, Francis Schaeffer put it this way:

“Just as our bodies are our means of communication to the external world, so the Church as the body of Christ should be Christ’s means of communication to the external world.” Francis Schaeffer True Spirituality p. 165

Let’s look even further. According to Scripture, God’s purpose for the church extends even into realms beyond what we can comprehend.

[God’s] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. Eph 3:10 NIV

Think of the roles of the apostle Peter. On Pentecost, Peter preached the word of repentance and forgiveness to the multitudes gathered for the Jewish festival. Not too many days later, as he and John came to the steps of the temple Peter brought a welcome word of healing to the beggar there. Peter was sent to the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius and after that was instrumental in helping the early church to accept Paul’s mission to the Gentiles and to understand that the gospel was open to Gentiles as well. These were all ways that God called Peter to be an agent of the kingdom of God.

In our world today, we as individuals are also called to be agents of the good news of the kingdom of God, bringing tidings of salvation, acts of healing, words of reconciliation, ministries of justice, and gifts of charity, all of which help us to be agents of the kingdom of God in our world today. While it is true that we do what we can individually, we can do so much more when we work together as a local community of faith.

# My Response

I challenge myself and I challenge you to think about God’s blessing upon the gathered people of God. To think about how God places his presence among the gathered people of God. To meditate upon the mission that God has given to the gathered people of God, and to dedicate yourself to continue to be, as you are today, present and interacting in the local body of Christ. Amen.