

Ben Libby
 Sermon
 May 24th, Ascension Sunday

To Jesus Christ, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification, be glory forever, Amen! The Word of the LORD which forms a portion for our sermon text this morning comes to us from Ephesians chapter 4, starting at verse 11:

He himself gave the apostles, as well as the prophets, as well as the evangelists, as well as the pastors and teachers, 12 for the purpose of training the saints for the work of serving, in order to build up the body of Christ. 13 This is to continue until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, resulting in a mature man with a stature reaching to the measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 The goal is that we would no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, when people use tricks and invent clever ways to lead us astray. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we would in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. 16 From him the whole body, being joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows in accordance with Christ's activity when he measured out each individual part. He causes the growth of the body so that it builds itself up in love.

The Church: Given to Build, Built to Give

- I. Jesus gave talented servants to build it
- II. The Spirit is given to hold it together
- III. It grows and functions in love

This is the Word of The LORD!!! ~~The congregation may be seated...~~

Mercy, Grace, and Peace ARE YOURS from your God and Father and from your Savior from sin, Jesus Christ. Dear fellow Redeemed

These are some of the phrases that Paul wrote that we just read: **unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son, mature, speaking the truth in love, growth of the body so that it builds itself up in love.** Do those phrases describe what is going on today?

I think that if you asked someone on the street "what words currently describe the world today?" they would probably answer: isolation, distancing, injustice, unrest, violence. How come the words Paul is using here are so different from words that describe the world today?

There is a simple answer to that question: Paul is describing something that is not of this world. Paul is here describing the work of the Holy Christian Church.

Yes, that church is made up of believers who are in the world, yet the church has been instructed by its founder to be different from the world. Jesus said in **John 15:19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."**

The Holy Christian Church has one foot in this world and one foot in Heaven. We are held to a higher standard because we have been called to be Christ's representatives here on earth. This is the blessing that Jesus' Ascension gives us, as we discussed last Sunday. He is gone, but we are still here and are blessed to be able to carry out His work and His word in our communities.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. This is the day when we recount how the LORD did what He promised, namely sending the Holy Spirit upon the disciples in Jerusalem for the purpose of spreading His Gospel to all corners of the world. It is also the day when we see that we too are a part of the same ministry as those men were. We too are called to the same mission, made to be a part of the very same ministry. We too are cogs in the same machine that they were, built into the kingdom of heaven for the mission of saving souls.

We are all aware of that mission. But sometimes, it is very easy to lose focus on it. Because of the nature of the Church and because we remain in the world, it can be easy to focus on only the physical things that are in this world. That is why it is good to go back to the beginning, see how and why it started in the first place, and take our next steps informed by the first. Today we will see that being part of Christ's church means that we were given to build, and built to give! LORD, SANCTIFY US BY YOUR TRUTH, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH, AMEN!!!

He himself gave the apostles, as well as the prophets, as well as the evangelists, as well as the pastors and teachers, 12 for the purpose of training the saints for the work of serving, in order to build up the body of Christ.

The day of Pentecost was the culmination of Jesus' act of giving the apostles. Yes, He had called them much earlier in their respective lives to accomplish this purpose. But during that time from when they were first called to when they had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they had received very important on-the-job-training. They would learn from Him, ask Him questions about the kingdom, and see His Word work in real-time. They saw the power His Word possessed. They saw His Word accomplish miracles that they couldn't explain. Finally, they saw the Word fulfilled when He was crucified, resurrected, and ascended.

Once Pentecost takes place, the training wheels finally come off. There was a rushing wind that filled the house they were in, and tongues of fire sat on

each Apostle's head as they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They then spoke in tongues much to the astonishment of those who witnessed this. Peter then stood up to describe what was going on, and he quoted them our Old Testament reading for today. He concludes: **I will show wonders in heaven above And signs in the earth beneath: Blood and fire and vapor of smoke. 20 The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. 21 And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.'** (Act 2:19-21 NKJ)

There was initial confusion over how these men were able to speak in foreign tongues. They were all from Galilee. How were they able to then converse in languages from all over the earth? Some dismissed this outpouring of spiritual gifts as nothing more than babbling, drunk men spouting off, and nothing more. But it was much more than that.

There is a similar argument that is still used today. How could people like Peter, James, and John write the Bible? Weren't they simple fishermen who had no educational training? Such arguments fail to understand what God is capable of giving.

Not only could God accomplish great things through meager men, but that is also how He operates all the time! This is how the kingdom is spread. God sends people to tell other people about Jesus. They are converted and do the same. The Apostles started it, and so God has continued His Church.

It is good to remember the origins of the Church. But what is the origin of your faith? How did you come to faith? Who brought you the true Word of God first? For me, it was my parents and perhaps you too. Or maybe it was a grandparent, or a friend, or even a spouse. You now have an opportunity to do the same with others, to give what you have been given.

The purpose of the Apostles and others is given here: **for the purpose of training the saints for the work of serving, in order to build up the body of Christ.**

This is another interesting concept that Paul brings up. Not only are we part of the ministry of bringing Jesus Christ into the lives of others, but we are also built into His body as well! Not only are we built into the body of Jesus Himself, which is a tremendous gift, but we have also been trained for the work of serving!

3 Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. 4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (Phi 2:3-4 NKJ)

How does such an enterprise continue to exist? An institution that is reliant on sinners serving other sinners? Certainly, there will be flaws in it. But something, rather someone, holds it all together. The Holy Spirit!

The Holy Spirit is not mentioned specifically in this text. You might think that strange on account that it is Pentecost Sunday. But I think it's appropriate. The Holy Spirit, although He is not mentioned, is very much at work in the things that Paul is talking about here. He is the unseen force at work all throughout the Church. He ties the whole Church together and is the only reason it doesn't fall apart at every chance it gets...

I don't know about you, but one of the things I miss the most is sports. Since this pandemic started, we have missed several sporting events. March madness was canceled, so was the Masters. The NBA and the NHL would both be in the process of wrapping up their postseasons. It seems like a small thing to mourn today, but I think we could all use sports right about now.

But the most regrettable loss is perhaps the season of baseball. Our national pastime has not begun yet. Baseball is unique among those other sports I mentioned. It is a team sport in the truest sense. Basketball is driven by its star players. Golf is a sport of one. Hockey is driven by its lines and shut down goalies. But baseball is different.

One great player doesn't mean a whole lot in baseball. It takes 9 different people to field a team. They need to play together in order to have success.

Even if you possess the most dominant hitter of all time on your team, it does not mean you will win. You need people in front of him to drive in. You need people behind him to be able to drive him in. If you only fielded 8 players, any team worth their salt would be able to drastically take advantage of them. Can you imagine a team taking the field without a shortstop? They would be a sieve! The best teams work together, complimenting each other, driven by the exact same goal, to put more runs on the board.

The same is true about the Church. Everyone has an important function. From the missionary in the foreign field to the parish pastor. From the president of the congregation to the small child in Sunday school. From the usher to the mom managing her children in the pew. We all work together to be reminded that our sins are forgiven by Jesus and to give that same gift of forgiveness to others.

If the church is like a baseball team, then the Holy Spirit is its manager. You don't notice them on the field (unless there is a dispute with an umpire) but they are vital. They are the ones steering the ship. They are the ones who determine the unseen particulars. Who bats where. Who is best served in the lineup? Who plays what spot? The manager seems unimportant, but they are the one who gets everyone on the same page and leads the team where it needs to go.

The goal of the church is mentioned here by Paul, but first let's start with what the goal should not be: **14 The goal is that we would no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, when people use tricks and invent clever ways to lead us astray.**

Whenever there is a group of people acting together, it can be easy for them to lose their way. After all, you have many different sinful and flawed people with different ideas about what should be done. When it comes to businesses or team sports, different ideas can be a good thing. But not when it comes to the church. This is not to say that there is no room for different opinions, but rather there is no room for different teachings. Paul writes in another letter that the Church should be teaching and saying the

same thing! **1 Co 1:10** Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

When it comes to the Church, the body of Christ, it cannot move in different directions at the same time. It needs to be on the same page. The only way that a group of people can be wholly united is by the Holy Spirit. He is the one who guards us against false teaching. He is the one who keeps us united in the truth of God's Word. Without Him, the church would be nothing more than a children's soccer team, driven to and fro by wherever the ball happens to be at the present moment. But with the Holy Spirit at the helm, we are a professional team that sees the bigger picture.

What is that big picture goal that the Spirit would drive the church to? **13 This is to continue until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, resulting in a mature man with a stature reaching to the measure of the fullness of Christ.**

This is the end goal of the church. To lead us to full maturity and knowledge of Jesus. Jesus is the measuring stick. There is no way for us to get there on our own. We can never measure up to this. But that is the beauty of TEAM SPORTS! It doesn't just depend on one player's strengths, rather it takes the strengths of many and pools them into one! The unit of the church has but one goal. To save sinners. It is built by God out of sinners. It in turn turns them into saints who have been redeemed by Christ. They then in turn tell others about salvation available for them. The only way a group of sinful people can function together is for the Holy Spirit to hold them all together!

Jesus gives the Church talented servants to build it up, and the Holy Spirit ties the church together in unity, knowledge, and faith. So what does that united serving body do? It grows and it functions in love!

15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we would in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head.

16 From him the whole body, being joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows in accordance with Christ's activity when he measured out each individual part. He causes the growth of the body so that it builds itself up in love.

What is the best way to stay strong? You have to build up the body! This is true when it comes to weight lifting. The only way to get stronger is to continue to work out your body. It doesn't feel good to work out, but it is how you stay in shape. The saying that always jumps to my mind when it comes to this subject is: Pain is gain!

This is also true when it comes to diseases. One of the things that we have been told about the recent pandemic is that we have to get to a point of herd immunity before we can be safe. That is to say, enough people have to get the disease and develop an immunity to it before we can be safe from it. That is what vaccines are as well. A vaccine is a small dose of the disease that the body can handle and get used to so that it grows its defenses and is able to withstand further exposure.

The growth of the Church happens in the same way. Paul commonly refers to the Church as a body, as he does here. He also states in first Corinthians: **11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. 12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. (1Co 12:11-12 NKJ)**

Since Christ is our head, the only way we can grow is through Him. The body is not going to function properly without contact from the head. People can stay alive without brain activity, but it's not much of a life. They have to be kept alive by life support.

The human race has been kept alive on life support for a long time. This is what time of grace is. God extends all a time of grace when they can come to a knowledge of Him. But many like it just the way it is. They think they do not need a God, and they refuse to come out of their vegetative state of sin. But they will not be able to grow without first being a part of the

body of Christ. We need the head before we the member can be able to do anything at all. Cut off that contact and eventually the life support runs out.

And we are no different. The book of Ephesians is all about acknowledging the past but looking forward to the future. Many people are familiar with chapter 2, which has some of the greatest gems of hope and promise in them. But how does that chapter begin? **And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. (Eph 2:1-3 NKJ)**

We too were dead. We might have been living, at least going through the motions of life. But life without Jesus is no life at all. The only way we can grow, let alone live, is through Him!

This is the glorious calling to which we have been called. We have been saved by grace. It is only by the free gift of God's grace through the work of Jesus that we have been saved and pardoned from our sins. The only way we know this is by faith, giving to us by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. Without this, we would die in our atrophy of sin. But He has made us alive, and now we function as the body of Christ!

There is a lot that is unloving that is going on around us. I'm sure I am not breaking any news here. No doubt you have seen the recent images of civil unrest recently. It reminds us that we live in a sinful world where sinful things continue to happen. Loss of life, loss of property, the collective loss of our minds!

This also serves as an example as to why the Church is so important. It continues to shine hope in a hopeless world. It continues to extend that saving olive branch to sinners who are dead in their trespasses and sins.

And we would know! It takes one to know one, so they say. We know firsthand how effective the saving power of Christ is because He has saved us! We were

dead on life support. But we have now been made alive! We now function the way that a body should. We don't do this because we are so strong, but rather because He has made us be strong. We have been given a new life, and have been built into His body which is life. Now we, in turn, can give that same opportunity to others. As Peter concluded on Pentecost, so we too confess: **And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved.'**

Isolation, distancing, injustice, unrest, violence. Those are terms that describe the world in which we live in. But the beauty of being part of God's Holy Christian Church is that we are also outside of the world! Where there was once isolation and distancing, now there is unity in Christ. Where there were injustice and unrest, now there is the grace of God given to us through faith by the Holy Spirit. Where there was only violence and hatred, now there is only the peace that surpasses all understanding. Jesus endured true injustice and violence when He went to the cross to pay for our sins. Because He did so, we have been built into His body, have been tied together in that body by the work of the Holy Spirit, and we grow in the knowledge of salvation. This will continue until we reach full maturation with Him in heaven. There we will have full contact with our God and LORD forever. All praise and thanks be to Jesus Christ who paid for our sins, and to the Holy Spirit who gives us the knowledge of that forgiveness. AMEN!!!