

The Grand Scheme of Things

Ephesians 1:1-10, 22-23

Today we begin a series on Paul's letter to the Ephesians titled 'Growing Together.' Why Ephesians? Check out the quote on the front of your bulletin.

"We immerse ourselves in Ephesians to acquire a clean, uncluttered imagination of the ways and means by which the Holy Spirit forms *church* out of just such lives as ours. This is the holy soil in which we have been planted, the conditions that make it possible for us to grow up in Christ, to become mature, 'healthy in God, robust in love'"

That's from Eugene Peterson, and it sums up as well as anything why we chose this letter for the autumn series of messages.

Last week I told the story of those 33 miners stuck in a hole in Chile. If you haven't heard about it, the men were hit by a cave-in and trapped underground. They survived in a shelter for 17 days before anyone even figured out where they were, and now they've been down there more than a month. The problem is that they're 2,300 feet underground—that's more than half a mile. They're drilling new holes to reach them, but it looks like they won't be rescued until late-November.

But the fascinating part of this story describes what the miners have been doing down there. Chile has a long history of mining—for gold and copper and nitrate and coal. It has a long tradition of mining, but not necessarily of mining safety.

When the miners were located they'd already organized themselves into teams—they have regular rations, they sleep and exercise and keep watch over each other in shifts. Most of this isn't part of their health and safety procedures. Most of this is handed down informally from grandfather to father to son—they've gone through so many tragic mining events that they've learned how to be ready—how to take care of each other and *live*.

That's how we want to be here in this church.

What we learn from Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a lot like what we can learn from those miners in Chile. Their skill and commitment, their willingness to stay together and trust each other—none of that happened by accident. It worked because they studied and remembered and practiced what to do when disasters strike. When that mine caved in no one had to tell them that they needed to look out for one another—to take care of each other. They'd been getting ready all along.

That's what we're going to do.

Don't worry—we're not going to turn our worship hour into a disaster preparedness class or some kind of first aid training. Not exactly.

What we're going to do over the next 10 weeks is be honest about life and faith and the world, and we're going to see how this important book of the Bible helps us become more a more mature church—a church family that's ready for anything.

Because we know that hard things are going to happen even as we grow in our lives as disciples. If we're honest with each other we'll admit that life doesn't always go the way we planned—accidents happen, wounds happen, disasters can strike. You don't have to be pessimistic to say that—you just have to be awake. Too often church families are safe places only when things are going well. When a loss or a struggle interrupts our lives we can feel like the church is the last place we want to be.

I want that to change.

We also know that we struggle with believing that we can trust God at his word. Everyone has struggles with faith—seriously, we'd be crazy not to wonder sometimes if this is all true. The problem isn't doubt. The problem is that sometimes the church is the last place we want to share the doubts that we have, the ones that keep us from believing and worshipping and serving freely and joyfully.

I want that to change, too.

And finally, we wonder where being a follower of Jesus fits in this crazy world. On the one hand we read about the God Delusion, and on the other tens of thousands of faithful Catholics are lining the streets to see the Pope. On the one hand Mother Teresa sets a standard that none of us will ever reach, and then a minister in Florida makes us embarrassed to call ourselves Christian. Where do we fit as people who want to be disciples of Jesus Christ? Too often churches forget that part of our job is to help people express and share and live their faith beyond the walls of this place—in the other 167 hours of the week.

I want to take that part of the church's job more seriously.

Ephesians is going to provide road map for us as we grow individually and as a church family. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus has a lot to say about life and faith and how to live in a world that doesn't always understand who we are. Listen to how this letter starts.

Our text this morning is Ephesians 1:1-10.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

That's a powerful and complicated statement about the grand scheme of things—the unseen reality of being an everyday follower of Christ. It's an amazing hymn of who Christ is, what God did through him, and who we are because of it. Listen to how another translator brought it into English:

“How blessed is God and what a blessing he is! He's the father of our master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down the earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love...Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments...And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making...It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we're living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he's working out in everything and everyone.”

Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus to encourage them and remind them not to forget their first love. The letter is unique in that it's the only one of Paul's letters to churches that doesn't address some serious problem. It's not that the Ephesians had it all together—Paul is just writing one of his theological letters to a church that he liked.

In the end what we find in this passage and in the rest of Ephesians, is that the church somehow represents and gives shape to the resurrected Jesus. The one we celebrate on Easter Sunday is the one we represent in our lives and in this place every day, every week. In the words of Eugene Peterson, we gather as the church to ‘practice the resurrection’ in our lives and worship and service. He writes:

“Church is an appointed gathering of named people in a world in which death gets all the biggest headlines: death of nations, death of civilization, death of marriage, death of careers, obituaries without end. Death by war, death by murder, death by accident, death by starvation...The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection life, life out of death, life that trumps death, life that is the last word—Jesus life.”

Part of how we prepare ourselves and each other for whatever life throws at us is to remember that we are a community that is built on a resurrected Messiah. The engine of the church is the belief that this life isn’t all there is, and that through the resurrection of Jesus, death isn’t the last word. Reminding ourselves and each other that we’re resurrection people, even when it’s hard to grasp or believe, is how we prepare for the hard times that might come our way.

There really can’t be any doubt that Ephesians is written to support the church, or at least gathered groups of believers. The word ‘us’ shows up a half-dozen times just in the 8 verses after the opening greeting.

God blessed us, he chose us, he predestined us, he gave us grace—no, wait a minute, he lavished us with grace, and he made Christ known...to us.

If ‘us’ is the church, then what is it about us that makes us ready to help, ready to love and care and serve in Christ’s name? What is it about us that makes us a Christian community that can grow into a mature experience of life and faith and interaction with the world?

Listen to verses 22 and 23 of the same chapter.

“And God placed all things under his 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.”

Three things to take away from this passage as we begin our journey through Ephesians.

Christ is the head of the church. That’s not a swipe at the Pope’s visit to London—any good Pope would confess the exact same thing. Christ is the head, the leader, the source of

everything true and good and loving that comes out of the church. To forget that is to forget who we are and whose we are, and that's never a good thing.

The church represents Christ's fullness to the world. No one of us can do it alone, but as a community of faithful disciples learning how to share our gifts with others we become the body of Christ here, showing what he's like to a world that needs to know.

And finally, what defines us as church isn't what we do, it's what Christ does in us and through us.

This past week a seismologist said that London was overdue for a serious earthquake. They haven't had a real shaker here since 1580, and the fault line in the Dover Straits has been quietly building up tension for centuries.

The talk of earthquakes took me back to growing up in Southern California, and how much time was spent in school learning how to react when we felt the earth start to shake. We knew how to get under our desks, how to stand where buildings were the strongest, and eventually even how to apply some basic first aid. Then we'd go back to our normal lessons and get on with the task of learning the rest of what we needed to know.

Our walk through Ephesians is going to be a bit like that. We want to be a church, a community of believers, a family that knows how to respond in faith to whatever gets thrown our way. That's how we'll make a real and lasting impact on the world God made—the world God loves.

Listen to how those last two verses are translated in *The Message*:

"At the center of everything Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which he speaks and acts, and by which he fills everything with his presence."

My prayer for us as we make our way through the letter to the Ephesians is that we'll grow more and more into a church like that. One that takes its place, serving from the center of things—a church that Jesus Christ himself will speak through, and will act through. Make that your prayer, too.