

Part 1: It’s about God

I. Intro

A. Today we have begun an extended journey through the book of Ephesians

1. On this journey we’re exploring the Q “*What does it mean to be church?*”
2. Series theme is “Building the body back up” ... now, building something back up, of course, implies that it’s broken or torn down

B. This summer we felt some relief thru our outdoor worship, but for 18 months, to some degree or other, **we as the body of Christ at Waterford MC have felt fragmented ... dispersed**

1. When we experience such isolation or separation, it’s hard to feel like we’re one church body
 - a) So as pastors, we hoped that worshiping again under a roof and with a new pastor, we would begin to feel like this body is being built back up
 - (1) But rebuilding is NOT a linear process that moves straight from “pandemic life” to “life after pandemic”
 - (2) Even as we’re doing this rebuilding, we acknowledge that there is still some scatteredness we feel ... some ongoing fragmentation
 - b) By entering this fall focusing on the purpose and place of the church within God’s designs for the world, this worship series is not going to be a guide for building the church back up just “as it used to be”
2. In fact we are imagining neither rebuilding back to the church as we knew it in February of 2020 ... NOR a new and unrecognizable Waterford church, totally rebuilt from the ground up

II. Instead this fall’s worship series aims to encourage us ... and challenge us ... and inspire us **to rebuild the church more as God desires it to be,**

A. How do we know what God desires for the church?

1. We’ve been given in the book of Ephesians a beautiful and sometimes provocative picture of exactly that
2. A lot of the basis for this series is inspired by an excellent book about Ephesians, called Practice Resurrection by pastor and author Eugene Peterson

B. In his book, Peterson uses a phrase that I really like, to describe this picture of the church that we find in Ephesians: **“The church we never see”**

Ephesians is a revelation of the church we never see. It shows us the healthy soil and root system of all the operations of [God] out of which the church that we do see grows.

(Eugene H Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: a conversation about growing up in Christ*, Eerdmans ©2010, p. 14)

1. What Peterson means by that is drawn out better in this description of what the author is doing in writing this general letter:

Paul ... writes out ... what makes church church. And what comes clear is that church is not what we do; it is what God does, although we participate in it.

1. I realize that to some of you that sounds impossible as a way to describe an institution that has a terrible history of destroying individuals and entire cultures, and poisoning God’s creation, all in the name of God,

a) To the justified cynics among us, I appreciate the nuance Peterson puts on what the church is, and how Ephesians describes the church. He writes:

... none of us ever sees the church whole and complete. We have access only to something partial, sometimes distorted, always incomplete.

b) He elaborates a bit more on the purpose of this book of the Bible:

We have the Ephesian letter before us so that even though we are surrounded with immature and deficient and incomplete churches, we can acquire a feel for what maturity is, what growing up in Christ consists of.

(Peterson, p. 17)

2. With this framework for understanding church through the book of Ephesians, you might have been surprised how in the 1st Scripture reading, the opening of the letter, there was no mention of church!

C. As we start digging into Ephesians, keep in mind that Ephesians basically is a letter written in 2 equal parts:

1. 1st 3 chapters are basically theological teachings, describing who God is and naming what God in Christ has done for us
2. Chapters 4-6 are ethical instructions or urgings for how God’s people are to live out our calling from this grand cosmic vision
3. So in this series the 1st 4 Sundays are grounding us in God’s great saving work, & the last 4 Sundays are fleshing out how we the church grow up into Christ in a world opposed to the way of Christ.

III. If I were to make a high-level summary of the message of 1st chapter of Ephesians, I would do it in these 3 statements:

A. It’s about God

1. Almost 20 years ago, many churches were studying Pastor Rick Warren’s best-selling book “The Purpose-Driven Life”

a) The very 1st of that opening chapter were, “It’s not about you,” meaning we were made by God FOR God, & not for ourselves

b) To expand these words to apply to the church rather than just to individual Xians, I’d say that the whole 1st half of Ephesians is essentially

saying, “It’s not about us. It’s about God.” (repeat)

2. Notice how right after the greeting at the very beginning, Paul doesn’t start writing about the church – rather it all starts w/ who God is & what God has done for us thru Jesus Christ, choosing us before the foundation of the world, to be a holy and blameless people!

B. A 2nd summary of Ephesians 1: The church’s identity is centered in blessings and worship

1. The section from v. 3-14 starts with “blessed” and ends w/ “glory” ... above all else, God’s nature is to bless, & to be blessed
 - a) For us to truly be who we are meant to be as God’s people, worship is our most essential activity
 - b) Don’t forget the setting where those ancient churches in Ephesus & other cities 1st heard this circle letter read to them: it was while they were gathered in worship together!
2. Worship reminds us that “it’s not about us ... it’s about God”

C. God’s vision is way bigger than our ability to grasp it!

1. When you and I think of effective leaders who don’t get bogged down in details, we say these people can “see the big picture”
 - a) Right here in Ephesians 1, we have “the big picture of all big pictures”
 - b) *God is gathering up all things in heaven & on earth, in Christ Jesus!*
2. To convey this big picture, Paul uses language that’s over the top – exuberant, repetitious, extravagant language
 - a) I remember that in high school English, they drummed it into our heads not to use run-on sentences, but to divide separate thoughts into separate sentences
 - (1) Believe it or not, vv. 3-14 of Ephesians 1, in its original Greek is one incredibly long sentence: 201 words in all! Talk about the mother of all run-on sentences!
 - (2) Imagine how breathless you’d be if you tried to read that one long sentence out loud to an audience!
 - b) Maybe this is Paul’s way of proclaiming that the length to which God would go to express this immense love to his chosen people ... cannot be limited by human language!

D. To sum this all up for now, the 1st part of Ephesians passionately describes an amazingly grand God, & the chosen people who are God’s partners in this grand work

IV. Conclusion: For a different angle looking into Ephesians chapter 1, I’ll come back a little later in the service ...

Part 2: Five Gifts

V. Intro: So Ephesians started out with a grand “big picture” vision of how God has blessed us in Jesus Christ

A. As I said earlier, a major theme Paul wants these listening churches to remember is “It’s about God”

1. The section we first heard makes mention of believers, but only God is the actor
2. And chapter 1 continues in that vein in the last 4 verses of what we just heard, which describe exactly how God’s great power was put to work in Christ Jesus:
 - a) namely in raising Jesus from the dead;
 - b) in seating him at God’s right hand;
 - c) in putting all things under his feet;
 - d) and making him head over all things for the church

B. But sandwiched in between these 2 cosmic descriptions of God’s blessings and power ... we find this section of v. 15-19

1. The way the letter reads changes significantly, as Paul directly commends his listeners for their faith and love toward all the saints.
 - a) In these 5 verses, the focus shifts away from praising God or naming what God has done.
 - b) Instead it becomes a prayer to God for the Ephesian church (& the other churches who also heard this)
2. Now things suddenly get personal in this section, which is why we heard this reading separately:
 - a) For the first time in this letter, we hear the word “I” ...
 - (1) Up to now Paul has mentioned “we” and “us”, as God’s chosen people, but primarily as the receivers of God’s blessings and gifts
 - (2) But here Paul is the actor: *I have heard of your faith ... I don’t cease to give thanks ... I remember you in my prayers*
 - b) Here we get a glimpse into Paul’s own heart, into how he feels toward his listeners. Specifically ... We get to hear Paul’s holy desires for his listeners

VI. After describing a God of blessing and power, in v. 17-19 Paul names gifts that he prays God will give them. Here they are:

A. First a spirit of wisdom & revelation.

1. Notice that he tacks on the phrase “as you come to know him”

2. This wish is in the context of discipleship ... of Jesus followers who keep getting to know God better

B. 2nd gift is an enlightened heart

1. He actually says “the eyes of your heart”
2. As sometimes happens in Ephesians, phrases are heaped upon each other to emphasize their importance, so this is largely repeating the first wish for wisdom & revelation

C. The last 3 gifts follow in this same pattern of finding alternate ways to express similar things. **The last 3 gifts in Paul’s prayer for the church are various forms of knowledge:**

1. Knowledge of hope

- a) This isn’t referring to just hope in general. It’s “the hope to which God has called you”
- b) What is that hope ... that hope to which God calls us?
- c) Here are several things we can point to, named a few verses earlier in chapter 1
 - (1) The hope of our calling could be how God chose us in Christ to be holy & blameless before him in love (v4)
 - (2) A clear hope of our calling could also be redemption through the blood of Christ, which brings us forgiveness of our sins (v7)
 - (3) Then we recall what it says in v12: “we who were the first to set our hope on Christ” ...
 - (a) And what specifically is the calling for those who first set their hope on Christ?
 - (b) The call is to “live for the praise of his glory”

2. 4th gift: Knowledge of a rich inheritance

- a) An inheritance here is what we God’s sons and daughters have coming to us, as we participate in God’s kingdom
- b) This is to remind us of the glorious things God has in store for us. That knowledge can help us live now, in light of that future

3. 5th gift: Knowledge of immeasurable power

- a) It says literally, the “immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe”.
- b) Here, as elsewhere in Ephesians, the use of intensified words & superlatives is telling us that God’s power defies description. It’s too great for that!

D. These 5 gifts are Paul’s earnest prayer for the church to receive

1. But Paul praying for them here is not how we sometimes pray for things: desperately hoping for something we doubt will happen.
2. I think Paul fully expects God WILL give these gifts to the church!

VII. In your bulletins today there’s an insert that’s blank except for the large words “The church is ...”

A. There are so many ways that sentence can be completed, and in fact we are inviting you for the next 2 months to do just that:

1. Write or draw or doodle how you would fill in that blank, and return the papers to a basket we’ll have outside the church office
2. Every week in this series more of these papers will be available in the back of the sanctuary. You’re welcome to do more than one!
3. And if you’re worshipping with us through livestream, we invite you to also participate by texting or emailing in your own fill-in-the-blank, to one of us pastors, or to office@waterfordchurch.org
4. We plan to make a mosaic or collage from those submitted, to give us a diverse multifaceted picture of what the church is

B. To get your thinking started, let me give you a few samples, first from some Xian authors, and then from me:

1. Here is a definition of the church from Mennonite Bible scholar Tom Yoder Neufeld:

The church, or better “Christ-in-his-church”, is God’s means of reclaiming the whole world.
(Yoder Neufeld, p19)

2. Here’s a different one, from the same Eugene Peterson I quoted earlier. Just like his Bible paraphrase The Message, I like it for its honesty and freshness:

[Church is ...] a congregation of embarrassingly ordinary people in and through whom God chooses to be present to the world.
(Peterson, p28)

3. And now, without at all putting myself on a par with these brilliant authors, here are a few of the ways I would fill in the blank:

- a) *God’s community living “to the praise of His glory”*
- b) *Heir of God’s glory ... Trustee of God’s power*
- c) *God’s calling to hope, enfleshed and lived out*

VIII. Conclusion: So now what about you, Waterford brothers and sisters?

A. In light of God’s grand work in Christ Jesus, and of God’s gifts to the church, **how will you complete “The church is ...”?**

B. Let us think, pray, and have fun with this little exercise

C. Now I will close this time with the last 2 verses we heard today, again w/ the same honesty and freshness from The Message

At the center of all this, 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, by which he fills everything with his presence.