

Ephesians 4:9-16

“In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is He who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. And His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.”

I'm A River How About You?

I've read about a museum in Dearborn Michigan; where there is a complete 'Allegheny' steam locomotive. Beside this massive machine, there is a sign showing the boiler size, its max pressure, the number of wheels, it's max horsepower, length, weight and so on. The bottom line indicates that some 90 % of the power generated was used to move the locomotive, and the remaining power left to pull the load. When you think about it many churches are like that. It takes so much energy keeping the people within the church comfortable, happy, and feeling "blessed", that there's not much energy left to reach out to others.

Charles Dickens began his book 'A Tale of Two Cities' with these words: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Could that be said about the church? You certainly don't have to look far to see this within the church. The church is constantly seduced by power, pride, and popularity. Fact, the majority of church -goers today do not tithe 10%, or even 5%. We idolize sports and their athletes, television and film and those in them, music and the musicians and/or singers, just to name a few. We tend to cling to our traditions out of fear and/or lack of faith.

We aren't really indifferent to people's needs; we too often cater to please ourselves first and foremost. We are also quick to complain and criticize everything and anything we disagree with. Today many with-in the church lack passion and/or compassion. We all want to be blessed, but often hesitant to be a blessing to others.

But wait, some are very faithful. Some tithe, above and beyond what is expected not only with their monies but with their time. The church in places around the world takes the Great Commandment and the Great Commission very seriously. That is, love God totally, love your neighbor as yourself, and go make followers of Christ. Some churches pray as if everything really depended on God. Some churches are even obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit in all things.

You see, the church is much bigger than what we see around us. The Bible says in Revelation 21:2 the church is "*prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,*" a radiant bride, preparing to meet her Lord. Sometimes she is less than sparkling, but she is still the church. And guess what, we are all part of it. Now ask yourself, do you add to, or subtract from the church's radiance?

Here is a harder question ... if everybody in this church alone gave like you; attended like you; prayed like you; served like you; worshipped like you; or complained like you, what would this place be like?

This morning, we are looking at the church as we continue in our series through the Apostles' Creed. We read just stated: "*I believe in the church.*" Do we? Do you believe in the church? Is the church worth believing in? We just read what God says about the church. Paul painted a picture of what the church is supposed to be in Ephesians 4. The question is, are we helping the church or hindering this picture from becoming reality? Ephesians 4:12-16 tells us what we are to be doing as the church "*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head,*

into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (leave verses up)

This passage gives us an idea of what God wants the church to do and be. We are told in verse 11 that the Holy Spirit gave special abilities and gifts to everyone, so that, we would all serve God in our own ways. That's God's plan: that we all serve Him, not just show up for Him. Verse 13 tells us that He wants us to be unified and mature in Him.

Verse 15 tells us that God wants us to grow up to be like Him. And verse 16 tells us that we are all joined to each other. We are to hold each other up. We are to grow and we are to build each other up. Ephesians 4:29 says *"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."* Is that what our words do? Do our words build people up or tear them down?

1 Thessalonians 5:11 *"Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."* This only happens when each of us allows the Holy Spirit to guide us. Makes me think that perhaps coming to

church really isn't about me. How about you? If this is true then when someone is not here the rest of us are denied a blessing.

Let's go back to the first part of our chapter in verses 1-3, "*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" Paul is telling us to live a life worthy of what God has called us to. That is, be who you really are created to be. God called all of us to be humble and gentle; do we do that? God has called us to be patient and kind; do we do that? God has called us to be unified and not to stir up trouble; do we do that? Based on what we say we believe then we should be who God created and called us to be!

You see, God used different images to portray different jobs that the church is to do. And folks, if it's the church's job, who is the church? Is it this building? Is it a bunch of folks down the road? Is it the churches with just a few hundred in attendance, even maybe those with a few thousand? Is it the people overseas? No, it's us! We are the church. If you call Jesus Lord, if you believe He has forgiven you, then you are the church. So what

God says about the church, He says about you. What He says to the church, He says to you. God's purposes for the church are God's purposes for you and your life. And God's description of the church is His description of you.

So what does God call the church to be and do? What? He calls the church to be a **RIVER**. Ah! What do I mean when I say God calls us to be a **RIVER**? We are all called to **Reflect God's love to others; Increase in the knowledge and image of Christ; Value Christ highly thru worship of Him; Encourage others thru relationships; and Reach out to others thru service**. Thus we are called to be a **RIVER**.

R - Reflect God's love to others. This comes from the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19-20 "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" Jesus told us to bring lost people to Him. He told us to help others find the forgiveness and love that flow from the heartbeat of God. He told us to march like an army, determined and strong, making a difference in our world, bringing light

into the darkness. He told us in Ephesians 6:11 *“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.”* He told us to use the weapon of prayer, and the weapon of the Word, the Bible. And yet, so many of us are on the sidelines, avoiding non-Christians as much as possible, afraid of getting dirty. Folks, we are not called to live in this fortress, we are called to go where people are. These are marching orders for the church, for you and me. What is just one way for you to show love to someone today? A phone call, a visit, an errand, a kind word? Will you be who God called you to be?

■ - Increase in the knowledge and image of Christ. This also comes from the Great Commission in Matthew 28, when Christ told us to teach new Christians to obey Him. It's not enough to be saved. God calls us on a journey of becoming more like Him. To grow and mature is God's plan for us. We expose ourselves to preaching and teaching and personal study. That's like sticking dynamite into a rock. Then God lights the fuse, making the truth come alive, and boom our lives are changed. God calls us to be a flock, a group of sheep needing a leader to guide us to where we should be.

Are you following God? Are you letting Him lead you? Or are you holding out on some issue? Let Him teach you, show you, guide you, lead you.

V - Value Christ highly thru worship. This describes how we respect and honor Him, how much He means to us. Jesus told us in the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:37-38 "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment.*" Doing this is putting God first with our time, talents and treasures. God calls us the Bride of Christ, getting ready to meet our greatest love, completely faithful to Him for who He is and what He's done for us. Is He your first love? Are you completely committed to Him and Him only? Or is your worship about you?

E - Encourage others thru relationships. Jesus told us to baptize the disciples we make. This refers to helping them find their place and identity with other Christians. It's about allowing them to become plugged in. It's about helping others to be part of His family, for "family." There are times I'm asked where is so and so; according to what we say when we say we believe in the church that's all our jobs not just mine or a few people.

We are all important. We are to treat other others just as good as we treat our own biological family, because the church bond is made with the blood of the eternal covenant.

R - Reach out to others thru service. Serving others flows from a love for them not out of an obligation. Christ told us to love our neighbors as ourselves. We were each made to serve others, to take part in our community and in our church. That is why we are here. Each part doing their work. Tell me, are you serving Him? Are you open to be in constant ministry, or do you set time aside just specific times to do a ministry, do a service, to this community or church? Perhaps you are part of the reason people have such a hard time believing in the church.

I believe I mentioned this before but bears repeating; a fellow minister's wife in a town Patricia served was diagnosed with some form of cancer. She was the one who brought in a regular paycheck which also provided their benefits. As she went through her treatments she had to use all her sick time and her vacation was about to run out, which meant doing treatments with no money coming in.

My friend pastored a small and not too wealthy congregation. I was called by one of his members and asked if I would talk to Patricia and see if she could help organize a gospel singing, like she had done earlier in the year, but this time it would be to help raise some funds to help this couple out.

Patricia agreed with this woman and she started making plans. I called a member of our church who loved to cook and asked if he could maybe cook hamburgers or hotdogs which he agreed he would do. The next night the man who I called came by and said to me since its cold outside why can't we do chicken stew. I asked if this would be a problem. He said no he had already called a good friend of his to come in and coordinate cooking 3 very large pots of stew.

The next thing I knew we had, besides the chicken stew, hash, baked goods, drinks, etc. Singers and cooks came from everywhere and when the dust settled most of the people in that town and county had come together and if for only one day they became the church.

That day people stopped coming or going to church, and started being the church.” Are you just coming to church, or are you being the church? I do my best to be a river every day how about you?