

I want to welcome everyone (from our Shelby Street Campus, those who might be watching on-line, and) especially anyone who might be worshipping with us for the first time.

On April 15th, the world watched as a fire broke out in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. We saw images of the steeple collapsing, and other damage to this iconic building. And yet while the building burned, people gathered outside, singing and praying to God. You see a building was destroyed ... but "the church" lives on!

Maybe you remember this old nursery rhyme (it has hand motions) ... if you know it say it with me; "Here's the church, and here's the steeple, open the doors ... (and there are the people). If I gave everyone a pen and paper and asked you to draw a picture of a church, many would instinctively draw a building, but we know that "The church" is not a building. It's people. The Creek is blessed with great facilities, and programs, and ministries, but those are where we meet and things we do. They are NOT who we are. We are the church! And this is important because as we continue our series God's Love Changes Everything, our text will show us how God's Love Changes the Church- specifically how we, the church, should relate to one another, serve, and grow together into the image of Jesus for the world!

Now I need to say something to those who are visiting or newer here before we get started. If you're visiting or newer to The Creek, thank you for being here! We sincerely hope you feel welcome and that you experience God's presence as we worship Him together. But it's important to understand that the verses we'll read are addressed to those who've said "yes" to following God, AND "yes" to uniting with a particular body of believers, as a part of God's family. So, if you're exploring The Creek as a possible church family, please pay attention. These verses describe who God is calling us to be, and we hope you'll join us in this journey!

So let's dive in. We're in Ephesians chapter 4, starting with verse 1. As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Now a couple of things to note: First, the Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus while under house arrest in Rome. So, he's literally a prisoner for the Lord when he writes this. Second, this chapter signifies a shift in Paul's letter. The first three chapters contain only one command: remember God's love and how it's changed their identity, status, perspective, access to God, and heart). But the last three chapters are full of commands that ALL point back to answering this question: What does it look like to live a life worthy of the calling you have received?

We mention this often, but it's worth repeating. We are not called to live worthy lives in order to get something from God, we are to live lives worthy of the calling we've ALREADY RECEIVED. We obey God, not to get love and salvation, but in response to His Love and salvation. So in response to God's Love, Paul urges them (military term; general calling troops to battle) to live lives worthy of their calling. And in vs 2-3 Paul begins to tell them how to do this: Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:2-3 Paul here says a life worthy of the calling of God is marked by: God Centered Relationships. That's what verses 2-3 are really about, how we're to relate to each other. And Paul begins with the most foundational of Godly relationship traits – complete humility. Every relationship we have will be impacted by our level of or lack of humility! And we need to spend some time here because

for many of us, myself included, the struggle to live in complete humility is real and this struggle shows up in how we relate to each other.

I read a great article recently on the epidemic of “self-absorption” that’s plaguing our culture. It defined being Self-absorbed: Preoccupied with oneself or one’s own affairs, to the exclusion of others or the outside world. Doctors have now linked Self-Absorption as a major, if not THE dominant factor in: Anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, various addictions, post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorders, and depression.

More than ever, we are afraid of feeling flawed. We feel powerless, unworthy, out of control. We are self-critical. We over analyze conversations and what people think of us. We feel threatened and vulnerable. These insecurities and fears lead us to be consumed with self! The article concludes the following effect of self-absorption ... listen to this: “Our relationships are damaged, sometimes irreparably, by a self-preoccupation that undermines the closeness, or intimacy, that all relationships require if they’re to be nurturing and resilient. Constant self-absorption undermines our capacity for empathy and true understanding of the thoughts, feelings, needs, and desires of others. It’s extremely difficult to clearly appreciate the world that exists outside ourselves when most of the time our focus is directed inwards.” (Psychology Today, “Self Absorption - The Root of All Evil” - Aug 24, 2016)

When we’re young we live by the slogan: It’s ALL about me. We’re hungry, we get fed. We spill something; it gets cleaned up. We fall down; we get picked up. But as we age, we start to have relationships, get jobs, maybe get married, have kids of our own, and we must come to grips with our own humility and choose to move from: It’s ALL about me, to, It’s NOT about me. One word changed, but that one word makes all the difference. So how do we make that move?

Well there’s an often-used definition of humility by Rick Warren: Humility is not thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. And that’s OK, but it’s not grounded in the reality of what Paul’s been building to in Ephesians to this point. Humility is thinking of yourself as God does- Forgiven, free, loved, God’s child, new purpose, new access to Him, new heart... on and on. When we think of ourselves as God does, it changes everything, including our relationships!

LOOK AT VERSE 2- Do you think you’d be gentler with others, if you were secure in God’s Love as your only source of value and self-worth? I think so. Do you think you’d be more patient with people, if you weren’t struggling with your own insecurities, taking your own frustrations out on others, but instead confident in how God REALLY sees you because of Jesus? Would that improve your patience? Of course, it would! Do you think you’d bear with one another in love (put up with difficult people) if you fully understood that how God sees you because of Jesus, is also how God sees them? Absolutely! Thinking of ourselves as God does would transform our relationships for the better!

Look at verse 3: Paul says to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. (guard / preserve). Unity isn’t something believers have to pursue, or manufacture. UNITY ALREADY EXISTS! Paul tells us to make every effort to KEEP unity. Protect it, guard it, keep it safe! In a world where so many things can divide us, God has already UNITED us to Himself, AND to one another, through the cross of Christ! We are already united, and we need to protect that! And the next few verses tell us why. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4-6 We should

protect unity because God is united! God models community and unity, and a life, worthy of His calling, will do the same.

Let's keep reading: Vs 7. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. Skip down to vs. 11: So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. I want to focus our attention on a few phrases here. The first is found in vs 7: Each one of us. Unity doesn't mean uniformity. We are united through Jesus, but "each one of us" has been given specific gifts and abilities vital to a body of believers. Next Paul lists leadership roles in the church, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers and tells us that these leaders equip his people for works of service. I love the meaning of this word, "equip." It's used in other places to describe the setting of a bone or mending a torn fishing net. Now even if you've never broken a bone, you can appreciate the importance of setting a bone back in place so it can heal ... but a hole in a fishing net isn't as familiar. Fisherman would cast nets over the side of the boat, then haul in fish. Holes meant that fish will escape, AND it placed extra strain on the good parts of the net that would lead to other holes.

You see these verses paint a beautiful picture of how a healthy church community functions: God appoints leaders who equip the body (bind, mend, correct, heal, making sure it's healthy) so that EVERYONE CAN SERVE AND GROW! Paul is telling the Ephesian church that a life worthy of the calling they've received is marked by Grace Empowered Service.

Now in 25 years of ministry, I've heard a wide variety of responses to the call to serve: Here's the first response: "I don't want to serve." Paul makes it pretty clear that if you've said "yes" to God, and to a local body of believers, the natural response to God's love, is to serve. Everyone in! We are better and more effective together! Here's the next response I've heard to serving: "I've already done my part." Now there are careers that offer early retirement: (Politicians, government workers, teachers, first responders). But "follower of God, connected to a church family" doesn't fall into that category. And I've had people regularly connected to a church community, say to me, "I served for 10, 15, 20 years. I'm done!"

Now ... I want to be very sensitive to the real need to take a season away to deal with issues at home, personal issues, or to refresh, but friends, we're not done serving till Jesus calls us home. Look again at vs 13: we are to serve until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Do you know when we'll attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ? When we see Him! In response to God's love for us, we serve Him until the day we see Jesus face to face.

And for those who've been at The Creek for a while, we've had a front row seat to a great example of what it means to serve this way. He's going to kill me for using him as an example, but Gary Johnson has been a great example to me of faithful serving! He's served here for 30 years and in ministry for a total 38 years. There's not anyone I know personally, who's worked harder for the Kingdom. If anyone could say, "I've already done my part", it's Gary Johnson. Do you know what Gary's doing today? He's preaching at another church. And when he's done with that, he'll continue to help churches and leaders in churches so that the kingdom of God is built up, and he'll do that till either God calls him home or calls him to do something else for the kingdom.

Church Family; “I’ve already done my part” is not the response of someone who understands God’s love, and it’s not the response of a life worthy of the calling we’ve received.

Here’s another response to serving, and this one sounds pretty good at first glance: “I want to serve in areas I’m passionate about and gifted in.” Typically, here’s how serving is approached in church world. A church helps find what you’re passionate about and gifted in, then finds a place to serve that matches those gifts and passions. That’s not a bad approach, but in my experience it’s incomplete and even potentially damaging. You see, in that approach the emphasis is on my abilities and my passions when the ultimate goal of serving from the text is “so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Do you want to know the response to serving that brings joy to the heart of a Pastor and indicates someone has the heart of God? Here it is: I will use whatever gifts I have, wherever I’m needed, to build up the body!

It’s a subtle but crucial shift in thinking. FROM “What do I want to do? Where do I want to serve? What helps bring me life?” TO “what is God already doing that I can partner in? Where am I needed? How can I help build up the body?” If you are visiting, my prayer is that you find a church where you trust in the leadership, the mission, and the vision; and then you decide to partner with them (in what God is already doing) to build up that particular body of Christ. And if that’s The Creek, we’d be honored to have you join us in this journey.

You know, it’s not surprising in light of the plague of self-absorption in our culture how even our serving, can be driven by, or result in, selfish motives and actions. (IT’S NOT ABOUT ME!) A life worthy of the calling of God is marked by Grace Empowered Service: Trusting in leadership, partnering in what God is already doing, how can I serve? Where do you need me? EVERYONE IN! – It’s exciting to me what God might do if we do that!

Look at what Paul says happens when we live with this mindset: Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Another mark, of a life worthy of the calling we’ve received, is Christ-like Maturity. Three times, in verses 13, 14, and 15 Paul speaks in terms of WE (We all/we will.) This tells us that maturity is collective! We can’t grow in maturity as disciples of Jesus in isolation. “Tom, can’t I just sit at home and watch the message online and grow as a follower of Jesus?” No, you can’t because these verses tell us that maturing requires community! We need to do life with each other practicing God Centered Relationships, serving together for a purpose greater than ourselves, and practicing something that can’t be done in isolation and is what Paul calls the Pathway to maturity: SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE.

Look at that phrase for a bit. On one side of the spectrum there are those who aren’t afraid to say anything to anyone, “I’m going to be me. I’m going to say what I have to say, no matter what.” On the other side, we’ve got “the conflict avoiders at ALL COSTS”. Your blood pressure rises just thinking about having any kind of confrontative conversation. And this pathway to maturity, “speaking the truth in love” has special meaning to me. You see growing up in NY, I learned by example to say what I thought, regardless of how it came out or who it might affect. “Think it, say it!” was the motto. Then I moved to the Midwest, and I quickly learned I couldn’t operate this way. (burned many bridges, stuck foot in

mouth) But instead of simple course correcting, the pendulum swung way to the other side, and I avoided every difficult conversation out of fear and insecurity. Then, about 11 years ago, God led me out of full-time vocational ministry, and through a crazy, set of God ordained circumstances I found myself working in the corporate world in a 100% commission-based sales job. And one day, in Columbus OH, in a room with eight other trainees, I was learning how to have hard conversations with potential clients about their finances so I can best meet their needs. All of a sudden, God began to bring names and faces to my mind of people that I had known from previous years in ministry. Names of people I knew whose marriages were struggling, faces of those who I knew were battling addiction, or who were wandering away from God, and who I NEVER SPOKE THE TRUTH TO IN LOVE out of fear they'd leave the church, or not like me anymore.

Here I was getting trained to have hard conversations in order to make a sale, but I wasn't willing to do that to save a soul! That moment wrecked me and shaped me forever! I flipped my training notebook to the last page that was blank and wrote down the following words: God if you ever let me back to vocational ministry, I will never be afraid to have the hard conversation. That's a lesson to this day I'm learning to live out well, and one I'll never forget!

Leadership Author, Patrick Lencioni wrote this: "Human beings have this crazy desire for self-preservation. The idea of putting themselves at risk for the good of others is not natural and is rarely rewarded in life, at least in ways that most people expect." (Overcoming 5 Dysfunctions of a Team, page 17)

So out of fear and self-preservation, we avoid the hard conversations! And we read verses like Ephesians 4:3 to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" and we use it as our excuse not to speak the truth in love thinking we're doing good! "Hey, I'm keeping peace, right?" But the opposite is true. Avoiding the hard conversation is actually incredibly selfish, it weakens the body, and it allows the individual to continue to wander into danger. Paul said in vs 15, that by speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

So here are three questions you can ask yourself before you have a hard or difficult conversation:

1. Is what I feel led to say actual "truth"? Is it my opinion or feeling, or is it based in scripture?
2. Can I say it in love? Do I need to pray, spend a day cooling off, and pray some more?
3. Does it point them to Jesus? Let off steam? Get something off my chest? Or move them to maturity?)

I've heard it said that a real friend will tell you if you have booger in your nose, if your fly is down, or if you have something stuck in your teeth! I think that's true! But it takes a mature brother or sister in Christ to speak the truth in love, even when it's difficult! AND it takes just as much maturity to RECEIVE the truth in love when confronted! Some of us need to mature in our speaking and some in our humility to receive it! Hard conversations, done in love, will always build the body up, and strengthen and bring unity to the relationship!

Look how this section ends again, vs 16. From him (JESUS) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Jesus leads! We pursue God Centered relationships in complete humility and we grow in love AND UNITY as we ALL do our part. Living this way will CHANGE THE CHURCH - AND IT'S CERTAINLY A LIFE WORTHY OF THE CALLING WE HAVE RECEIVED.

We're going to move into a moment of prayer and reflection, then into communion. In just a moment some questions will come up on the screen that I'll read. Then you'll have a few moments to prayerfully take them to God and ask Him to reveal what He wants you to know and what your next steps should be. We'll do this for three specific sets of questions. Here's the first:

1. God Centered Relationships: Has being self-absorbed damaged your relationships? How specifically? What do you need to allow God to do in you, or remind you of, to change?
2. Grace Empowered Service: If you consider The Creek your church family, are you serving to build up the body? If so, are there any selfish motives? If you're not serving, what's preventing you?
3. Christ-Like Maturity: Is there a conversation you need to have that could propel a relationship forward or point someone to Jesus? Whom have you avoided having the needed conversation with? How can you grow in your ability to receive hard conversations?

Prayer: God, we thank you for your word which is, amazingly, both encouraging and convicting. Thank you that we get to grow, in you, and together in community. We thank you that we can celebrate now in communion, the only hope we have - grace, and forgiveness of our sins through Jesus's death and resurrection. Your love has changed everything for us, and we pray that it would change us together for the better as a church family. May we follow your lead, for your Glory. Amen!