**What is the Church, and Why is it Important?**

Good morning everyone. It is so good to be here. I know I can speak for many of you when I say, my whole life revolves around God, worshipping God, thinking about God, and applying who he is to every area of my life —- and a huge part of that is gathering with God’s people on Sunday morning. I am so happy to be here. I hope you are too.

Most of you know, Becky and I were recently down in Comitancillo, Guatemala for a few weeks. We were invited down there to celebrate the anniversary of the church we are involved with there

This was a really big deal for them, and it should be. It was a big for us as well.

I spoke on the importance of being a church. How it’s the greatest organization in the world. It is more important then government. It is more important then the most important businesses in the world. It’s even more important than the family. What did Jesus say in Matthew 12 vs. 48, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

And so today I want to consider the church a little bit and why it is important? For some of you here who were with me in Sunday School last year, some things might sound familiar. I am not too original. I know a few things and I am sticking to them.

I want you to consider a verse with me for a second. if you could ever have a one verse definition of a church this would be it: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

This in essence is what a church is …

We are a people called by God … you see that “a chosen race” … I spoke to a group of theology students in Guatemala while I was there …. and this is how I opened up my talk:

I said - “First, I thank you for the opportunity to be here. It gives me great delight that you all are here as well. I truly do love you all. There is not one greater purpose in the world than to be studying theology and preparing oneself to serve God.

Second, I don't come here as one who is better than you or less than you but one who is your brother in Christ. One of the most beautiful things about the gospel of Jesus Christ besides it giving us eternal life is that it is giving eternal life to those who believe all over the world.

There is a lot of things that separate people from all over the world. Skin color, language, borders, food we eat, ways of looking at the world, but the one thing we have in common is that we are believers and that is greater than all those differences.

The blood of Jesus Christ is stronger and the identity it creates is more important than cultural or ethnic identities. We don't lose our cultural or ethnic identities. But what we gain is way much more. Our unity in Christ.”

So you see … you don’t lose anything when u become a Christian … if your American … you’re still an American … if your Norwegian … you are still Norwegian …. but what you gain is way much more and supersedes all previous identities … there is a very real sense …. were Christianity creates a whole new race, a whole new culture, a whole new people group of people

- “we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” 1 Peter 2:9 says

I started a blog a few years ago … I don’t think anyone reads it … It’s not the fanciest thing … it was supposed to be missions blog … now it has transformed into more of a theology blog … but one of the things it says on the front page in the upper right corner, which is kind of my theology for ministry is: “Jesus died for individuals, individuals with names, yes He did, but more importantly than that, He died for a people. And together we must suffer for each other, encourage one another, exhort one another, support and pray for one another - using each one of our gifts in proportion to how God has allotted them to us,'till all of God's people are gathered.”

Not only is He a great God but He has a great cause.

Let us who call themselves Jesus followers, join hands and turn this world upside down for Christ the King. By God's Grace, By His Means, For His Glory"

You see, when u are saved, you are saved into a people … a people that God has created and is still creating … Deitrich Bonhoeffer says, a “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate.”

And this is true.

Very much what Andy was expounding a couple weeks ago. Christian unity is a thing that God creates. It is a thing to walk in line with. He broke down the dividing wall of hostility. He has made peace by his blood. Not just with all nationalities and ethnicities. But with all peoples. Listen to what Paul says in Ephesians 4, verse 1-6 again

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

There is something we share that is more significant than the songs we sing or the place we go … and it’s true … go travel to a church in a different part of the country once or go travel and visit a church in a different part of the world … and you will have this connection … that is almost unexplainable … and the longer and deeper you go in your walk with Christ there is a very real sense that the people of God will become more family to you then your blood relatives … and often times your blood relatives do not understand this … They will get offended.

There is another example of it… my wife and I are not blood relatives …  but she is my next of kin … she is my closest living relative and we are not related by blood … it is like children who come into a family by adoption…. they are our children for real … sometimes people will ask things after they know I have adopted … like, do you have any real children … and I will say to them, yes all of my children are real … If I poke them they go oowe

And they are like, “No, you don’t understand … and I am like, no, you don’t understand.

You see friends, if you’re a Christian … your adopted because God only has adopted children … when you were born, you came into this world a sinner. You were an enemy of God. With your back towards God, not a part of his family. But then by the grace of God, God the Holy Spirit drew you in and you repented of your sins and surrendered to Christ and you were adopted.

God has adopted us into his family and the more deeper we go into this and the more we walk with God and the more we live in communion with God’s people  … the more we begin to see this … these people are my real family …

And that’s church …. and it’s real … it’s the family of God that God creates and the identity that God creates transcends all other realities.

Yet, on the other hand, there are so many professing Christians not experiencing this reality. So many Christians not experiencing Christian community. And there are really only two explanations. Either they are not a true believer. Or they really have never been discipled.

So many nowadays say you don't have to be part of a church. I here it all over the place. The idea is, going to church doesn’t make you Christian, so why go to church? Is this true? If your a Christian can you just take the church or leave it?

It just seems like there is such a big disconnection.

My friends when you read the New Testament without any outside distractions or any out side influences, what do you see? I know what I see.

I mean, I know you don’t go to church to become a Christian. You go to church because you are a Christian. You become part of the church so that you can live the Christian life.

Church is meant to be an avenue for living out the Christian life.

No one is meant to do the Christian life alone. Satan is prowling about like a roaring lion and he will pick off straggling wandering sheep with ease. Perseverance, that is plodding along in the Christian life is a community project. The Christian life is not a Sprint. It is a marathon.

And we need all the help we can get. Sanctification, that is growing in the faith, is a community project. We need brother and sisters to sharpen us and challenge us and cause us to grow. Discipleship is community project. Almost everything about the Christian life is meant to be done with one another - with others.

One of the biggest themes of the New Testament is this idea of ‘one another’. Which I just say is another way of saying ‘church’.

Once you get the idea that the New Covenant people of God is the church … a lot of things will begin to click. Instead of being at odds with the mission of God, you can start being part of it.

Romans 12:10 says, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love...”

Romans 12:16, “Live in harmony with one another...”

Have equal concern for each other.” (I Corinthians 12:25)

“...Serve one another in love.” (Galatians 5:13)

“Carry each other’s burdens...” (Galatians 6:2)

“...Forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.” (Colossians 3:13)

“...Make your love increase and overflow for each other.” (I Thessalonians 3:12)

“...Spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” (Hebrews 10:24)

“Confess your sins to each other...” (James 5:16)

And on and on I could go, the NT is filled with this language. But if you have no theology of the church, how are you supposed to do these things. The intimate things, the hard things that the New Testament and really the Bible is calling us to, cannot be done without a week in and week out commitment with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

To the NT authors. Church is just an interwoven, intermingled part of being a Christian. There is no Christianity without it. Think about it. Almost all of the NT is written to churches.

Romans - written to the church in Rome

Corinthians - written to the church in Corinth

Galatians - to the church in Galatia

Ephesians - to the church in Ephesus

Philippians - to the church in Philippi
Colossians - to the church in Colossae
1& 2 Thessalonians - written to the church in Thessalonica

1 & 2 Timothy - written to a young pastor instructing him, exhorting him, and encouraging him to fulfill his duties as a pastor

Titus - another book to a young pastor sent to plant a church in the very hard place of Crete

The Book of Revelation - written to 7 churches

Not even to mention the narrative of Acts. The central theme being, the start of and expansion of the church. Or the general epistles, like 1 & 2 Peter, Jude, James, and 1,2,3 John which were meant to be circulated amongst all the churches.

The apostles and disciples gave their life for the church. The Apostle John was an Elder at Ephesus, James was a Pastor at Jerusalem, Titus was a Pastor in Crete, Timothy was a Pastor, Paul was a church planter. And almost every other Christian mentioned in the NT was in some way a co-laborer for the good of the church.

Gods plan for this world, yes it is hard to believe, even in the midst of all this social unrest, is still the local church.

Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16:18, “upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it”. What is this rock? Look with me there.

It was the rock of Peters confession in vs. 16. In verse 15, Jesus says, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the son of the living God”

and then Jesus says, “upon this rock I will build my church”

“Upon this rock, upon the rock of your confession Peter. I will build my church”

Those who confess me as Christ and gather together with other confessors of Christ, I will build my church. And the gates of hell will not prevail against it. You get that.

When we are committed to Christ and committed to each. No scheme of hell can stop us.

The people nowadays, who call themselves Christians, but don't have anything to do with church, it just wouldn't make any sense to the New Testament authors.

The New Testament wasn't written by individual Christians all by themselves, nor was it written to individual Christians all be themselves. Listen to some of these letters.

Philippians, the greeting, verses 1-2 “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The farewell - 4:21-22 “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

Colossians - the greeting, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers[a] in Christ at Colossae; Grace to you and peace from God our Father.”

The farewell - Colossians 4:7-12, “Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him), and Jesus who is called Justus. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.

And there is about 3 or 4 more verses … and pretty much all the letters sound like this but you get the idea.

Yes, read the Bible by yourself, in your homes, spend much quite time in his word, praying over it, memorizing it, seeking to understand it, but don't read it thinking of yourself as being all alone. No. You are meant to have a Christian family. You are meant to read it to share with others. Share with others what God is doing with you. Share with others as you seek to live it out. It is meant to be told to unbelievers. And it meant to be lived out with believers.

Maybe it is safe to say, that you can be a Christian and not be part of a church. But what you cannot be is an obedient Christian if you are not part of one. Many of the things we are called to do can only be done in the context of a church.

Some people don't have access to a church. And it’s sad. Not only are there a lot of unbelievers in the world. But there are a lot of believers who can’t go to church because they don’t have one. So we need to pray and work towards this end of establishing more biblical churches.

And how intimately does Christ associate himself with the church?

How many of you recall the conversion story of the Apostle Paul in Acts 9? Paul who was formerly Saul, was going to Damascus to persecute Christians. He was not yet a Christian. The guy who was going to end up writing half the New Testament was not yet a Christian, but rather a persecutor of Christians.

And while he is on the way, the resurrected Jesus appears to him and knocks him off his horse.

And Jesus says to him in Acts 9:4, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me”

Notice, Jesus didn't say “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute those Christians in Damascus.” He says, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Jesus identifies himself so intimately with his people, so intimately with the church there in Damascus, that literally the church is part of who he is. Quite often the NT talks about the church being the body of Christ.

Friends, the church is Jesus’ idea. How many times have I heard people say, “Oh I love Jesus, it’s the church I hate”

And I understand that. It’s so easy to hate. It’s so easy to set aside. It’s so easy to forget about. In fact, the church nowadays almost seems like a hindrance to our life. But is that right?

Somebody said something during the reformation, which happened about 500 yrs ago in Europe. It went something like, “the church is a harlot, but she is our mother”. I know it seems offensive. But think about it. For so long, people were not allowed to have bibles, burned at the stake for having one. The Catholic church is all the world knew, and it ruled the world with an iron fist.

So much evil happened in the name of the church. The word was hidden. People were taught they were saved by works and nobody knew any better. The church extorted people for money. The atrocities were numerous. In the history of the world, that time in Europe, from around the year 300 to around the 1500’s was known as the dark ages.

But instead of the reformers, saying they were done with church. Instead of them saying they were just going to love Jesus and be done with the church. Instead of doing that. They saw within the pages of scripture, God’s plan for the world, the church. And they gave their lives for it.

There was also another saying, Post tenebras lux - After darkness light.

Seeing the word of God for themselves. People started dying so that God’s word could be translated into languages people could understand. And the light started breaking upon peoples hearts.

So what I think it means is something like this. The church is broken. It is beat up, it is a raggedy. It is a motley group. Full of broken sinners like you and me. Full of Pharisees like you and me. Full of people that don't always follow Jesus correctly. But oh she is beautiful. She is the bride of Christ. She is the body of Christ. And she is beautiful. And yet there is till much work to be done, there is still much need for reformation. She is still worthy to give our life for.

Why, because Christ gave his life for her. What does Ephesians 5:25-27 say?

It says “that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish”

Is it true that the church doesn't have any spots or wrinkles? No. No. No. I don’t think so. As I look around at churches today. I see tons of spots and wrinkles.

If we look around at Osseo Community Church, we might find a couple spots and wrinkles. We are far from perfect.

My friends, the only reason Jesus is going to present this church to himself without spot or wrinkle is on account of himself. He died for individual Christians, yes he did. But more importantly he died for a people. And it’s high time the people of God start realizing this again.

Jesus is going to present the church to himself because of the purchasing power and cleansing power of his blood. (That is what Acts 20:28 says) Think about that. I love how the Bible talks sometimes. Jesus is going to present the church to himself. How do you present something to yourself? I don’t know, but God can.

Jesus is going to present this church to himself in splendor. This church is his bride. In the old days, they had what is called a dowery. It is where the bride’s parents paid the groom a price to secure their daughter in marriage. That is what Jesus did for you. He himself paid an infinitely high price for you.

And in his eyes you are perfect. Without spot or blemish.

It’s not to hard to pick on the church these days. But what is hard, is to be for the church. Are you for the church? Because Jesus is for the church. He gave his life for it.

Ponder that. There are a lot of things that might be possible to regret 10,000 years from now, but one of them will not be, being ‘for the church’. It really is God’s vehicle for his mission in the world. To have little disciple making factories. Evangelism machines. Lighthouses. Gospel outpost. Training barracks. Places of worship. To complete our joy. Express our hope.

Encourage one another. Be a family. Love each other. Care for each other.

There are so many reasons to have churches all over the place, in every little corner of the world, besides the fact that we see it is the pattern that God started through the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts.

It is God’s plan for evangelism and discipleship in the world. Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against the church” And you can see this, as his church is multiplied in local expressions all over the globe.

So let’s pray, let’s work hard. Let’s invest in the church. Not per se, in the building. Though it wouldn’t hurt. But in each other. The church is not so much a building. It is more a people.

1 Peter 2:4 says, “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

The church is about people. It really is. I wish we could get rid of the idea that church is a building. People don't go to church. The church goes to a building. Thats what we need to get in our heads. The church is a people. A group of people who have been called out of the world to do life together and be on mission together.

Do you know one thing that is just a true about your earthly family as is your family of God? You know the old saying, you can pick your nose, you can pick your friends, but you cant pick your family. And this is true.

It’s very easy to love people you like but what about people who are difficult? Everyone has got someone in their family that is hard to deal with. Does that mean you don’t deal with them? No. Does that mean you don’t love them. No.

So it is with the family of God. You don't get to pick who your brothers in sisters in Christ are. God does. In much the same way, you don't choose who your earthly brothers are, or sisters, or even your Mom and Dad. God does. You can only accept brothers and sister in Christ as Christ has accepted them. To not accept someone as your brother or sister whom God has accepted through Jesus Christ is sin.

It is to somehow think that you know better than God. And we know this is not true.

God knows better than you. The fellowship of the family of God is not based on preferences, likes or dislikes, interest, what we have in common, or anything like that. Fellowship in the family of God is based solely on Christ. There is a lot of things that separate people. But the one thing we have in common is that we are believers and that is greater than all those differences.

The blood of Jesus Christ is stronger and the identity it creates is more important than all things. There is a reason we are here.

There is a reason that God has called us out of the world and created this gospel outpost, this church here. Forget about if you are family or friends or not or anything else. The Christian family is way more important. And yes, friends, the Christian family is a family bound by blood. The blood of Jesus Christ.

I am telling you folks … it is hard to organize a burden. I didn’t know where to start and I don’t know where to finish. So I am going to close with the words of someone who knows more than me. This is taken from the book titled, “Life Together.”

It was written by a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a Pastor in Germany during the time Adolf Hitler. He was executed in a death camp the day before America liberated Germany.

“Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ'

I am a brother to another person through what Jesus Christ did for me and to me; the other person has become a brother to me through what Jesus Christ did for him.... Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality, and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ.

He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients.

We thank God for giving us brethren who live by his call, by his forgiveness, and his promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us; we rather thank God for what he does give us daily. And is not what has been given us enough: brothers, who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessing of his grace? Is the divine gift of Christian fellowship anything less than this, any day, even the most difficult and distressing day? Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the communal life, is not the sinning brother still a brother, with whom I, too, stand under the Word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Christ Jesus?

Thus, the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary, because it so thoroughly teaches me that neither of us can ever live by our own words and deeds, but only by the one Word and Deed which really binds us together--the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. When the morning mists of dreams vanish, then dawns the bright day of Christian fellowship.

If we could only learn this one thing. Me, you and everyone here - it would change everything. Does that mean there is no place for correction or confrontation or iron sharpening iron? No. Definitely not. But it does change what confrontation and correction is and what it looks like.

Galatians 6:1 says, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

We approach other brothers and sisters in Christ with humble and soft hearts. And when we mess this up and do it wrong. And there will be many times when we do it wrong. May God give us grace for it. May the bright day of Christian fellowship breaks through and heal all that needs to be healed. May it be so. May this be a church. A place of healing and reconciliation purporting a ministry of healing and reconciliation. May we all be ambassadors to that end.

And so I must stop. I must close.

I only hope today that I can get across to you, both theologically, why the church is important and also practically, why it is important that we be the church, here, in the community of Osseo.

Church is the one place that should be filled with lots of people who would normally not have anything to do with each other. Because the one thing we do have in common. The gospel of Jesus Christ is way more important then anything that causes us to differ.

Why is the church important? Because God said it is. Because we need it. And the world needs people who need the church and are living together as it. It’s God’s remedy for the world. Little kingdom’s of God in the midst of this world. Oh yes. We are not perfect. But God says we are and that changes everything. He is slowly changing us into what he already says we are. And he will not forsake us. He will be with us always. Even to the end of the age.

Let us pray!