

YOU CAN HELP BUILD JESUS' CHURCH (Part 1)**EPHESIANS 3:1-13**

A man by the name of Steven Levitt was driving by an A&W restaurant the other day. He happened to be thirsty. So he stopped in to order a frosty mug of root beer. "We're out of root beer," the worker told Steven. That blew Steven's mind! How can A&W run out of root beer? Isn't that the first rule of any A&W restaurant - to always have root beer? When Steven Levitt published that story on his blog, the comments section of his blog post filled up with other horror stories: an Italian restaurant that ran out of pasta, an Arby's that ran out of roast beef, a Panera that ran out of bread, and a Dunkin Donuts that ran out of donuts. It's unthinkable! Why, that would be just like a local church failing to evangelize the community in which God has put it, or failing to help those who attend the church to grow in their faith, or failing to share the good news about Jesus' salvation at any and every opportunity! It's unthinkable!

We're in the midst of a study of Paul's letter to the Christian communities living in and around the city of Ephesus sometime in the middle of the first century. The more you dive into this part of the New Testament, the more you discover what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Thus, the title of this series of messages: "Child of the One, True King: Discovering Who You Are in Christ." Today, we want to read and think about 3:1-13. There are a whole lot of different directions I could go in terms of applying this message to you and me today. Here's the point I want us to focus on this morning: Because the church is central to God, it should be central to you.

When the New Testament uses the word "church" it can refer to a local, literal congregation like Karl Road Baptist. It helps me to think of that kind of church using the small, lower-case letter "c". But "church" can also refer or to a very large group of people: every person past, present or future that has ever trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord in any part of the world. This is church with the large, capital letter "C." Now, Paul uses the word "church" nine times in this letter to the Ephesian Christians. In every case, he uses it in that second sense - the big, capital C church - that universal group of people that share an invisible, spiritual bond in Jesus that transcends time, distance, culture, ethnicity, and language.

But, Paul also wrote most of his letters to little "c" churches located in literal places called Philippi, Corinth and Thessalonica. He assumed every follower of Jesus would plug into a small "c" expression of big "C" church! You and I need a literal place to gather together with other followers of Jesus for worship, encouragement, growth and outreach to those who don't know Jesus yet. Paul doesn't always carefully distinguish between small "c" church and big "C" church in his New Testament letters. I think I know why. Almost everything that's true about big "C", universal church should also be true of little "c", local church. Paul can wax theologically eloquent about big "C" church, but no one was more committed to, or gave birth to more, little "c" churches in the first century than this great Christian leader. Now, first of all, these verses tell us that...

THE CHURCH IS CENTRAL TO GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN.

Probably most of us here today have studied history at one time or another in school. You learn about kings, queens, presidents, leaders, conquerors, wars, trade, inventions and scientific advances. All of it is taught from a merely human perspective. What's important to God, however, is the advance of the Church of Jesus Christ. That's what matters to Him. Paul says here, "I was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning. God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Eph 3:9-11 NLT)

Just a word about that phrase "mysterious plan" or "mystery" both there in v. 9 and also up in v. 3. When we hear that word "mystery" we tend to think of Sherlock Holmes solving a crime by gathering and interpreting clues. But in the New Testament, "mystery" referred to a body of knowledge that had been concealed from everyone but was now revealed by God. The mystery Paul is talking about in these verses is God's eternal plan of bringing lost people to Himself. Paul makes it quite clear that he could never have thought this up himself or ever imagined that God would do it this way. First, God had revealed to Paul that human salvation had been accomplished through God's Son, Jesus. Furthermore, this plan included bringing ethnic Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles together into a new people group - a new community, a new spiritual family - called the Church. Believe me, it was a real surprise to Paul and other Jews to discover that God loved non-Jews as much as He did the people of Israel! Last but not least, God's plan put this entity - both big "C" church and every small "c" church including Karl Road Baptist Church - at the very center of His plan to offer His salvation to every person in every corner of the planet.

Someone has observed that ultimately all history is really "His story" - the story of what God has done through Jesus. God's eternal plan for this world is not accomplished through political leaders, powerful nations, governments or people considered to be VIPs. From God's perspective, the real VIPs are those who advance the work of His Kingdom here on Earth. Quite often those are people just like you and me - pretty ordinary and seemingly unimportant people, but - people in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, who love Jesus and who want to contribute to God's eternal plan to bring lost people to Himself.

Right now the eyes of the world are fastened on the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia. TV makes it possible for billions of people to enjoy the skill and competition of athletes all over the world. It's fun to watch, but the illusion is that it's important. Isn't it? Well, Paul suggests here that only the Church of Jesus Christ has a cosmic audience made up of angelic, spiritual beings that inhabit the universe. "God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."

(Eph 3:10 NLT) I don't pretend to understand all of what that means, but it reminds me of the following verse, "...It is all so wonderful that even the angels are eagerly watching these things happen." (1 Peter 1:12 NLT) When angels gaze out on this world trying to understand what God is doing, what's their primary focus? Wars, governments, political leaders, billionaires, celebrities? No. They're focused on what the Church of Jesus Christ is doing all over the world. That's where God's eternal plan is getting worked out. Second, these verses also imply that ...

THE CHURCH IS CENTRAL TO TRANSFORMING PEOPLE.

The church is God's primary tool to redeem people. All through the New Testament, it's assumed that it is primarily through little "c", local church and big "C", universal church that men, women, boys and girls come into a living relationship with God through Jesus and are transformed spiritually by the Holy Spirit. If you follow Paul's thoughts here and elsewhere, it's obvious that he sees the church taking up where the nation of Israel left off. God chose the people of Israel – a literal community of people – to be a light to the rest of the world. That changed after the cross and the empty tomb. The church is now the community through which lost people can find a relationship with the one, true God. The church – and the local church in particular – is God's primary tool to redeem individuals – one here, two there, three here, an entire family there. The church is central to God's mission of transforming people spiritually for all eternity.

I love how one translation – The Message – renders the following verse in the passage we are considering today. "Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!" (Eph 3:11 MSG) God accomplishes His purposes through local expressions of His universal family made up of real, live, imperfect and deeply flawed people like you and me. Let's get specific. God has chosen KRBC along with other local congregations to reach out in the love of Jesus into the Northland area primarily. A local church is a physical place where the good news about Jesus is contained, so to speak, for the surrounding community. This church – with all of its warts and blemishes (and every church has its warts and blemishes) – has a part in God's great mission for the whole world and we get the privilege of being a part of it! You get in on the privilege of helping to build Jesus' church which is all about building God's Kingdom.

Now, is that true of KRBC? Are we all about transforming people? Honestly, not as much as we could be and not as much as we should be. I know at a personal level, a staff level, a Ministry Council level, and a church leader level there is a new and growing desire to get back to what you might call Christianity 101. We're going to put a new and intentional emphasis on encouraging and equipping our members and regularly attending friends to share Jesus with others and helping those who receive Jesus to grow up in Him. Or, to put in another way, we're putting a renewed emphasis on just good, old-fashioned

evangelism and discipleship. I hope you heard that emphasis at the Family Gathering if you attended that event today. We'll start with whoever is willing and go from there. If it's just five, we'll start with just five. If it's twenty, we'll start with twenty. We haven't gotten it all figured out yet how we will go about it, but we invite you to join in and help us go wherever Jesus leads us.

But how exactly does this happen? How does God use a church to transform people spiritually? In my experience, it happens in two ways. Members and regularly attending friends of a local church like ours make intentional efforts to share Jesus with other people and to disciple those who begin to follow Jesus. It's a highly relational, personal interaction. They do this one on one or with two or three others. They're just always on the lookout for people who are open to Jesus and open to growing in Jesus. Then, they use ministries and programs of the church they attend to help them in that task of bringing people to Jesus and growing them up in Him. It might be inviting people they're pointing to Jesus to a worship service, a Sunday adult Bible class, a small group, a fun event or an outreach ministry of some kind. That's how the church gets involved, then, directly in evangelism and discipleship. It supplements, but never replaces, what you and I do on a personal level. It depends and builds upon the personal, relational, Holy Spirit-filled work of you, me and everyone else.

James Gilmore was a bachelor living in Sacramento, California. He was a follower of Jesus but he'd gotten out of the habit of attending church altogether — for well over a year. One weekend a friend visited James. He was a recent convert to Christianity, and he insisted on going to church that Sunday. So he checked around and picked a church for James and him to attend. James really enjoyed the worship service and the church, but he made no plans to return the next week. But that very next Saturday, on a night out with some of his work buddies, he happened upon *some people* from the same church where he'd attended the previous Sunday. They spotted James and invited him and his buddies to join them. Long story short: James attended that local church every Sunday thereafter, at first just the morning worship service, but soon the study hour as well, then Sunday evening worship too. He eventual became a member - really the first church he'd ever committed to joining. What's my point? Reaching people for Jesus doesn't always happen at the Sunday morning worship service. In fact, it most often happens when you and I reflect Jesus in ordinary places other than Sunday morning and take the initiative to reach out, build a relationship and invite. Finally, these verses imply that:

THE CHURCH IS CENTRAL TO A HEALTHY SPIRITUAL LIFE.

I believe the church is both the best and the worst argument for the truth of the Christian faith all at the same time. Churches do dumb things. They can be too focused on themselves and ignore the needs of the community around them. They can have judgmental, hypocritical people. Their leaders can commit terrible sins. By the same token, local churches in our country and around the world

have done and are doing some marvelous, wonderful ministry, too. But, I want you to remember that Jesus loves the church – both the big “C”, universal church and the small “c”, local church. Later on in this letter, Paul writes about marriage, but embedded in that teaching is an important statement about Jesus and the church. “For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her.” (Eph 5:25 NLT)

Yes, Jesus died on the cross for you as an individual, but that verse says Jesus died on the cross for the church. In America, we stress individual rights, individual freedom, and – not surprisingly, then – individual spirituality. Don’t ever lapse into thinking this way, “Oh, I like Jesus, but forget the church. I can be a good Christian and dump the local church. It’s OK to have this private ‘me and Jesus’ spiritual life because, after all, I’m a part of the spiritual, universal Church. Jesus, yes, but the local church, no.” It’s a mistake to invite people to Jesus without explaining that you are also inviting them into God’s new community and God’s new family. I read recently that 20% of people who consider themselves followers of Jesus in the United States are not a part of any local church anywhere. That’s millions of people! If you really love Jesus, you will love His church. If you really love Jesus, you can’t neglect His church, or hold it in contempt or pretend that you don’t need to be a vital part of one. Yes, you do!

Does God give you salvation just because you join this or another church? Of course not! Spiritual maturity isn’t an automatic result of attending a church either. Plenty of official members of local churches have yet to be truly born again by the Spirit of God! Plenty of other members need to stop being babies! By the same token, you can’t be a follower of Jesus apart from a vital connection with His church. Vital connection to a local church is an indispensable mark of being a child of God. It’s not about just getting your name on some list of church members! Your own spiritual health depends on an involved, tangible, committed role in one of Jesus’ local churches somewhere. I have never met a Christian – man or woman, young or old, married or single, black or white – whose walk with God I admired who was not serving faithfully in some local church somewhere somehow. Oh, you can get mad at the church, frustrated with it and hurt by it! But if you love Jesus, you will love His church and you will be back in it serving somewhere somehow. You can never experience God fully without the church. You can never become the person God intends you to be without the church. You can never be spiritually healthy without the church.

It’s an immense privilege to help build Jesus’ church. Paul says here, “By God’s grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving him by spreading this Good News. Though I am the least deserving of all God’s people, he graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ.” (Eph 3:7-8 NLT) It was constantly amazing to Paul that he got to serve Jesus through the church. In fact, he invented a new word to try and capture his gratitude. The literal Greek wording there is “more leaster.” In other words, he considered himself “more leaster” than

all other Christians - less worthy than even the least among all of God's people to serve Jesus' church. But God had chosen and tasked him to share the good news about Jesus, nevertheless. He's given you and me the same task!

Is that how you feel when you're asked to serve Jesus through this or another church? "What a fantastic privilege! What an incredible honor!" You and I live in a consumer based culture and it's so easy to bring that consumer oriented mindset into the local church. Too often, even genuine followers of Jesus can begin to see this or any church as a place to get their own spiritual needs met first and foremost – "Does the worship service meet my needs? Do they play the music that moves my spirit? Do they do children's and youth ministry the way I want it done?" - rather than a place where you first try to meet the spiritual needs of others in the name and power of Jesus. Neither the big "C", universal church nor any small "c", local church – including Karl Road Baptist Church – exists to meet your spiritual needs. It exists to glorify Jesus and to serve Him by drawing others to Him. And you and I get the privilege of helping out! Oddly enough, when that becomes your primary goal - to serve Jesus and His church - you get your own deepest spiritual needs met along the way.

Is there anyone here today who does not know who that is? Of course, that's Sylvester Stallone! Back in 2006, he surprised the entertainment world by resurrecting his iconic movie hero, Rocky Balboa, for one last film. Then, while he was promoting the film, Stallone shocked Christian fans with the revelation that his personal faith in Jesus had not only impacted the writing of the first Rocky film, but also that his decision to create the final movie was inspired by his journey back to living out a personal faith in Jesus. In an interview he said, "I was raised in a Catholic home, a Christian home. I went to Catholic schools and I was taught the faith.... I got out into the so-called real world, and I was presented with temptation. I kind of lost my way and made a lot of bad choices." But, those bad choices ultimately left him unsatisfied - especially his decision to place fame and career ahead of his family. As a result, Stallone was increasingly pulled back to his Christian heritage. "The more I go to church," he said, "and the more I turn myself over to the process of believing in Jesus and listening to his Word and having him guide me, I feel as though the pressure is off me now." As part of this transformation, Stallone realized another poor choice that had guided his previous life: self-reliance. "You need to have the expertise and the guidance of [others]. You cannot train yourself. I feel the same way about Christianity and about the church: the church is the gym of the soul."

"The church is the gym of the soul." Imagine such profound spiritual truth coming from Rocky himself! In other words, the church is central to your spiritual health and mine. It's central to transforming people. And it's central to God's eternal plan. Because the church is central to God, it should be central to you and to me. You get the privilege of helping to build Jesus' church! It's part and parcel of your identity as a child of the one, true King.