

Ekklesia - The Local Church
June 28, 2020 - Reopening Sunday
Ephesians 1:15-23

Please read Ephesians 1:15-23 before going further in this transcript.

It's been an unprecedented, fascinating year in the life of our church. Back in January, we were humming along in our normal fashion. Gathering for church simply meant gathering in this Sanctuary. Now, we did have around 15 screens viewing our livestream at the time, but we kind of considered that a secondary opportunity. Our primary focus was in the main church sanctuary. Then, back on March 15th, on a crisp 8-degree morning, we had our first, livestream ONLY service.¹ All of a sudden livestream was no longer a SECONDARY opportunity; now it was our PRIMARY ministry focus. It's pretty incredible how quickly things can change in this world. It's been said, "You don't know what you've got until it's gone." At the time, we had no idea we'd be in this holding pattern for 15 consecutive Sundays, but we were. Now, today, on June 28, waking up to a comfortable 60-70 degrees, we find ourselves in a brand-new situation. For the first time ever, we are considering BOTH our ONLINE congregation and our ONSITE congregation as our primary ministry focuses. Right now, we have around 80-90 people ONSITE. And, we have about 40 screens watching ONLINE. (If we figure an average of 2.5 people per screen, that = about 100 people worshipping ONLINE.) As strange as it may sound, this is likely our "new normal," at least, for a while.² Today, we're taking a break from our sermon series on the Proverbs, so that we can focus in, on the local church. Ephesians 1:15-23 is a rich passage, filled with all kinds of great stuff about the church! It teaches us at least three things about the local church. First of all,

Local churches have a...

1. Shared faith. My sermon title today is "Ekklesia." Ekklesia³ = a gathering of people with a shared belief in Jesus.⁴ This is the Greek word that we translate as "church." Broadly speaking, it can refer to any gathering of people. But, for NT purposes it's "a gathering of people with a shared belief in Jesus." In verses 15 and following, Paul says that he has heard about their faith in the Lord Jesus and their love for God's people. He then goes on to urge them to deepen their faith, to get to know God better; to get to know their faith better. This shared faith helps clarify what we mean by the local church. We don't just mean anyone who gathers in the building. In other words, just because an electrician comes into our building to do some work for us, that doesn't necessarily make him or her part of our local church. Shared faith, following Jesus together, is what makes a local church. Being part of a local church also means that we have a...

2. Shared empowering. In verses 19 and following, Paul talks about God's "incomparably great power for us who believe." In other words, shared faith comes with shared power. And this is not just any old power. This power is the same power that God used when He raised Jesus from the dead! There's a third thing that this passage teaches about being part of a local church. This is the one we are going to FOCUS in on. Being part of a local church means that we have a...

3. Shared identity. Verses 22ff declare that Jesus is the HEAD of the church, which is His BODY. Brother or Sister in Christ, we are THAT body! WE are the BODY of Christ! THAT is our shared identity! Now, Ephesians 1:22, actually applies more broadly, to the universal church. We might think of this as the "unseen church" that exists all around the world and throughout history. Local churches are visible gathering points for this unseen, Universal Church. Our specific focus today will be on the

¹ <https://www.accuweather.com/en/us/bemidji/56601/march-weather/950>

² It's difficult to be certain how long this will last. Just as many of us were beginning to hope that we were getting through the worst of this shutdown, there are recent reports and statistics coming in, of a possible 2nd wave. It's entirely possible that we may need to close our building down again; BUT I sure hope NOT! For now, we have every intention to stay open. It's SO exciting to be back! In Matthew 6, Jesus urges His followers not to worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will worry about itself. So let's just enjoy today and make the most of this opportunity to be together!

³ ἐκκλησία = "people with shared belief, community, congregation" sometimes referring to a local gathering and sometimes the global community of Christians or Universal Church. (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature (3rd ed., pp. 303-304). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See also the helpful description in Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 125). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴ If you'd like to learn more about the importance of the local church, I encourage you to read the book, "Church Membership," by Jonathan Leeman. It's may be the best \$5-10 investment that you've made lately.

local body of believers RIGHT HERE at the E-Free Church of Bemidji. As a body of believers, what does it mean for the E-Free Church of Bemidji, to be a LOCAL church? It means at least 4 things.

The E-Free Church of Bemidji is...

1. a local body. It's localized, we aren't talking about the universal church. In other words, sometimes we refer to the Church with a capital "C." But our focus today is on the church with a small "c." God has placed us, this "small c" little local church congregation on this particular corner in Bemidji. We are located at the corner of Washington Av. SE and Carr Lake Road SW. "1 mile south of Lueken's South." Now lately, due to our livestream technology, we've been impacting people all across MN. In fact, well beyond MN. Take a guess at how many different states have livestreamed our services, at least 1 time, over the past 15 Sundays. Would you guess over 10 states? Over 20? Over 30? Believe it or not, according to our analytics, our Sunday services have been streamed in 49 different states! The only one we seem to be missing... is Hawaii! We've also had people livestreaming in from multiple countries. Take a guess at how many different countries have watched us online. How many would guess 3 countries? 6 countries? According to our analytics, our Sunday services have been streamed in 11 different countries!

Now, perhaps I should have warned you, but this was a setup. I shared all of this data for two reasons. First of all, to celebrate! God is using this pandemic to help our church reach to places we've never reached before! But the second reason that I share this, is to WARN us: Online church CANNOT and SHOULD NOT replace our commitment to our own local church. As soon as we are able, we need to gather onsite with a local body of believers. I know that this may come across as a little blunt, but if you don't live within driving distance of the E-Free Church of Bemidji, then you need to commit to a closer local church. This DOESN'T mean that you can't keep livestreaming our service. But it DOES mean that we CAN'T be your primary church. Each and every one of us needs to find a LOCAL body of believers and commit to THAT body. Our LOCAL CHURCH needs to be our primary source of spiritual growth, and fellowship, and service, and accountability. There are limits to ONLINE church. If you found E-Free ONLINE, we're SO glad that you've joined us. But please don't neglect your own local church - you need them AND they need you!⁵

Hebrews 10:25 talks about, "not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...." Back in April, I mentioned that gathering ONLINE via livestream does NOT mean that we've "given up meeting together." It just means, that on a temporary basis, we needed to gather in a different way. But now the time has come when many of us feel that we can safely regather. I don't mean this as a pressure statement though; some of us, are still not quite ready. We need a little more time, and that's TOTALLY fine.

Even so, let's consider the next phrase, "as some are in the habit of doing." For many of us, this time of COVID-19, has caused us to develop some bad spiritual habits, and we need to break free from those bad habits! Some of those bad habits are related to our Sunday morning church attendance. Going to church ONLINE means that no one will necessarily notice if we skip church. Or if we fast-forward or mute the parts of the service that we don't want to hear. Perhaps we tried the livestream once or twice and then we quit. Perhaps we haven't even been to ANY kind of church service for the past 15 Sundays! Whatever the case may be, not meeting together is a BAD habit! Not meeting together not only jeopardizes our OWN spiritual health but it also deprives the church body of its essential parts. Romans 12:5 reminds us, "so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." If you'd like to learn more about the local church, I encourage you to read the book, "Church Membership," by Jonathan Leeman. They are available for sale online. We are also selling them at church for \$6.00. God has designed the local church for our mutual spiritual growth and development. There are occasions when we need to do church ONLINE, but in SO MANY WAYS, ONSITE church is better for our OWN faith AND for the faith of our FELLOW believers.

⁵ Our livestreaming ministry was never intended to steal people from other local churches. All of us need to resist consumerism; we need to resist hopping around from church to church to church. We need to resist the temptation of just enjoying the next fad, listening to our favorite speaker, or enjoying the latest popular worship band. The local church is designed to be a family of Brothers and Sisters in Christ who are devoted to one another, and loyal to one another, as a local body. Rather than being "church-hoppers" or consumers, who quickly move on to the next church as soon as something happens that we don't like, we need to be fellow servants, who embrace our corporate identity as the local body of Christ.

Brother or Sister in Christ, we need to commit to a local church body! The E-Free Church of Bemidji is also...

2. a timely body. In accordance with God's design and foreknowledge, the E-Free Church of Bemidji exists at this particular time in history. Not 1,000 years ago. Probably not 1,000 years from now.⁶ But here we stand; we exist in the year 2020. We have been commissioned to make disciples TODAY, in our CURRENT time period.⁷ During this powerful surge toward ONLINE church, many of us have discovered all kinds of excellent ONLINE resources. In fact, meaning no disrespect, some of you may even be sheepishly thinking, "No offense Pastor Jerry, but you're no John Piper. You're no Timothy Keller or Ravi Zacharias." And you're right about that. And yet, when I preach, or when Pastor Albin or Pastor Eric preaches, we have one significant advantage over ANY other preacher or speaker that you can listen to ONLINE: we have the privilege of having been called to this particular local church, for this particular time in history. Proverbs 15:23 says, "A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!"⁸ This doesn't make the pastors of our church the smartest people or even the best preachers; but it does make us the ones who have been placed here, for God's purposes in THIS local fellowship. That means we carry the responsibility and the privilege of delivering God's message to this particular local church. You can't get this anywhere else, because God's Spirit hasn't fine-tuned it, FOR anywhere else. Now certainly, we can and should learn from other preachers and teachers; but when it comes to the LOCAL church, we should gather together and listen for the message that God wants our specific location to hear, at this specific time.

As one writer puts it, a sermon can be "streamed and recorded and posted, benefiting both virtual attendees and future hearers. But for a local family of believers, God's Word is best communicated live, as the Spirit empowers an appointed preacher...to articulate God's Word personally, in a moment [of] purpose and possibility... we're struck not only by the content of the message but also by the gravity of the moment."⁹ And this has been my prayer each and every Sunday since I began preaching: "God help me to say what You want said, no more than that and no less than that."

Not only does the SERMON unite our local body in a TIMELY way, but so also does the SINGING. Colossians 3:16 urges us, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts." "Singing together symbolizes our unity as we harmonize over the gospel... we...sing to glorify God; [but] we ALSO sing to encourage each other... ultimately, God will hear the rising praises of the Christian church, and it will be good if we're there to express them together."¹⁰ Bros/Sis in Christ, God has blessed the local church to be a timely body! The E-Free Church of Bemidji is also...

3. a representative body. We are here on this corner of Bemidji, to show Bemidji what Jesus is like. We represent Him, for better or worse. And our sincere prayer is that it will be for the BETTER. We are here to demonstrate for the people in the Bemidji area what it means to be fully devoted followers of Jesus together. What it means to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. What it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. As representatives, we are the only Jesus some people will ever see; we are Jesus with skin on. Most people in Bemidji will never get to go on a pilgrimage over to Israel. As representatives, we are the only Bible some people will ever read. Many people in the Bemidji area have Bibles, or at least have access to them, but they may not ever read them. And if they do read them, it's very possible that they won't know how to understand them. But, as representatives, you and I can help them access the Bible, by living it out among them. At work, at play, at the grocery store, and so on. The physical gathering of our local church is a visible

⁶ No one is guaranteed tomorrow. As a local church, there's a chance that we won't even exist a year from now. But that's not our immediate concern or responsibility. All we can do is seize today, make the most of the opportunities in front of us right now.

⁷ This is why each month we are making a concerted effort to pray for Vision 2024. As we approach our church's 100-year anniversary, we recognize that time is passing along. We don't know how long God plans to keep us on this corner of Bemidji. But as long as He allows it, we recognize that some things will need to change, other things will need to stay the same. We are asking God to help us see His vision for what THIS local church needs to be TODAY; and what it needs to become in the days ahead. (If you are not on the mailing list to receive this monthly prayer letter, please call the church or send me an email to PastorJerry@efcbemidji.org.)

⁸ Consider Proverbs 25:13. Some of us can hear musician Keith Green's voice, "this generation of believers is responsible for this generation of souls."

⁹ David Gundersen, "10 Reasons to Come Back to Church after COVID-19" June 13, 2020, p. 4.

¹⁰ We don't even have time to consider the ways that TIMELINESS applies to baptism, communion, child dedications, weddings, funerals, and so on.

representation of Jesus to this community! People can come to this place or meet people from this place, and they can see and hear and experience, just a little taste of what Jesus is like. The E-Free Church of Bemidji is also...

4. a physically gathered body. There are times when we simply CAN'T physically gather, whether that be due to the threat of a bad virus or the threat of bad weather. Or, whether that be due to our own fragile health or staying home to take care of sick kids or whatever else it may be. Any of these reasons is fine, but what's not fine is the dangerous MISUNDERSTANDING that some of us may come to: the misunderstanding that it's somehow preferable to NOT meet in person at all. One writer notes, that for some Christians, ONLINE church... "has now become the PREFERRED medium, an acceptable substitute for physical presence."¹¹ For some of us, "distance has made the heart grow fonder." We miss the in-person fellowship desperately. But, for others of us, we are in danger of losing our commitment to meeting in person. After all, it's pretty convenient to just watch church from a distance, in our pajama's, with our favorite beverage in our mug. With our feet propped up in our recliner at home.

There is also something attractive to not having to deal with the hassle of other people. "Bearing with one another in love" is hard work. "Iron sharpening iron" means that there is friction. Not to mention church discipline. If I stay home, at least no one will judge me or call me out on my sin! So, it's tempting to avoid all of the drama and just watch church on TV from the comfort and safety of our own home. But do we really believe that THIS is what God wants? Do we really think that His design for the church body can be fully lived out at a distance?

There are so many great Bible passages that we could talk about here, that it's difficult to pick just one. Consider how the Apostle Paul describes his involvement with the local church in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, "...we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." So many of the gifts and abilities that God has given us require physical contact, or at least physical proximity. In fact, it's hard to imagine living out [our Christian] faith along these lines without being in one another's presence."¹² When the New Testament talks about the local church, it urges us to... "Be devoted to one another in love." "Practice hospitality." "Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn." To serve one another, encourage one another, and to show mercy to one another.¹³

"VIRTUAL" reality or "virtual church" is simulated church. By definition, this means that we've tried to replicate church the best we can, but it's not the same as ACTUAL church. As one writer puts it: "We're not just pixels and screennames, headshots on Zoom and Facetime. We're human beings. We're designed to see and hear and taste and touch and feel our way through the physical world God has made... No loving couple gladly accepts a 'long-distance relationship' as ideal. Neither should a loving church family."¹⁴ There's no question that the church can accomplish a lot of things ONLINE, BUT there are certain things that need to happen ONSITE.

So as long as we are physically able, we should physically gather at our local church. If we are not physically able, we should continue to gather online.¹⁵ If we are physically able to come to church, but we're still feeling unsure about the threat of COVID-19, it's fine for us to stay home for a little while longer. But NOT forever! As soon as we feel safe from this virus threat, we should make it a priority to get up on Sunday morning, get ready for church, and COME to the LOCAL CHURCH!

This sermon was preached onsite & online at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 28, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

¹¹ Jim Carlson, "Social Distancing and the Church: An Unnatural Response," May 13, 2020, p. 4.

¹² Jim Carlson, "Social Distancing and the Church: An Unnatural Response," May 13, 2020, p. 5.

¹³ Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

¹⁴ David Gundersen, "10 Reasons to Come Back to Church after COVID-19" June 13, 2020, p. 2. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/10-reasons-to-come-back-to-church-after-covid-19/>

¹⁵ And as soon as things open up again, our local church body should get out there and visit others from our Church Family. Those who, for health reasons, simply can't gather here in person. By the way, we should be exceedingly thankful if God has blessed us with the health and wellness to make our way to this church building.