

## **Ephesians 4** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### Unity in the Body of Christ

**4** I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, **2** with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **3** making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **4** There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, **5** one Lord, one faith, one baptism, **6** one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

**7** But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. **11** The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** 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.

## **Matthew 16:13-19** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

### Peter's Declaration about Jesus

**13** Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" **14** And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." **15** He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" **16** Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,[a] the Son of the living God." **17** And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. **18** And I tell you, you are Peter,[b] and on this rock[c] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Today is the second week of our sermon series called "Catch: Invitational Evangelism." We continue to think about what our mission of making disciples means and how we live that out. Last week we read the story of Jesus calling his first disciples to drop their fishing nets and follow him. Jesus said he would teach them to fish for people. Just like the story of Jesus calling his first disciples, God still calls each one of us to do whatever it takes to share the good news of Christ's love with all the people we know. It is the core of who we are as disciples of Jesus. We are called to be relentlessly focused on those who don't yet know the love of God and to invite them to "come and see!"

Let us pray. God of mercy and grace, for the sake of those yet to know you, open our ears and our hearts to hear your word and give us the courage to go out and live it. Amen.

Recent church trends are brutal. A 2019 Pew Research article warns that 40% of millennials (those aged 24-39) are unaffiliated with any religion. There is great work to be done in making disciples for Jesus Christ. And there is great opportunity, too!

Silent Generation	age 75-92	10% unaffiliated with a religion
Boomers	age 56-74	17% unaffiliated
Gen X	age 40-56	25% unaffiliated

Millennials

24-39

40% unaffiliated

Today we are going to consider three important questions in our work of reaching out to the people in our community who are disconnected from the body of Christ. These three questions are designed to help us live out our mission of inviting others into a life-giving relationship with God. And these are not rhetorical questions. Answering these questions for yourself is your challenge for this upcoming week. I hope that you will take a few notes today. Talk it over with your friends and family, and then I encourage you to find some time to answer these three questions for yourself because they are truly personal to each one of us. And having the answers to these questions in our minds will certainly help us share the good news with people in our lives.

### **Question #1: Why do people need Jesus?**

I think today's scripture hits the nail on the head in helping us to answer this question, **13** Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" **14** And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." **15** He said to them, "But who do **you** say that I am?"

This is an extremely important question for us to grapple with, isn't it? It's not exactly the question "why do people need Jesus," but when we are able to describe who Jesus is for us personally it is extremely compelling to those who are seeking meaning in their lives.

Now, I have to admit to you that if Jesus had faced me a few years ago and said, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" I am certain my mouth would have dropped open, and I would not have had a response. Even though I had been to church almost every Sunday since I was a child – I had no idea who Jesus was. Even though I had said the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed most Sundays of my life, I had never truly cried out to God or relied on the power of the Holy Spirit, and I had never taken the time to know Jesus.

One commentator wrote this about today's scripture. "Our knowledge of Jesus must never be second hand. A person might know every verdict ever passed on Jesus; he might know every Christology that the mind had ever thought out: he might be able to give a competent summary of the teaching about Jesus of every great thinker and theologian—and still not be a Christian. Christianity never consists of knowing about Jesus; it always consists in knowing Jesus. Jesus Christ demands a personal verdict."===== And it is this personal experience that we must share with others.

As we invite others to come and see, they don't really care about our head knowledge of Jesus. They don't really care if we understand the deep theological issues of who Jesus Christ is. They want to know how Jesus will make a difference in their lives!

In John 9 there's a story about a blind man whom Jesus healed. And that's about all he knows about Jesus. He doesn't know the theological or historical implications of what happened. He really can't even explain how it happened. All he knows is that he was blind and because of Jesus he can see. When the Pharisees investigate the healing and accuse Jesus of being a sinner, the formerly blind man says this:

I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, though I was blind, now I see. John 9:25.

What **you** .....**know** to be true about Jesus is your witness to others. Each and every one of us have a faith story -- even if you are so lucky that your faith story is that you have always known Jesus. Last week Bud challenged us to write our faith stories in the form of a short elevator speech and email it to him. The challenge is still on -- either one of us would still love to hear your faith story and to pray for you that you will find a chance to share your story with someone. I want to share a format with you -- I think it will help you to think about what your God story is. Here is a prompt for you to use -- it is simple, and it will get you started:

Jesus is my \_\_\_\_\_.  
There was a time that I \_\_\_\_\_, but then \_\_\_\_\_.  
And since then \_\_\_\_\_.

So let's think this through. Now in today's scripture, when Jesus says to Peter, "Who do you say I am?" Peter responds by saying to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." I wonder how Peter might have told the story of his life lived with Jesus to his friends and family. I wonder how Peter might have described to his friends what the Messiah, the Son of the Living God had meant to him.

Maybe it would be a story like this:

Jesus is my Lord. There was a time I was afraid to trust him or anyone. We were out in a boat during a terrible storm, and Jesus appeared walking on the water. I couldn't believe it, but then Jesus called me, and I stepped out of that boat thinking I could do the same, but I took my eyes off him and began to sink. But then he reached out and saved me. And since then, I will always trust him for my very life. (Matthew 14:28-31). Or maybe this one:

Jesus is my teacher. There was a time when my ego ruled my actions. I thought others should serve me. But then at the last supper we would ever share with him, Jesus got down on his knees and washed my feet -- teaching me to serve others. And now I live my life serving others..... and it has brought me true joy. (John 13:2-11). Or maybe:

Jesus is my rock. There was a time that my life was controlled by anger. When the guards came to the Garden of Gethsemane to arrest Jesus, I got angry and cut off the ear of one of the guards. But Jesus healed the guard's ear teaching me to love all--even my enemies. And now my life is ruled by loving others not anger and hatred. (Matthew 26:36-46)

As for me, Jesus is my life-saver. I used to feel like something was missing in my life --- I had a hole in my soul that I tried to fill with material possessions and striving for the approval of others. But through studying God's word I came to realize I am beloved for who I am, and that God has a purpose for my life. Since then, my heart rests in Jesus and I am filled with peace and joy!

People need Jesus, the light of the world. People need the hope of Jesus. People need the healing of illness, grief, loneliness, addiction and pain. People need unconditional love and purpose and eternal salvation. And people need to hear your story of God's grace.

## **Question 2: Why do people need the church?**

"The word *church* comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means a gathering of people who have been called out for a special purpose." (*Catch: A Churchwide Program for Invitational Evangelism*, p. 39, Debi Nixon). Jesus was the one to first use this word about his

disciples who were the very beginning of a new movement created to invite other people to join in a body that has a unique relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't call just one person to follow him. He called twelve, who then went out and told others. The life of following Jesus was never intended to be done alone. The Father of United Methodism John Wesley said that the idea of "holy solitaries" is inconsistent with the gospel. Following Jesus is a group effort -- we learn from each other, we are held accountable by each other. It is part of God's design that people would gather together to accomplish God's purposes.

We are better together. The power of God is more evident to the world when we are together. You see, we are all uniquely created with specific gifts. And when we gather together as the church and all of God's people use those gifts for God's work -- the church is unstoppable in sharing the love of God. Today's text from Ephesians says the gifts we have are to be used to:

**12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13** 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.

Each of us have different gifts and these gifts are used in the church to bring about faith and knowledge of God, to bring us to maturity so that we are able to imitate Christ!

In today's scripture from Matthew, Jesus says this about the church:

**18** [I] tell you, you are Peter,[b] and on this rock[c] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Jesus grants and affirms the immense power and strength of the church. And know that Jesus is not talking about a building or a place. He is not talking about a denomination. He is talking about a community of believers who are passionate about Jesus, who are transformed by the power of his love, and who go out telling the whole world about the love of God in Christ Jesus. Jesus says not even the gates of Hades will prevail against it -- not even death will succeed against the church. And it is **not** because of Peter that the church has its strength -- it is because the power of God is the foundation of the church.

You see, when we are **being** the church instead of just coming to church the power of God is unstoppable. When we stop looking at the church as a place that exists to meet our needs, and when we start being relentless in our outward focus, the power of God is unstoppable. When we are brave enough to see the movement of the Holy Spirit and risk doing whatever it takes to share Christ with those who have no idea that God loves them, the power of God is unstoppable.

When we are at our best as the church, lives and communities and even the world are transformed by the power of God. Here's how the United Methodist Church describes the power and calling of the church.

Whenever the church has been most clearly used by God and remained focused on its mission: "God has used our Church to save persons, heal relationships, transform social structures, and spread scriptural holiness, thereby changing the world."<sup>1</sup> We, God's Church, are called by God to live and serve in ways that best lead to the salvation of the world. The United Methodist Church and its people are faced with a serious task: **"we must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced."**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Discipline, 94.

<sup>2</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, 98.

When we become members of a church, we sign on to this mission, and when we really live out this call to be the church it leads to the salvation of the world. We have a high and serious calling to offer ourselves for this work.

People need Jesus, the light of the world, and, therefore, people need the church -- which is the means through which we share the light with the world.

But, how does that play out in real-life ways?

Well, the love of God is shared through people like you-- and via individual local churches. And so the question then becomes: **Why do people need this church?** If we are inviting folks to come and see who Jesus is by inviting them to worship, study or serve with the people of First United Methodist Church -- what does that mean? Why do people need First United Methodist Church Fort Smith?

Now, again thinking about your own personal response to this question is imperative for our mission --- because the Holy Spirit is going to work powerfully when you know your own story and share it.

My story goes like this. I need First United Methodist Church because it is where I experience the love of God in real-life ways. I moved to Fort Smith last July. It was really hot, and we had a trailer load of furniture to move in to the parsonage. We were met at the house by the youth group who was out in the community that week serving all around town. It didn't take 10 minutes for the youth and their faithful leaders to get every bit of our things moved in. Now if you have ever moved, you know that your friends tend to disappear when it is moving time, don't they? But that day, I witnessed the church serving people in need in the community. and I also received their act of service. But there's more.

My first Sunday here, I wandered over to the Family Life Center and this thing called Last Sunday Breakfast was going on--just like it was this morning. I witnessed neighbors from the community having a wonderful breakfast, sharing a devotional, getting their blood pressure checked and, now, you can even see folks getting free haircuts.

A few weeks into my time here, I was invited to check out something called Knitters and Knotters. And I met a group of people who meet every week to make sleeping mats out of plastic bags for children and the unhoused population. They knit prayer shawls for those who are suffering. But there's more.

Recently my 46 year old cousin died totally unexpectedly of an undiagnosed heart problem. She left a husband and two kids, the youngest a senior in high school. It was a devastating loss. The people of First United Methodist Church prayed for me and for my cousin's family. You all sent me cards and shared your kind words and sympathy. I could feel the love and healing power of God. But there's more.

Many of you know that my youngest son Mark is a football coach. And many of you also know that the Searcy Lions surprised us this year and made it all the way to the state championship game. The game was broadcast on AETN, and I was floored to learn that a lot of you watched it and joined in on cheering them on, yelling at them when they needed it, and even praying with me --- especially the last five minutes of that game. I am convinced that it is the prayers of First United Methodist Church Fort Smith that brought the Searcy Lions to their first state championship since 1933. When I thanked one of those persons who watched the game and

told her I was surprised she watched, her response was this: “Well, of course, I watched. We are family.”

We are family. The body of Christ is a family. **This** body of Christ is a family. A family who worships, prays, serves, and studies. It is a body of Christ that challenges me to grow closer to Christ, that teaches me and encourages me. The church is THE way we grow. I don’t know how people survive the journey of life without the church. Following Jesus is not a solo journey.

Friends, there is a lot of darkness in our world. And people need Jesus. People need the light of the world. People need the sustaining presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. And it is up to us to tell the world. It is up to us to be relentless in offering Christ to others, in offering the church to others, and in offering First United Methodist Church to others as a way of hearing the news that Jesus has been **seeking** them all along. Friends, **“We must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced.”**<sup>3</sup> May God’s will be done, and may we be God’s instruments. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Book of Discipline*, 98.