

What is the church?

Sermon 2: The Family of God

Passages: Ephesians 3:14-21
Luke 8:19-21

You and I, and he and she; we are one family. We all know that. Family is not a new concept in churches.

But what is the kinship among us? Or, do we really have one? The fact is, we call each other “brother” and “sister”. Is this just a friendly way of greeting in the church? Is it because we all believe in God and Jesus? As far as I know, Muslims call each other “brother” and “sister”. They believe in Allah and Muhammad.

Of course, we all want to know what it means to be a family. So, we need to pray to God that He will speak to us through the passage today about what the family of Christ is and how we can live as a family.

Let's pray: Father, thank you for the Scriptures. Open our hearts so that we can understand your word. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Today's passage, Ephesians 3:14-21, is a prayer. In the beginning of verse 14 Paul says, “I kneel before the Father.” At the end, in verse 22, he says “Amen”.

The recipients of Paul's letter were at Ephesus, originally a Greek colony, a busy commercial port. It had both Jewish people and Gentiles living there, and of course both Jews and Gentiles came to the church. If we had the opportunity to ask Paul what he would pray for **our** church, I think he would pray the same prayer. Paul says that he prays for a reason, and he has explained this reason in chapter 3. It's a very simple one. You see, he is an apostle. As such, he cares for us and he serves us. That is why he prays for us.

As Christians we pray for each other and, more importantly, we have the privilege to pray. Atheists do not pray. They only wish, hope and dream. Buddhists pray but they have no idea whether the Buddha is listening to their prayer. It all depends on whether they have done enough good work. Muslims pray but, believe it or not, Allah doesn't love them. Koran says that Allah judges, punishes and sometimes rewards his slaves, but since Allah does not have human emotions he doesn't love. In fact, in the eyes of many religions, God is mystical, incomprehensible and unapproachable. What is confusing for

them is exactly what Paul claims here verse 14. Paul says that we are **the family of God**. Our Father listens, cares, loves, protects and seeks the good of his family. He lovingly rules his family.

Do you realise that the basic structure of human relationships derives from the heavenly Father? Your family at home is a family; our church is also a family. You have ties of blood with your parents and children, siblings, uncles and aunts. The church also has ties of blood with God, and we have ties of blood with each other. The kinship is revealed in verse 16: “His Spirit in your inner being”. This is the focal point and the center of our life, deep inside your soul. It is the interior of our being, the seat of personal consciousness. Let me use just one word to describe it: the heart. God’s Spirit lies in our hearts. What our hearts do for our bodies, pumping our blood and helping our bodies function, this is what the Holy Spirit does for us. Through the Spirit, God strengthens us with power so that, as Paul says in verse 17, “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith”.

I am often asked where we can find the word trinity in the Bible. I am afraid you’ll not be able to find the word but you’ll find the idea. Trinity is derived from a Latin word *trinitas*, describing the doctrine of trinity: Father, Son and the Spirit. If you can find a better word to express the idea, feel free to use it. But at the moment, it is possibly the best word that can be universally recognised. So we continue to use the word “trinity”, and it is a beautiful word, so why not use it? Here is a passage clearly delivers the idea of Trinity. ---“Out of God’s riches he strengthens us with power, through his spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts.” The spirit strengthens us and Christ indwells us. To be strengthened by the Spirit in the inner person means that Christ dwells in our hearts.

Whenever and wherever the Trinitarian God is at work, there is unity. We are not the family of God because we have the virtues of loving and being kind to each other, or because we like the idea of being a family. Nor is it because it sounds better if we call each other brother and sister. We are the family of God because of the ties of blood that we have! Through the character of God and the work of God the father, son and the Spirit, you and I are connected. Can you separate us from God? Can you separate us from each other? Never!---- That’s how strong our kinship is.

This idea also draws our attention to verse 17: “Christ dwells in our hearts through faith”. Jesus does not come to the church and sit there or somewhere.

Some people think that we come to the church to meet Jesus. They think that this building is the temple of God. This is not the temple of God! Sure, it may look like a temple, even without a spire. But it's not a temple-- this is only a building. The Bible says that **we** are the temple of God. We are the body of Christ. As we trust him through faith, he makes our heart his home.

This is important! When you go out to work tomorrow, you are the body of Christ. When you are mowing the lawn, you are the body of Christ. You who speak English are the body of Christ. I speak Chinglish, but I am also the body of Christ. And when we come together on Sunday, the body of Christ is tangibly represented by the church in its institutional sense. If Christ has taken up residence in our hearts, which mean the center of one's personality (our thoughts, will, emotions, and whatever else lies at the center of our being), he is at the center of our lives and exercises his rule over all that we are and do. What a strong tie of blood that is!

These ties of blood not only reveal who you; they also determine what you do. In verses 17 and 18, Paul spells out the function of the ties of blood for Christians. Through the strengthening of the inner person by God's spirit and Christ's indwelling in our hearts, we are rooted and established in love **so that we may have power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.** As we are rooted in love, so we will grow in love. As we are established in love, we will be built up in love. Don't forget that the love of God has been revealed to us in Christ. That love has been shown to be the source of our salvation. That love has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit. Romans 5:8 says this: *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* So shouldn't we love each other?

I've once heard a friend of mine say that the center of Christianity is love. It sounds good and sweet, but when you think it over, you wonder where that statement is going to lead you. Love is possibly the most misused word. I can do lot of wrong things because I love. And if I love myself too much, there are a lot of things I don't want to do. Human love is contaminated and twisted by our sinfulness. Christianity is about love, but it is about Jesus' love. His love is not selfish love; it is sacrificial love. Look how Paul describes that love: He says that the dimensions of love are wide, long, high and deep. Jesus' love is broad enough to encompass all mankind, long enough to last for eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and high enough to exalt him to heaven. Hold on to that love and share it with your brothers and sisters. As Paul says,

grasp the love of Christ together with all the saints. We need the power of the Spirit and of Christ's indwelling to enable us to love each other. Whenever we disagree with others or whenever we tend to separate ourselves from each other, we need to look upon Jesus. Does Jesus unite or divide us?

Apart from language and colour of hair, a lot of things can divide us, really a lot. I can draw a long list of them. Have you ever seen a Chinese person playing cricket? Let me tell you-- Westerners don't know how to sing karaoke. Karaoke is sung by one or two persons, not a group. It's not like singing hymns. I have been living in Australia for 15 years now. I love everything in Australia except vegemite. Setting fences up between us or turning your back on someone is easy. Dividing is easy. You don't need the power of the Spirit to divide. Everyone can do that and we were all good at that.

I had my hair cut at the main street of Hurstville. Now, you know how many Asians are at Hurstville! Well, I decided to go to a Lebanese barber. His shop has probably the best location in the CBD. He told me that only 5% of his customers were Asians. Church has to be different! If the ethnicity of members of our church does not reflect the ethnicity of the local community outside the church building, we have failed. We need to be asking radical questions about the church: What is the church's essential being without which it would cease to be the church? We all want the church to grow. As a new minister, I particularly want the church to grow. I have a passion for our church. I have an ambition to make our church flourish. But you and I need to think, pray and work out what kind of church we want our church to become! What kind of church do we want it to grow into?

Paul says that we are rooted and established in the love of Christ. The love of Christ is not a concept; it's not an intellectual knowledge. In verse 19, Paul says that we are "to know this love that surpasses knowledge". Paradoxically, it is knowledge surpasses knowledge. It seems legitimate for me to say that the love of Christ is to be felt; it is to be experienced. So, how can you feel the love of Christ? You feel it when you are loved by others and when you love others. That's when, you feel the love of Christ. You don't have to go to heaven to see God's glory or to experience God's love. We have all of this here, at our church. That's why Paul prays in verse 19 that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Can an isolated Christian know something of the love of Jesus? Yes, of course he can. I don't have to come to church to know Jesus' love. I can sit at home watching someone preaching on youtube and still know Jesus' love.

But that knowledge of love is bound to be limited by my limited experience of His church.

The idea of the fullness of God in verse 19 leads Paul to speak about our final state of perfection in heaven when together we enter the completion of God's purposes for us. Paul speaks about the day when we shall become like Christ, which is God's purpose and promise for Christ himself is the fullness of God. This picture is painted really well by Paul. As a family, we are to grasp the love of Christ and to be filled with all the fullness of God. Is that simply a picture for aesthetic appreciation, or is it a vision of reality? Praise be to God-- He is the one who can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. It is available for us as brothers and sisters. The same power which raised Jesus from the dead, enthroned him in the heaven and then raised and enthroned us with him, is now at work within us to achieve more than we can ask or imagine.

Friends let me remind you again that this is a prayer of Paul. The basis of Paul's prayer is his knowledge of God's purpose for us. It is because of what God has done in Christ and revealed to Paul that he has the necessary warrant to pray. We have the warrant to continue our church life here, because we are joined together as a family.

Let us finish in prayer: Our Father, thank you for your grace through which we come to be your children. Thank you for Jesus who died for us and through whom we are forgiven. Thank you for the Holy Spirit who strengthens us. Holy Trinity, help us to grow together as a family. Help us to love each other more. In Jesus' name. Amen