

First Fifteen: January 17-21

Focus Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a – “Hallmarks of Christ’s Church”

Monday: Ephesians 4:1-6

Going Deeper: Over the years growing up playing hockey, I remember hearing my coaches repeat the same mantra I have never forgotten... “There is no I in team.” These words from the Apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus remind me of this mantra. As you read them are there specific words or phrases that catch your attention? Paul’s intent seems clear... be intentional about creating community. From his instruction I would say in the church then just as today, the community of faith consisted of people with diverse ideas and experiences. And yet he also realized as people of faith, if we seek to be intentional about our faith in our God of love and mercy, a way to create unity even in the midst of diversity was and still is possible. In re-reading these verses what stands out for you that will help you create unity with those who are your brothers and sisters in Christ but whose ideas, experiences and views are different from your own?

Prayer: You are one Lord; I am part of one body, and we share one hope in our faith in your loving grace. I hear these words, and in my heart, I know they are true, please Lord help me to seek unity and be open to how I can intentionally create unity in my home, with my family, my neighbors and all who you lead into my path. For you my God... are over, through and in all in my life today. Amen.

Tuesday: Ephesians 4:7-13

Going Deeper: Paul was either an eternal optimist, or a person of deep faith and trust in the work God was doing with us, as the body of Christ (the Church), moving us forward, leading us into the fullness of who we are as human beings and the children of God. Although, if you trust God and seek to live by faith then optimism will be the natural outcome... right? Grace has been given, but we must receive and believe it for ourselves. I think that is part of Paul’s point when he refers to Christ having descended into the lower regions, and by that I think he means here with us and all the competing and conflicting ideas we batter one another with in our effort to find what we hope is true, and real and trustworthy. I like the way The Message renders Ephesians 4:12-13 *“to train Christians in skilled servant work, working within Christ’s body, the church, until we’re all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God’s Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.”* That is God’s hope and desire for us! I want to be part of helping to create that, how about you?

Prayer: Our God of infinite grace and mercy give me a spirit of optimism grounded in my trust in what you are doing in my life and in our world. Help me look beyond the conflict and strife to find what we hold in common. Help me trust your love to look beyond where I see differences and give me your grace and kind heart to ask questions to seek to know those who are different. Amen.

Wednesday: Ephesians 4:14-16

Going Deeper: These next words from Paul tell us how to become mature in our faith, firmly grounded even as we continue to learn and grow in our understanding of life, love and truth. How do we discover this source? From the teachings of the one we call our Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. As we read and ponder his teaching from the 4 gospels, as we work together, side by side with other followers of Jesus, listening to their stories of faith and sharing our own we are building the church, as well as building each other up in love into the fullness of God's love and grace found in Jesus. Where do you come together with others to build your faith and hold one another up? I am aware during these times this has been more difficult, but not impossible if we are intentional. If you are looking for a place to find others to support one another and grow in your faith, please contact me to learn more about the Connection Groups we have begun to form. Remember... *"God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love – like Christ in everything."* (Ephesians 4:15 – The Message)

Prayer: Life can be hard Lord, and people even harder to understand and love. Help me to remember to call out to you when I know I am beyond my capacity and strength. Help me to be silent when I know I do not have the right words, words that lead to life and healing. Help me to be your follower as I work with others to create your church. Amen.

Thursday: Ephesians 4:17-24

Going Deeper: Over the last few years I suspect we have all asked ourselves "where can I find truth, or how can I be sure the sources I turn to are fountains of truth." I suspect every generation within human history has asked this question, the difference for us now... we have so many sources claiming they have the truth! We even hear this within the stories of our Bible, as is the case within these verses in Paul's letter to the followers of Jesus at Ephesus. Paul knows just as we do, we are bombarded daily with options and choices and when coupled with the pull of societal trends it feels as if our head is on a swivel! And yet he tells us there is a constant source of truth to help us guide our decisions and inform us in the way of life that will lead us closer to God, one another, as well as more deeply centered in our own sense of self and well-being. I have heard people say the Bible has the answer for every situation we face or difficult question we must consider... while I believe this to be true, it is not the same as looking it up to find an exact fit to every problem. What I do know to be true is the underlying truth in Jesus' teaching, modeled within his interactions and engagements with people reveal to us the foundational truth of how to live our lives both well and free within God's love and mercy.

Prayer: You are truth... Your words always lead us into life lived more richly, freely and with abundance. But there are so many other streams of information that say they too can give me what I want and need. Help me to see you way more clearly guided by the teachings of your Son. Help me to hear your voice and sense your leading today in the midst of everyone and everything else. Amen.

Friday: Ephesians 5:8-14

Going Deeper: In verse 8 where Paul challenges us by saying... *"You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light"* (Eph. 5:8 – CEB) he is merely echoing Jesus' words to his followers... *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl... In the same way, let your light shine before others."* (Matt. 5:14-16 – NIV) Although in these verses, Paul pushes us to help us understand what this means, basically saying... if what you are planning on doing, if it is not something you would want the whole world to know... then maybe it is not something that is true, or in our or our neighbor's best interest. This challenge to bring all we do into the light is certainly a very revealing way to get to the base nature of our motives and desires. It leads us quite quickly into the places within our heart that we have not given over into God's mercy and healing grace. This is the meaning of the quote Paul has adapted from Isaiah 60:1... *"Wake up sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."* (Eph. 5:14b – CEB)

Prayer: Lord of light and love, give me peace... settle my heart and spirit within your care and in my faith in you... Pour out your grace that frees me, your love that binds up the places where I have been wounded... and your light that guides me to live this life you have given me with authenticity and mercy for myself and others. Amen.