

## **On Mission Together**

### **Ephesians 4:11-16**

Last week we talked about how living on mission can be difficult in the day to day struggles and how we need fuel for the mission if we're going to persevere to the end. That fuel is the person of Jesus – he is the vine, we are the branches and if we are going to endure we need to abide in him – we need to intentionally cultivate our relationship with him so that his life, love, and spirit is flowing into us, like life-giving sap flowing into the branches of the vine. That is how we produce fruit and live on mission. Jesus is fuel that we need.

This morning is going to be a similar message, but rather than talking about the fuel that we need, we're going to talk about the support we need. Not only do we need fuel to persevere in living on mission, we also need a network of support. Living on mission is just too difficult, there's no way we can do it on our own. We need a network of support.

In the 19th century, every farmer in North America needed to have a barn to store feed and hay in and to keep animals. Yet a barn was also very large and expensive to build. To build an entire barn was a practical impossibility for the lone farmer and his immediate family. So community members would join together for support and have barn raising parties (picture). Everyone in the community would get together for about two days and raise an entire barn for a community member. Every person had a part. The adult men would do the construction, the older and more experienced ones would be the crew chiefs and the younger ones would do the manual labor. The adult women would provide water and fix food for the entire group. The youngest children would watch and learn how things were done, and the older boys would fetch parts and tools. The entire community became a network of support and thousands of people ended up with the barns they needed. None of them could do it alone – they needed the support.

The same is true for us when it comes to living on mission. It is too difficult for us to do alone. The only way that we are going to be able to persevere is if we are plugged into and surrounded by a network of support. And this morning we're going to look at where that comes from and how it works and what we can do to maximize our support so that we're able to persevere in living on mission.

The passage I want us to turn to this week is in Ephesians 4. Paul wrote this passage as a letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus and in this part of that letter he writes about the network of support that Christ established for us to be able to succeed in living on mission.

Read Ephesians 4:11-16.

*<sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, <sup>14</sup> so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

Paul uses the metaphor of the human body to teach us about our network of support. He points out that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between the individual parts and the body as a whole. When individual parts are plugged in and contributing, the body as a whole grows and is built up. And as the body grows and is built up, it in turn gives strength and support to all its individual members. It's a network of support with reciprocal blessings and benefits for everyone involved.

I have found that to be true in my own body. There were several months over the winter when I wasn't doing any regular physical exercise and I could feel it in my whole body. But in the last couple of months I have started exercising again and as I have forced the individual parts of my body to do their part and contribute to the overall health of my whole body, not only have I begun to feel better overall but the different parts of my body are doing much better as well. My legs have much more energy, my knees don't hurt is much, my back doesn't hurt, my arms feel stronger, my lungs feel stronger, and I'm sure my heart is doing better as well. Individual parts are working to provide a benefit to the whole body and because of that the body is providing benefits to the individual parts. It's a network of support.

And what Paul is saying is that that's the way it should work in the Christian community as well. We need one another for our network of support. The shepherds and teachers are needed to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. And when the saints are plugged in and doing the work of the ministry, it builds up the body of Christ. And when the body of Christ is built up and strengthened, it in turn strengthens the individual members so that they grow to maturity. So as each individual Christian in the church grows in maturity and is working properly as a member of the body, they contribute to the overall health of the church. The whole church body grows and builds itself up in love. The blessings and benefits are mutual. It's a network of support.

One of the fastest growing, and most successful companies in the world is Amazon. And at the heart of Amazon is the shopping website that contains the largest collection of retail items on the internet. I've been an Amazon customer since 2002 and it amazes me how it works. It's an enormous network of buyers and sellers and everyone in between who works for Amazon in development, marketing, warehouse management, packing and shipping, and much, much more. The Amazon website provides a platform from which buyers and sellers can connect. I'm a buyer, so I go on to Amazon looking for something to buy. I search for that product and within seconds I can browse through hundreds of options from different sellers. I can compare prices, look at pictures, read reviews and then choose which one I want to buy. A receipt is sent to my inbox and because I'm a member of Amazon Prime, two days later a package shows up at my door with the item I purchased.

Now I'm sure I see just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the vast complexity of this online shopping network. It's a huge company. But if you break it down, the reason it works is because of thousands of individual people who all come together to do their part and work together for everyone's benefit. It's a huge network of support for the buyers, sellers and everyone in between. The individuals support the organization and the organization supports the individuals.

That's the idea of how God designed it to work in the community of believers. It's a massive support system with each person plugged in and doing their part – they benefit the community as a whole and receive the support they need. When

every part is plugged in, the body of Christ is built up and it's a great situation. That's a healthy church that you'd want to be a part of. But the opposite can also be true. If the parts of the body are not working properly, then the body isn't working properly. And if the body isn't working properly the individual members are not going to be built up and are not going to be working properly.

That's what was happening to me about 6 months ago. I had been playing basketball early in the morning on Wednesdays and Fridays, but that's the only thing I was doing, so I started to get all kinds of little injuries. My Achilles tendon on my right leg hurt, both of my knees hurt, my quads in both legs were tight and painful, I had tendonitis in both elbows, several fingers injured, and the middle toe on my right foot was jammed and swollen. Lots of individual parts weren't working properly and it was affecting my whole body, so eventually I had to quit playing basketball. Then, once I quit playing basketball, I wasn't getting any exercise, so my individual parts weren't contributing to the body and the body wasn't as healthy and able to contribute to the individual parts. A reciprocal weakening was happening. There was a breakdown in the network of support.

The same thing can happen in the church. When individual members aren't plugged in and contributing to the whole, the church isn't being built up by them and they aren't being built up by the church. Both the individual and the community suffers and there is a breakdown in the network of support. When that happens it becomes more and more difficult to persevere in living on mission. The bottom line is, we really need each other for a network of support. If we are going to persevere in living on mission we need to be plugged in. It's impossible to do on our own; we need one another.

So what does that look like in your life and at East Lincoln Alliance Church? I think that most people think that to be plugged into the support system of the Christian community means to come to church on Sunday, and that is definitely part of what we need. By coming to church you can make some connections with people, spend time in worship, and hear some preaching. But has that ever been enough for you? It's only beginning to scratch the surface of the support that we need. We need to go far beyond that. You need more than that from other believers and other believers need more than that from you.

When you look at the practices of the first community of believers you can see that they were connecting together every day. They weren't just acquaintances, they were close, personal friends. They had deep relationships for encouragement and support. They shared life together and were living on mission together. That's the direction you and I need to go in order to get the support we need to continue to live on mission.

For some of you, that might mean joining a small group. That's a good place to start. In a small group you can begin to form deeper relationships to encourage other Christians and share the struggles you're going through. But even that is not enough. When you look at what Paul wrote about the interconnectedness of the body of Christ you can see that it was much more than that. So I encourage you press in even further. It might be time for you to take some steps to build deeper friendships with some people you've met at church. You could invite them over to your home for supper or a campfire. You could go out for breakfast or coffee. You could get together for a shared interest or hobby.

Maybe you're an older Christian and you've been wondering how to get more involved. I encourage you to look into mentoring a younger believer – meet with them regularly to see how they're doing and share your experiences and wisdom. Maybe you're that younger believer and you've been looking for ways to help you grow. Talk to someone you look up to in the faith, see if they'd be willing to get together to share their life with you.

There are also all kinds of ministry opportunities where you can plug in and use your gifts to strengthen the body and connect with people.

The only way we're going to persevere in living on mission is if we live on mission together. As we seek to surrender our lives to the ownership of Christ, this is something he wants us to do. It might cost you some things that have to be pushed off your schedule, but the benefits will be worth it.