

Back to Church Sunday

Week 1: Together We Find Peace

Good morning and welcome! We're so happy to have you join us on this Back to Church Sunday. It's wonderful to see so many new and familiar faces with us here today.

As most of you probably know, we are excited to be participating and celebrating this Back to Church Sunday as part of a national movement. This is a great opportunity for us to join with other parts of the body of Christ across the country to reflect on and reclaim the true nature of the church as a place and expression of love, peace, and hope for our friends, neighbors, communities, and world. As a church, we are the collective hands and feet of Christ, who reflect Him and do His work in the world as we grow in our relationships with Him and with each other. That's not just us as a group of friends and family within these four walls; that includes those gathering in the church across the street and three blocks over and across town and on the other side of our country and around the world. We've all done, and do, that better at some times than at other times. And sometimes we've done a simply lousy job of that calling to represent Christ. I know that everyone here today has a personal story and experience with the church—some good and life giving, some bad and painful. For those of you whose experience with the church may have been painful, I'm sorry. For all of you, no matter what path has brought you here today, let me say that we are honored to welcome you and to get to know you. We are excited to be here together.

Together is the theme of our Back to Church Sunday, and as I thought about togetherness and what it means for us as followers of Jesus, I thought of . . . Legos.

[NOTE: It can be helpful to pull out a small Lego construction set, such as a car or a house, and/or several Lego bricks.]

That's right. You know this favorite childhood toy, right? Those small plastic bricks with little raised circles. Who could imagine that these pieces of plastic are worth billions of dollars?

Literally, a fortune. The Danish toy company that began in the 1930s has built a Lego empire around the building bricks that they introduced in the 1950s.

Individually, Legos are just cheap pieces of plastic—and, I might add, the cause of great distress to parents who, in the darkness of night, step on the lone Lego left on the bedroom floor. But despite their basic design, the magic is in the way they fit together. Legos are designed to be together—that's what those little raised circles are for, to attach each brick to another. And together these plastic pieces can be made into fantastic creations. Full-scale models of castles, cars, airplanes, spaceships have all been built from Legos. If you've ever been to one of the LEGOLAND theme parks, you've been treated to scaled replicas of the world's most famous buildings and landmarks. It seems that Legos can be put together to create almost anything. They are just pieces of plastic. But together they create something much bigger and better than the sum of their parts.

The church is like Legos—a collection of individuals of various sizes, shapes, and colors. Individually, we may not be much to look at—or kind of a big jumble at a glance—but when we come together the way God intended, we form the Church, which is a creation much greater than the individual members. God takes our chaos and, by His design, makes something spectacular and gives us purpose.

Legos make a fun example. But I hope you can see my excitement for the concept of togetherness. In real life, this concept is powerful and life changing. Christ invites us to be together with Himself and together with one another. Together we are on this journey of transformation.

As we celebrate Back to Church Sunday, I hope that what we experience today is just the beginning—a taste of the belonging we can experience here, and an invitation to come back for more. Whether you're a regular member, a first-time visitor, or on the fence about church, I invite you to commit to joining us for this four-week journey, where we will explore what the concept *Together* means for us individually, as a church, and as a part of our world as a whole.

Over the next four weeks, we will discover together how we experience peace, love, strength, and purpose as we explore these themes:

Together We Find Peace

Together We Experience Love

Together We Grow Stronger

Together We Can Change the World

Let's start this journey with a bit of a road map. The guide for our journey comes from the book of Ephesians. While in prison in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to a group of believers in the city of Ephesus about 30 years after Jesus' death and resurrection; that letter is the New Testament book of Ephesians. It's a short book of the Bible—just six chapters—but it's a beautiful and powerful book. And togetherness is a theme that Paul comes back to again and again.

It's fitting that we study this book together, because that's what the original believers in Ephesus did. I know you know this, but the people of Ephesus did not have smartphones, or the Internet, or even TV or radio. I remind you of this obvious fact because it's easy to forget the original context and culture of the people of the Bible. And like all of the early church, the believers in Ephesus got their information in a very communal way. Although Paul wrote to them in a letter, the people receiving it did so by gathering together and listening to the letter being read. When it came to processing and understanding what the letter meant, the people of Ephesus (and all of the early church) did so—together. Together they listened and learned and shared and discussed and wrestled through the challenges of living out their faith in Christ in the midst of a culture that operated in a vastly different way. So we will be following their lead together in discussing and wrestling with the ways Christ invites us to live both together with Him and together with one another.

Does anyone know where Ephesus is, or was? If you search it on Google Maps, your first hits might include a city in the state of Georgia, an elementary school in North Carolina, and a Mediterranean food restaurant in Houston, Texas. If you keep scrolling, you might eventually

find the Ruins of Ephesus, which are located at the site of the ancient city in what is now modern-day Turkey. But no one in Paul's time would have needed to look it up. The port city of Ephesus was once considered the most important Greek city and an important trading center in the Mediterranean region. The Romans made it a provincial capital, and it was home to the Temple of Artemis—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. So Ephesus was big and bustling, with many people coming and going to worship or do business or pass from one region to another. In the early history of the church, Ephesus became a place of evangelism where the gospel spread quickly and many people came to be believers.

Paul had previously spent time in Ephesus as a missionary, so he knew the culture and the challenges this group of believers faced. He knew that they were a multi-ethnic group, surrounded and challenged by other ideas, beliefs, and practices. Not unlike our church today, the church at Ephesus needed the strength of unity to grow and survive.

So Paul wrote this letter to encourage and instruct the young church. And he structured the letter in a way that is easy to follow. The first half of Ephesians basically looks at the gospel story—how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection changed the world. Part One describes God's redemptive plan to bring humans together with Himself through Jesus. Part Two then gets very practical—how we should live in response to God's grace and relate with each other. That second half of the book focuses in on how the gospel story changes our lives.

In following the lead of Ephesians, we will spend today and next Sunday looking at the peace and love that were given to us through the life and sacrifice of Jesus. Then the next two weeks, we will look at how, in light of the gospel, we can grow stronger together and impact our world.

Our world seeks peace in so many different ways. We seek peace among nations, peace in our cities, peace in our families, peace in our churches, and peace in our own minds and hearts. As we explore the concept that Together We Find Peace, let's dive into Ephesians 2:17-22, our main text this morning: