

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

**11.09.2025 | [I believe in] the holy, catholic (universal) church, the communion of the saints |
Ephesians 4:1-16 | Joe Slunaker, PhD, Associate Professor of Old Testament
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Thank you, Pastor Ben, and I am just so encouraged today to ask you to open your Bibles to Ephesians, chapter four. Another great encouragement to me is the sense in which as First SF has been teaching through the Apostles Creed, they've been preaching through the Bible. And I don't know if you've noticed it over these last nine weeks, within the first 10 seconds of Pastor Ben or Pastor Clark taking this stage, they say the words, "If you have a Bible, open it too." And friends, I would just say as the visitor today, praise God for every story of every person in this room who's bringing them into the church family at First SF. Ephesians, chapter four is an incredible passage as the Apostle Paul is picking up steam in what it means to be the church. And so when we are considering the phrases in the Apostles Creed, I believe in the holy Catholic church and the communion of the saints. We are gonna find these complicated words, I think explained very clearly here in the text.

Please go with me to God's word. Here we are in Ephesians, chapter four, starting in verse one. I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with great humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. The grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, when he ascended on high, he led forth a host of captives and he gave gifts to men. In saying he ascended, what does it mean? But that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth. He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. To mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves of doctrine about every wind of, to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes, rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ 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.

There's more in this passage than we have time for this morning, but suffice it to say, the definitional ability to understand these two phrases in the creed, I think, come from this text. When we hear the word Catholic, we think, uh-oh, first Baptist SF, we believe in the Holy Catholic Church, there is good reason why on these banners the word Catholic is spelled with a lowercase C. Long before it became a title, it was a description. And this word coming to us from Greek and from Latin means universal. Thus, as the apostles' creed comes to the church and is organizing them to recite what we know to be true about what God has done, who he is, and what he is calling his church to be, the phrase I believe in the Holy Catholic Church is a recognition that the church is holy because God is holy, and by his work, he has made the church holy, and this is not only one building in one place, but this is everyone who confesses Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

When we speak about the Holy Catholic Church, the Holy Universal Church, I might say, from this point on, we are acknowledging that everybody of believers meeting contiguously, regardless of time zone. Insofar as they preach Christ crucified is a part of this body that Jesus has composed for our salvation, for our good, for his glory. Our unity is presupposed on God's unity. And so as we get back into Ephesians chapter four, I want you to notice as we just read the first section of this again, maybe even count on your fingers and maybe even your toes, how many times the word one is used. Let's get into here back into Ephesians chapter four, verse one, "Therefore, I, a prisoner of the Lord, "urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling "to which you have been called, "with all humility, gentleness, with patience, "bearing with one another in love, "eager to maintain the unity of the spirit "and the bond of peace." And here we go, verse four, "There is one body, and there is one spirit, "just as you were called to the one hope "that belongs to your one call, "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, "and one God and Father of all who is over all "and through all and in all."

Luckily, we stopped short of me having to take off my shoes to count there. But still nonetheless, we are struck by the fact that the oneness of God and that to which he calls us informs our understanding of how we relate to one another. If we have one God who calls us to one gospel, if we have one Christ who calls us to be one people, then this means everything when it comes to our unity. Friends, if you wanna write something down, you're gonna see two points in your bulletin. And the first one you can take to the bank. When the church is unified, God is glorified. When the church is unified, God is glorified. To believe in the holy universal church is to believe in a body of Christ that extends beyond these walls.

I can't help but think of my church, not Avenue Christian Church in Anaheim, California, preaching through the second half of Matthew 18 today. The sense in which though we are distanced by hundreds of miles, we are equally part of this universal church. It's the body of Christ. What is amazing about the absolute unity of God in the sense to which it then calls us to be a unity is that there is incredible unity in our diversity. Look in verse six, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all in all, verse seven, but grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. If I might just skip forward just for a moment. In verse 11, the text helps us to understand that God gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, the teachers, the leadership of the church to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.

I love to see a local church that is an authentic expression of their community. And not only are we coming from a whole diversity of backgrounds, but we are also coming from a whole diversity of giftings. And that is a good thing, my friends. Elsewhere in the text, this same author is gonna speak of the body of Christ using that metaphor to say some of you are the hand and some of you are the eye and some of you are the knee. Friends, you have a place following Christ in the body of Christ. And maybe you don't know exactly what that is. Every piece is important. Your little toe on your right foot may not be as high profile as the left hand, but friends in equal part of the body. Incidentally, this is one of the major reasons by which we participate in church life because this church needs you.

If you follow Jesus Christ, you are a part of the holy universal church. And you come from a distinct place where God has made you uniquely to contribute something. Now friends, I'm an amateur woodworker. I'm not gonna show you any photos because it's bad. But nonetheless, that makes me a tool guy. I love tools. And I love the uniqueness of tools. And so even though the biblical metaphor is of a body, I think of a tool chest. And I think of First SF as a tool chest here in your city for the sake of the gospel. And so if I might be so bold, if you are a unique tool in this tool chest, what happens if you are unavailable for the work of this church? I worked construction for many years and one day I ended up in Palm Springs, California, which is desert, desert. And I was up in the top of a tilt up warehouse building, three stories in the air on top of a manual lift. And it was only when I got to the top of that lift that I realized that I needed to hammer some nails. But I had only brought a screwdriver. Friends, I actually completed the test and I hammered those nails. But I destroyed the screwdriver and my hand in the process.

What if I would have had a hammer? Now, I will be so bold again. What if you are the hammer, my friends? And what if as a part of this church, which is defined by one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father, you and your unique makeup are intentionally and by God's orchestration put here for the work of the ministry in some unique way. I am just saying, friends, use your gift for the glory of God. And that, I think a very keen segue to the second stanza that we deal with in the creed today, which is the communion of the saints. The word communion, as it's handed down from the Greek, is the word koinonia. Koinonia is used in a variety of contexts in the New Testament. It is used of fellowship in Acts two. The disciples devoted themselves to the koinonia of the apostles. It's also used of financial giving. Paul, speaking to other churches about needs in Jerusalem, says, "I want you to contribute koinonia to your brothers" in a different part of the world." It's also used to describe the way that we relate to each other in suffering.

10 minutes ago, I got a text that one of my best friends in my Christian life died this morning. And that is a conflicting thing whenever it happens, but friends, I want you to let you know Dennis had a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ. I know that his mourning is better than my mourning. Because he is standing with the Savior Jesus Christ this morning. But nonetheless, I'm just trying to be transparent with you, my heart hurts today. And I am reminded that when I suffer, the people of God suffer with me because we are created to be a family. And that literally one of the uses of this term, communion or fellowship, in the New Testament, my friends. And so when we think of the way that we relate to each other, when we think of the way that we spend time together, here maybe is one thing that might be clarifying for any

church, including my own. When we use the term fellowship, communion, these words that are equally good translations of this word, *koinonia*, a lot of times we just mean we're hanging out. Hey, you wanna smoke a brisket? Let's go do some Christian fellowship.

That's not quite ever a biblical motif. But if something else happens in that moment, when we bear together, when we give together, when we share the gospel together, when we by the use of our gifts contribute to the kingdom of God, that is where fellowship and communion takes place. Which then transforms even the most mundane of our scenarios. Because sitting at the bus stop is just as keenly an opportunity for the communion of the saints as being in this building. With that being said, it might also help to clarify the word saint. And if you wanna see just one example of it, if you're in your Bible, this is actually literally on the same page for me, just go back to Ephesians 1, verse one, Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God to the saints who are in Ephesus.

Long before the word saint was used to describe that special GI Joe level Christian, its biblical use describes anybody who is saved by Jesus Christ. Thus, if you follow Christ, you are a saint. And look, nobody feels the irony more than me of the outsider in the room coming to you and telling you that your city is named after a saint. Saint Francis of Assisi, right? But once again, the biblical use of this terminology, the word saint means holy one, one who is made holy. By whom are we made holy by Jesus Christ himself? The biblical standard for a saint is not that you achieve a sainthood by the virtue of your merit, but that your sainthood is given to you by the work of Jesus Christ.

Would it be weird to start walking around and calling ourselves Saint Dave? (Audience Laughing) Maybe, but fun as well, and biblically accurate. Thus, as we declare, I believe, in the holy universal church, the communion of the saints, we are saying something not only about ourselves, but also of Christ. The great commentator John Stott says of this passage, "The one Father creates the one family. "The one Lord Jesus Christ creates the one faith, "hope, and baptism. "The one Spirit creates the one body." If we delve into the second half of this chapter, or this section, rather, as we're discerning what it means for church leadership to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, if we pick up back in verse 13, Paul continues the idea. "Until we 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, "so that we may no longer be children, "toss to and fro by "and carried about by every wind of doctrine, "by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." I mean, that's pretty ominous.

What is the antidote? Rather, verse 15, speaking the truth in love. We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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. Friends, our second point that you find in the bulletin. A true saint is someone saved by Christ, and marked by love. To think back to this apostolic creed phrase, the communion of the saints, that fellowship, that partnership, that mutual service, one with another, is not only presupposed on the love of God that invites us into this community in the first place, but secondarily is a command that we love one another.

The word love is one that is complicated in the Bible and has just as many varied meanings as the way we use the word love in English. I love my wife and I love pizza. Those are two very different loves. I leave it to you to discern which is the greater love. No, I jest, right? Of course, I love my wife. That is the cornerstone of who I am and my covenant partner, friends. To say that we speak the truth and love to each other and that we grow in love means a couple things. One, it means that we are making a choice. Number two, it means that it is words backed up by action. For us to live out the communion of the saints is for us to make the deliberate step to love one another as we love ourselves.

And that a qualifying condition to our previous conversation about the sense in which we all have diversified gifts, as I think about the spiritual gifts as you're represented in the New Testament, which would fall under this umbrella of the communion of the saints, I am so thankful that not everybody is the same exact giftedness as I am. Not to say that I am gifted, but I've got like one particular skill and I so much so rely on the people of my church that we need to fit together. If I might be so bold again, the pastors of this church are incredible but not gifted in absolutely every way. And that by God's design, that we would work together for the sake of the gospel. And so when you think about spiritual gifts from preaching to evangelism and down to, even administration, I cannot tell you how thankful I am that administration is a spiritual gift because I don't have it. And though I am growing in this way and practicing in this way, by God's grace, he

has put people in my life, in my church that are administrators to help me where I lack because we are the body of Christ. But the point is, whatever your spiritual gift and however you find an expression to use it without love, it is garbage.

First Corinthians 13, as we call it, the love chapter, as much as it is read at weddings, in context has nothing to do with marriage. The whole love is patient, love is kind, love is long suffering. That absolutely applies to you and your spouse but in context, that is more about you and the person sitting next to you today. And we are reminded that you might be the most extremely talented orator and preacher in the history of Christianity and yet, if not done with love, you are little more than just that static that you hear in a crosswalk sign. And though you might give massive gifts if not done with love at its root, worth nothing. Notice here in Ephesians chapter four that one of the conditions of the body of Christ growing and maturing is that love is a cornerstone. Just to pick up back in the text, verse 15, rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ from whom the whole body, that's you and I, 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.

A recap, I believe in the holy universal church. A body of believers that is created as such by God himself who sends his son to die that we might be redeemed. We are not made holy by virtue of our actions, we are declared holy by virtue of the work of Jesus. And that a recognition in every church, in every tribe, nation and tongue around the world who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. And I believe in the communion of the saints. A fellowship that is born out of the sense in which not only is God one, but has called us to serve one another, to bear with one another in our sufferings, to contribute with each other for the ministry of this church. To rejoice with one another when there is a victory. And I just return to mourning with those who mourn. To have communion and fellowship with one another is to be a family. And friends, that outward expression, we call it love. We call it love.

When we consider the way that Jesus says that this world will know who we are, think of the things that he does not define us by. And he will know you are mine by your building. Nope, although I have to say, folks, I have to say it sometime, what a glorious building y'all have by God's grace. Oh no, no, they will know that you follow Christ by your songs. No, not really. By what measure will this world know that we belong to Jesus Christ by our love? This holy universal church and this communion of the saints is defined by the God who first loves us and calls us in turn to love one another.

As we begin to conclude, I want to key in on the sense in which a major motif in Paul's exposition here in Ephesians four is that we grow up. And I don't mean that in any kind of condescending way, but it is top of mind in my life because I've got a 20 month old and a three month old. My wife is happy that I'm flying back today. Let me just say that. And I am in this phase of my life that many of you have already tread, where not only am I seeing the little boys in front of me, but I am attempting to disciple them into the men that they will be later on. And of all of the things that I want to see them grow into, of all the things I want to see them develop, of all of the things that I want to see them demonstrate in their little lives, from reading proficiency to sharing with one another, of course, all of the good things. I want these children to be loved by God and to love somebody else. And I am confident that they are loved by God. But my role as a father among many other things is to instill in my boys that to be a part of the communion of the saints is that we love one another.

Our task is large and the lost are many. But friends, as the holy universal church participating in the communion of the saints, we are told that the gates of hell will not prevail against us. The apostles' creed is worth reciting and is worth reminding ourselves that we each have a place in this community by God's grace, by his decree, and by his gifting. And my encouragement to you, my brothers and sisters, whom I'm just meeting today, whom I may never see again on this side of eternity, we collectively are the holy universal church. Though distanced by miles, not by time zones per se, we are united by the blood of Christ. And as there is one hope, one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father, one Spirit, so we are one because God makes us one. And by God's grace, he uses us as his ambassadors in this world to introduce the lost and dying to the one who holds life in his hands.

This is a special Sunday as well. I left out maybe one of the most forward-facing uses of the phrase communion. Because as I finish here, we will move this morning to a time of the Lord's Supper. And I would draw your attention to 1

Corinthians 10. We're the same writer of Ephesians, the Apostle Paul says the following in 1 Corinthians 10, 16 through 17. The cup of blessing that we bless. Is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? That word participation, *coinonia*, communion. Let me read it again. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body. For we all partake of the one bread. I believe in the holy universal church. I believe in the communion of the saints. Because the one Lord Jesus Christ invites us into the one communion.