

SERIES: “Together”
“*Together We Experience Love*” – Ephesians 3:14-21

We continue our series exploring the theme *Together*, as we draw lessons from the book of Ephesian

To begin, I'd like to play a little word association. Okay, I'm going to say a word, and I want you to say the first word that pops into your head. You can just call it out. Ready?

Salt and ... (pepper)

Peanut butter and ... (jelly)

Batman and ... (Robin)

Adam and... (Eve)

Hide and ... (seek)

Pros and... (cons)

We could go on all day, demonstrating the power of things that have become so closely associated that they are inseparable. Now, what do people think of when they hear the word *church*?

You may have a word that comes to mind, but it's not likely the same for everyone. There is no one inseparable association. Depending on your experience, the association could be positive, negative, or somewhere in between. But what if the word that automatically came to mind with *church* was *love*? I want to challenge us as a church to consider what it would take to build an inseparable link between *church* and *love* so that when the world hears the word *church*, their immediate association is *love*.

That's a tough challenge, so how do we get there? Perhaps the first step is that we, together as the church, must experience love. Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, addressed this same topic of how as believers we can experience love.

If you weren't with us last week for Rally Sunday, we talked a little bit about the church in Ephesus. For a quick recap, this group of believers faced challenges not unlike the ones the church faces today. They were a group of people living in a fast-paced city, surrounded by powerful religions and various philosophies. They were a diverse, multicultural group themselves, trying to figure out how to interweave their lives and live out their faith in Jesus.

And in light of those challenges, Paul emphasizes over and over again the importance of togetherness in understanding the gospel of Jesus—the redemptive work of God to bring us together with Himself—and how that story impacts our lives personally and changes the world. This wasn't an easy topic for the believers. But they read and discussed and wrestled with Paul's words together.

Like the believers in the early church at Ephesus, we as a church have committed to journeying together. As we study and explore the ideas Paul presents, it's because we want to understand and to renew our commitment as a church to be a welcoming community of love and peace and grace and impact. It's because we're on this journey together, encouraging and supporting each other, walking together to discover the greater purpose and calling of God in our lives, as individuals and as a collective church body. The church by its very nature is a place where we live and learn and worship and grow and make an impact in our world—together.

We Experience God's Love Together - As Paul wraps up his description of God's redemptive work, bringing God and man together, bringing Jew and Gentile—all people—together, he culminates in the verses that will be our main text for today, Ephesians 3:16-19, as it all comes back to God's amazing love and the life-giving work that flows out of it:

“I pray that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God..” (Ephesians 3:16-19)

Wow, what a love! What great imagery Paul uses here to convey God’s vast, limitless love. Since we’re playing word association today, let’s do a little more here. Wider than _____? The ocean? The universe? No matter what the widest thing you can think of, God’s love is wider. Longer than _____? Time? History? The line at the DMV? God’s love is most definitely longer than the line at the DMV—and all of eternity. Higher than _____? The highest mountain? The moon up above? Deeper than _____? The deepest sea?

It doesn’t matter what you fill in the blanks or answer, God’s love is wider, longer, higher, deeper. It is eternally vast and powerful, and, as Paul says, it surpasses knowledge. That’s a Bible writer’s way of saying it blows your mind. And this is the love we can experience and model together in the church. You see, the thing about love is it’s relational. It is meant to be shared. It is meant to be experienced together. It is together that our ability to grasp God’s love deepens. And together is a reflection of God’s relationship with us. God dwells with His people, and so His love is present when we come together. As we gather, we experience His love in tangible ways.

Love Is God’s Plan - If all we do is show up here once, maybe twice, a week, walk in, sing a few songs, smile and nod and shake a few hands or share a few hugs, then walk back out into our lives like nothing is different, then we’ve missed the point. We might as well drop in at the country club or the PTO meeting, or the local bar, for that matter.

But instead, if we gather here together with expectation, openness, and grace to let down our guard before God and other people, then we’re getting somewhere. If we’re willing to humbly recognize our need for help, for forgiveness, for strength, for a deeper kind of life, then we’re reaching a vulnerability that allows us to be known and to know God and others authentically. And if we’re willing to acknowledge our own needs and weaknesses, then we’re able to receive support and encouragement when we need it—and to offer acceptance and help to others when they need it. And in all these things, we are then experiencing the transformative power of God’s love in our individual lives and as a church body.

We are tapping into the very nature of God. First John 4 tells us that God is love: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). God doesn’t just have love or show love, He IS love. God and His nature cannot be separated. To be in relationship with God through Jesus is to be in relationship with love itself.

Love Binds Us Together as One - It may seem obvious, but it’s important to realize that love can’t be experienced alone. Love is something that by definition is given and shared. Jesus knew that, and in John 17:20-21, He prayed that His followers would experience the same kind of oneness that He and the Father had: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.”

That's a kind of unity that is difficult for us to grasp. Even in our closest relationships, one-ness is elusive. We live in a world of connection, but you've seen the research and reports that remind us over and over that we feel more and more alone. Technology has increased our ability to connect, but it has decreased the depth and authenticity of connection in a way that leaves us feeling isolated. And if we're honest, it's not just the world of technology that is to blame. How many people go to work, family events, and even to church but never feel connected? We can be physically together but lack true connection and community.

That's in stark contrast to the love Jesus desires for believers. The love between Jesus and His Father is love without separation, without boundaries, without end. And while we often don't even come close to that kind of love, experiencing it is the reason we come back to church. It is the reason God calls us to be together.

So that leads us back to the question I posed at the beginning of our time together today. How can we create an inseparable association between church and love? What does that look like here among ourselves and to the rest of our community and world outside? How do we experience love together, and how do we spread that love beyond ourselves? I'd like to suggest three ways that can serve as starting points for us as we experience God's love together and live out love all around us. They are three Cs, and these can be doors to relationship and impact.

Connection: Where are you plugged in? Where would you like to be? As a church, we can be good at offering opportunities to meet together for various reasons. We offer small groups, study groups, classes, family outings, and more. Relationship is always a goal, but we all must take the first step. Let me encourage and challenge all of us: If you're just filling a chair on Sunday morning, plug in, try a class, show up. I'm confident that you will find a place of belonging, growth, service, and common purpose. If you are already involved in some way, let me encourage and challenge you to look around, open yourself up, and reach out to those who are seeking their place. Let's all look for ways to better love each other and to share that love beyond ourselves.

Comfort: There's no doubt we could go around this room and hear from every single one of us stories of pain, struggle, and heartache. This life isn't easy, and we all pass through seasons of greater difficulty and need. In the normal rough and tumble of life and in times of greater need, we need each other. As a church, we want to be there for each other, whether it's the shoulder to cry on of a friend or the rallying of tangible support through a ministry, such as our Stephen Ministry, Human Needs or Manna Market ministries. We are on this journey and in this life together. Love binds us together and gives us opportunities to care for each other in times of need.

Collaboration: Our third C is collaboration. It is working together toward a purpose. From meeting others' needs like we just mentioned to harnessing our skills and abilities toward a common goal, we have the ability and opportunity to serve and to make a real difference in others' lives. This often begins in our small groups and ministry efforts. It might be focused around a shared interest like music or art, a shared experience like a conference or mission trip, or a common project like cleaning up church grounds or serving the homeless. In collaboration, we are greater than the sum of our parts. We are able to find fulfillment in the expression of our God-given gifts and talents.

Whatever place or way you choose to plug in, it is love that guides and unifies us and our efforts. And it is Christ living in us that allows His love to grow in and flow through us. It has always been God's plan for His people to experience love and to be bound together in love. Let's carry that thought with us as we leave this place, and may we as a church always be known by our love. In Jesus, Amen.