Good morning. One of my favorite quotations is from A. Z. Tozier: “What comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us!” Now, let me ask this question: What comes to your mind when you think about church? Have you stopped to think that you are part of an eternal plan? That this plan began for you before your conception? That this plan we enter by the blood of Jesus? Let me suggest to you that church is a new and living way, fitted and held together by His grace and His plan *involving us* before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5\*).

Yes, I know that for some the local church and the church universal have inflicted hurt and that that pain is real. If you have experienced such pain, I pray that we here at Shepherd can provide a place of healing for you. Here you can experience the good news; Francis Chan writes: “He [God] has made plans for His church, His sacred church, and includes us in those plans.” You—yes, you-are part of the special people of God. God provides a people for Himself comprised of all backgrounds, ages, nationalities, and races—brought together to form a unified temple of our Holy God. Unity in diversity is possible because of the believers’ new and living way, a way that cultures hearts and behaviors to align with His way. Church, listen. God is not a supporting actor in His church. He is not a co-star. Yes, each of our stories contributes to the larger story of the Glory of God and the saving Grace of Christ. We participate in the mission of the church in the edification of one another as we transform ourselves and our faith helps transform the lives of others. We can do this work because God is the center. He is the Superstar. Each of our scripture passages today is about our responsibility in the church, unified in the Spirit. In Ephesians 4:16, the Greek word for “fitted and held together” is the root of our English word harmony. In our passage in Hebrews, the author exhorts

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\*Ephesians 1:4-5

4 For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love 5 He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will

believers to faithfulness. We cannot afford to get this wrong! Look with me at the passage in Hebrews 10:22-29:

22 Let’s draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Language within these lines imply and instruct shared effort and action: “Let’s” = a contraction for “*let us*”! “our” (vs. 22) and “together” (vs. 25). This language speaks to our mutual responsibility and interdependence as we draw closer within the body of Christ, relying upon—dependent upon—Him. Just as the human body functions through the cooperation of its various parts, we support each other. We use our various gifts, our diverse gifts, for the common mission. Each of us has responsibility to guard and protect the others in our unified body. We can respond because Christ gives us confidence in this new and living way (Hebrews 10:19-22—see passages in support of this sermon at the end of the text).

It is the fact that we are in Christ that secures us. For, He who promises is faithful. Look in Ephesians 5:25-27 at how the Bible describes Christ’s church:

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Since Christ gave Himself up for the church, His bride, surely, I should consider my role within it. Christian, love is the most effective apologetic (*a justification* as in "an apologetic treatise on church doctrine" [American Heritage Dictionary Online). Ephesians 5\* makes clear that His love for us is intentional.

Listen: As believers and part of the church, we are called by intentional, sacrificial love to intentional and sacrificial love: “23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, 24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23-24). Paul makes clear that, unquestionably, it is the Lord Jesus Christ whom you serve. The *Shorter Westminster Catechism* sums up the new and living way in Christ for us: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Do you enjoy God? Enjoying Him is a biblical command. So much of the joy results from this truth: Church membership is a gift to be treasured. Unity of the church is to be protected at all costs—even, at times, at the expense of a believer’s pride.

The new and living way will evince joy! As the body of Christ, we get to protect and treasure church membership. Look at what Luke says about the joyous activities of the early church:

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. --Acts 4:32-35

About this passage, Francis Chan has written in *Letters to the Church*, “It is this kind of love that makes our message believable.” Scripture is clear: There is a real connection between our unity and the believability of our message. Intentional love and unity require investment. This is God’s design for the church in this new and living way--in bringing the church’s mission to life. The Church is not a business to manage but a collective of believers as image-bearers of Christ, “and abundant grace was upon them all,” Luke tells us. And THAT is the business of the church. Grace! The membership must value truth while holding together as a church. Review the membership vows! Read them slowly and let them resonate within each of you. When we call the church *family*, it's not a gimmick or a cute phrase. It is the design of the new and living way. It’s the plan of God for the body of Christ through the shed of Jesus. His design is what’s most affective and purposeful—to glorify God and enjoy Him forever (Hebrews 10:19-25, see the Passages in Support of this Sermon at the end of the text). It’s not programs or lights and smoke; it’s not strategies or marketing that make a church. It is the spirit of god leading and growing His people in harmony, their enjoying Him together!

Passages in Support of this Sermon:

Ephesians 4:4-16

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

8 This is why it[a] says:

“When he ascended on high,

 he took many captives

 and gave gifts to his people.”

9 (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Hebrews 10:19-25

19 Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.