Covenant Partnership (Part 1):
The Dearest Place On Earth
Ephesians 2:17-22

MANUSCRIPT

Introduction(Me, We, & the Struggle)

I remember buying my first house 15 years ago. It was a small ranch style home in Daleville, Virginia. I recently made a trip over to Daleville and went by that house. Here it is. 900 square feet... paid just around 90k for it. And I remember the pile of paperwork that had to be signed in order for the transaction to be complete. On every piece of paper I had to have either my signature or my initials. After about the 15th sheet you just stop reading... you just sign. But all of those signatures on all of those pieces of paper signifies something very important... a contract, an agreement, a covenant which says... this is your home.

And... I didn't sign all of those papers by myself. My wife was right there with me, signing and initialing each piece right alongside me. You see a little over a year prior to signing my life away for this house... I signed another piece of paper... my marriage license. In covenant partnership I pledged myself to her as her husband forever. Here's that picture.

Why am I telling you about my marriage and my house? Because, there are few things in life, if any, that compare to the commitment it takes to get married and to purchase something as large a house. In the Bible, these commitments are called covenants. A promise that should not be broken, and must be taken seriously. I have covenanted to my wife that regardless of sickness, or struggle, I will always be faithful only to her. She has covenanted the same thing to me. Regardless of which house we live in at the time... where we are together... that is home.

What's interesting is that in Ephesians (a book that we should all be very familiar with as we just finished a series on it a couple of weeks ago) it says that the covenant of marriage is to reflect an even more important covenant... the covenant between Christ and the church and to a lesser degree... the church to the church. You see the Church is Christ's bride. The Church is his most beloved. And he desires more than anything for those in the church to be committed to him, and to be committed to one another. That wherever Christ is exalted amongst individuals committed both to Christ and to one another that is home.

This is why we are going to go through a series over the next two months called Covenant Partnership. You may very well be familiar with the concept of church membership. If you've been a part of Third Avenue Church for any length of time you may very well be a member here. Membership is not a bad way of describing the covenant relationship believers are to have towards one another in the church. In the scriptures that we will be pouring over in the coming weeks, you will see the term member used over and over again. Membership speaks to the idea that we are all individual pieces or members. I am a hand, you are a foot, someone else is an elbow, etc.... And when our members come together in membership we form the body of Christ.

But, the term membership in general, and I believe at Third Avenue as well, has lost the weight of what it is supposed to mean biblically. Rather than a covenant to Christ and to one another... a promise to strive together as members through thick and thin, membership in the church has become akin to the membership of a country club. You pay a fee, you show up when you want, you do what you want to do, and if you find another club or activity that offers more amenities you can cancel your membership and join up over there... no questions asked. It's like being a member of Netflix or Planet Fitness... 10 bucks a month... cancel anytime. Well, I don't know about you but I am completely uncomfortable with having the same type of commitment to the bride of Christ as I do to my television subscription.

This is why we are no longer using the term membership to describe our relationship with the church. At Third Avenue we use the term Covenant Partnership. Covenant meaning a promise of commitment. Partnership meaning a mutually beneficial relationship where we strive together for the betterment of the whole. In short... as brothers and sisters in Christ at Third Avenue Church we will partner with one another in covenant relationship to accomplish the vision that Christ has given us.

So... in order to better understand what Covenant Partnership is we must first understand what the Church is. What is the Church? Charles Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest preacher of the modern age, answers that question this way; he says “Give yourself to the Church. You that are members of the Church have not found it perfect and I hope that you feel almost glad that you have not. If I had never joined a Church till I found one that was perfect, I would never have joined one at all! And the moment I did join it, if I had found one, I should have spoiled it, for it would not have been a perfect Church after I had become a member of it. Still, imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us... All who have first given themselves to the Lord, should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord's people. How else is there to be a Church on the earth? If it is right for anyone to refrain from membership in the Church, it is right for everyone, and then the testimony for God would be lost to the world!” Spurgeon calls the church the dearest place on earth. Now, how can he say this? For many of you who have been in church for some time, you've seen that the
church can be a very challenging place. Some time it feels like the worst
place on earth, not the dearest. And Spurgeon tells us why... because
we are imperfect people trying to form the most perfect picture of Christ's
love for us here on earth. We are going to fail to be the Bride of Christ,
but the beauty is in the journey, as much as it is in the destination. And,
when the church functions in covenant partnership rather than casual
membership, when we give ourselves to the church, it truly can be the
place where we as individuals find the most comfort, encouragement,
love, kindness, understanding and grace. In life's greatest struggles
the church should be the dearest place on earth.

Turn with me if you would to Ephesians 2:17-22. I want to show
you this morning what the church is and why it truly is the dearest place
on earth.

Teaching (Expand on the Problem, God)

First off, The Church Isn't a Place, it's a People (Ep. 2:17-19).
Look at it like this... Jesus is seeking a people who are near. In the
context he's speaking about the Jews. They had the prophets, they were
considered God's chosen people, they knew all of the covenants. It's
like those of us who grew up in church. I was always at church... there
every time the door was open... Sunday School, Sunday Service, Sunday
night, Wednesday night, and anything in between. So you could say I
was near to the church. After being there for a while in the church Christ
saved me. There are also those who were nearish. You were in church
as a child but then something happened... it got old... you left. But then
later in life Jesus drew you back in. He preached the peace that his
Gospel alone can offer and you accepted it through faith.

But then there are those who are far. In the context it meant
Gentiles. Foreigners who didn't know the ways of the Prophets or
covenants. These were the others who never grew up in church, never
knew the love of Christ... perhaps you never even heard of Jesus. They
were as far out as they could've been... but Christ drew them near
through his love and eventually they came to him... and thats it... thats all
they know. Perhaps you were one of these. And all you know is that, "I
once was blind but now I see"... you didn't know the theology... you didn't
know you weren't supposed to cuss anymore... you didn't know the Lord's
prayer... you didn't know anything... all you knew is that Jesus offered you
peace and you accepted him. Those who were Far and those who were
Near.

This tells us the endless reach of the love of Christ, but it also
gives us insight to they type of Church that Jesus desires. If he is
seeking both Jews and Gentiles, far and near, then he is also seeking
both the churched and unchurched, the poor and the rich, blacks and
whites, old and young, male and female. If Jews and Gentiles are drawn
together under the banner of the church, then all are drawn. Jesus desires a
diversity that spans all walks of life. Under the roof of the church everything
that used to divide us is done away with. Now we look past all of those
things for the sake of Jesus Christ. In fact, now we can find ourselves in
a local church where we look around and discover that perhaps the only thing
I have in common with these people is Jesus Christ... and guess what...
that's the point! We rejoice in our differences because Jesus is the only
thing we could ever find unity in! Our unity despite our diversity is based
upon a central focus on one thing... Jesus Christ. Just look at our
diversity in this place. We have young and old, democrat and republican,
Panther's fans and Redskin's fans, those who grew up in church, and those
who didn't. That's near and far in the same place... and it's God's plan for
the church.

Next Paul says that we are no longer aliens and strangers but
citizens. Look in the news. Everyday there is some debate or new law
being proposed when it comes to immigration. Some think aliens should be
completely banned, outlawed, etc... Some think that aliens should be given
certain rights and welfare. Regardless, being an alien in the United States is
not the same as being a citizen. As a citizen I don't have to worry about
being deported, being separated from my children, or having the same rights
as everyone else. It was the same way for Paul. Remember the story in the
Bible when Paul was being drug out into the street was about to be stoned
to death and he yelled out... "I'm a Roman citizen." At that point they all
stopped, picked him up, dusted him off... and probably said sorry we didn't
know. Why? Because you don't treat a citizen of Rome that way. Here's
what happens in the church. You go from being an outsider who has no
rights to being a full citizen with all the rights, and protection of a sovereign
nation. That nation being Heaven.

And then Paul clinches this idea of the church as a people by saying
that we are all members of the same household. Household, not a building
but a people. You see, when you come to be a part of the church you are
no longer visiting, you are home. In the church I'm not visiting; I'm home.
For believers, the church is your home. God wanted you to have a home
this side of heaven... that home is the church. For us as believers our family
is the family of God. Yes, we still have flesh and blood family, wives,
husbands, sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers... but in Christ our faith
family is closer than our blood family. Some of you have experienced this in
a real way. Because of your relationship with Christ you may have found
yourself estranged from your relatives. But in the church you have found
family that is closer than brothers and sisters. And thats the point! We are
family not because of who we were physically born through... but who we
were spiritually born through! In Christ we are all home! The local church is
God's plan for you to have a home on Earth. When the world is against
you, when your own family is divided from you... the church is here.
In Life’s Greatest Struggles, The Church Should Be The Dearest Place On Earth

The Church is the dearest place on Earth because it’s family... but also because it is meaningful. You see.. The Church Has A Worthy Vision (Ep. 2:20). No one wants to be a part of something that has no purpose, no meaning, no reason. People want to be a part of something that is bigger than themselves. They want to be a part of a cause. That is why there is a big push in California right now to outlaw plastic straws. Because even if there is a small chance that eliminating plastic straws will help save our oceans... it’s worth a shot. Because everyone wants to do their part to save the world. No one wants to be a part of something that doesn't do anything. You remember when you were a kid and you started a club. “Hey, do you want to be in my club? Sure, what do we do? Well, we have a club house, and we don't allow any girls. But, what do you do? We'll figure it out.” That club lasted for 10 minutes? Why? Cause it had no point! Unfortunately that is the way a lot of our local churches function. Whats the point? Uh... show up? Nah... I'm good! People want to be a part of something that does something.

They also want to be a part of something that is solid and has a good foundation. Something that is well supported. You've seen the show Shark Tank where people come pitch their inventions and their business strategy to these big investors. Usually, even if the product is a good idea, the Sharks will pass if there is no good business plan. They want to make sure there is a good foundation to whatever business they may invest in. It's the same with people when they look to join anything. Is this solid or is this shaky.

Well, when one looks at the church of Christ... do they see a worthy purpose and a solid foundation? What does it say in verse 20? Built upon the Apostles, the Prophets, and Jesus Christ as the cornerstone... the foundation is solid! When you become a part of the church you are a part of something special. What does it mean that it is built on the apostles and the prophets? Well the Apostles means the writings of the Apostles in the New Testament and the Prophets means the writings of the Prophets in the Old Testament. You see the Church isn't built on something generated out of thin air with no history or no support. No, the Church is built on 6000 years of God handing down his Word to us and showing us how to be his people. A story spanning 6 thousand years with on singular focus... the redemption of mankind. If that isn't a worthy cause I don't know what is. “Do you want to be a part of us... sure, what do you do? We are trying to save the world?” The church is a people, formed in a local church, built on the foundation of the Word of God, with the purpose of trying to save the world. There is no room for country clubs here. And then get this... we are also built on the foundation... the cornerstone of Jesus Christ himself. Meaning... all of the word of God points to Jesus Christ. If the whole story of the Bible is the redemption of mankind then the final solution is Jesus Christ. Everything hinges on Him. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world is what the Church is built on – the Gospel. So when I preach, I preach thus says the Lord. I preach Jesus is the only answer. As a church our foundation is this... because there is no real authority other than the word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So... what is Our vision. Well here at Third Avenue we believe that the great commission in Matthew 28:19-20 is that vision. To Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them the ways of Christ found in the Bible. In our own words it sounds like this... Depending on Christ we will reach our world with the Gospel to see lives completely transformed. So at 3AC you can have a purpose; depending on Christ, reaching our world, and seeing lives transformed. We depend on Christ by relying on the word, constant prayer, and authentic worship. We believe that the Word of God is our standard not a suggestion. We believe that prayer is our first response not our last resort. We believe that worship is a lifestyle of joyful obedience not reluctant observance. We will reach our world with the Gospel through relational outreach and strategic missions. We believe that reaching our neighbors means more than inviting them to church and we believe that reaching our world means more than writing a check. And we will see lives transformed through intentional discipleship. We believe that spirit led transformation happens through spirit filled community.

Where is this taking us as a local church? Well within the next year I believe we will be replanted as a church with a focus on helping the area of North Danville as well as the community on R&L Smith Rd. In a way we will be a church in two locations reaching two communities. Now that sounds like a big order for a small church, but I also believe that God is going to work miracles with this year that we can't explain. I believe that we will see him do things that we never thought could be done. I believe we will see community bible studies started in this community. I believe we will see new families and leaders come to our church and not know how they got here. I believe that God will send us money and help to do ministry in ways we hadn't even thought about. And why do I believe this? Because... for one if we don't do it who will? If not us then who? And if not now then when? There is a need... and that's what the church is for... when there is a need for more Jesus... we don't ask for more Jesus... we take the Jesus we have to where it is needed! Secondly, because I know my God can! There is no telling what God can do through a few dedicated people! If he can change the whole world with 11 or 12... what can he do with 60 or 70! Church, it's time to dream bigger and live more urgently than we ever have! And that's
why the church is the best... because here we have purpose and vision that can't be paralleled. In Life's Greatest Struggles, The Church Should Be The Dearest Place On Earth.

The church is the dearest place because it is family, because it has purpose and lastly... because The Church is Overflowing with Grace (Ep. 2:20-22). So... how does Christ hold the church together... join it together? By Grace. If the church is this entity that is closer than physical family... how does that happen practically? By Grace. In Christ we experience the transforming grace of God. We are sinners saved by grace. You see... the Bible tells us that we are all sinners who have rejected God and are rebels against him. But by the Grace of Jesus Christ and his salvation delivered to us on the cross... we now can be set free from our sin and forgiven for our trespasses. The greatest wrong ever done... our sin against God... has now become the greatest measure of forgiveness through Christ. So... now the world may say “you’re an addict... Jesus says you’re my son. The world may say you’re an adulterer... Jesus says you’re my child. When that happens that does something transformative. When we should be punished but instead we are hugged... loved that changes everything... that draws people closer than any draw in the universe. You see no one understands grace like those who have embraced the forgiveness of Jesus. And so that's why the church is so dear. This is why the church is so attractive and sticky like real heart felt family. Because a people saved by grace will show grace. Now once again, all churches aren't like this. We've all been in some bad churches. But the true church understands grace and shows grace on a whole other level. The world isn't graceful because it hasn't experienced grace... but for those of us have been loved by Christ we love others with that same love and forgiveness. Without grace all of us as stones fall to the ground... in fact we are repelled... because of judgement. But the grace of Christ flowing through us attracts and sticks and embraces. There is no where on earth like a place where you are accepted in Christ regardless of your struggles and your past. So why are so many churches not more graceful. Why do churches not look like family? Because many of us avoid covenant partnership or covenant relationship in the church because we have been wounded by people. We protect ourselves... we want to look like we belong but not really belong. We attend casually or once in a while to put on the appearance of belonging... but we don't really want family... cause sometimes family can hurt us the most. And get this... the cover of membership has allowed this. I can call myself a member... but not really be a part... and its all good. Well thats not church! Can you be brave enough to allow the church to become your family? Jesus has paid the price and in doing so invites you to join with others who have the same hurts and the same struggles with no judgement ... only grace. Let's be a church of grace... because thats what the true church is. Let's embrace people and forgive them as we were forgiven. Let's show them the same grace we've been shown. Let's not be quick to push away from the table but be the kind of people who don't let anyone go easily... why because we love them like family... because of grace. In Life's Greatest Struggles, The Church Should Be The Dearest Place On Earth

Application (Resolution, You)

So... I encourage you to lay down your misperceptions of what the church is. A church may have hurt you or misled you in the past but be assured... that is not the real church. The real church... a people saved by grace... shows grace.

This morning I think God is calling some of you to Reengage with the church. To find a place where you can belong regardless of your differences. Where the only thing that matters is if you love Jesus and have felt his grace. Find a place where you find purpose. If the purpose is to make the church known, make the pastor known, get your needs met, or feel good there is no purpose in that, but if the purpose is to serve others, love others with grace, and show them the Gospel of Christ... boom. Find a place where they grounded in the Word? Find a place where you are loved with grace! No one wants to be consistently judged. The true Church understands that they have been forgiven of much... so they love much! In Life's Greatest Struggles, The Church Should Be The Dearest Place On Earth

Reengage in the church and... know your place in the church. Listen, if you are a believer then you are a stone in the wall of this temple. When you are here the wall isn't as strong. When you disengage and see this a some type of casual country club thing then our cause is weakened. We can't do it without you... we aren't what we were meant to be without you.

Conclusion

Can I do something. Can I confess? I've been a part of the problem. I have been judgmental, I have been ungraceful, and I have at times taken my eyes off the true mission of the church. But just because I or anyone else has misrepresented the church of Christ doesn't mean that you should just walk away from it all together. Will you forgive us and give us another chance. The church truly is the dearest place on Earth. When we come together in grace we can prove it. We can do better... we will do better. Together we are the church... and when that happens we are the dearest place on earth.