

Step 7 – Connecting to the Calling
Ephesians 4:1-16, 1 Peter 4:7-11

Well brothers and sisters, these are certainly unprecedented times... I was looking at the NHL standings the other day and I noticed that the Leafs are solidly in first place in their division and having quite a good season thus far.

It turns out their winning formula is to not be in the same division as Boston.

Now I don't typically follow the major league sports too closely, but its certainly good to have them back – even if they are playing in bubbles and we have weird seasons and all the divisions have to be changed around because we can't have teams crossing the border...

With all this change and confusion – I have to say it was rather comforting that the NFL managed to keep the annual Superbowl championship on the same date and feature at least on of the same teams as last year and also have Tom Brady playing again.

And of course this year we were all wondering if Tom Brady could still have a winning formula if he wasn't playing for Boston – and it turns out... he did!

Leading his current team – the Tampa Bay Bucaneers to victory in the 2021 Superbowl, Tom Brady secured his 7th Superbowl championship.

And if you are an informed sports fan you will know that Tom Brady has been to the Superbowl 10 times since 2001, and nine of those appearances were with his former team the Patriots. And even more impressive is that Brady and the Patriots managed to win a back-to-back Superbowl in 2003 and 2004.

Now interesting enough the last back-to-back Superbowl champs were the Denver Broncos in 1997 and 1998, the same years I was married and my daughter was born and also the same years that the Detroit Red Wings won the Stanly Cup back to back as well – because we started out this example with hockey, so we'll finish it with hockey.

But whether it's the Stanley Cup or the Superbowl it is an impressive accomplishment for a professional sports teams to have won back-to-back championships and... if you are a hopeful sports fan that wants to see their team win – it might have you wondering; what does it take to put together a winning team like that? (Aside from simply not having the Leafs play in the same division as Boston.)

Now, I know that talking about sports and using sports analogies in a sermon can be a bit of risk since not everyone is interested in sports to the same degree. But, we are living under extenuating circumstances... so please indulge the analogy – because I do think it works well for what we are looking at this morning.

So how do you build a winning sports team? Well most sports fans would know that a team needs good players to fill the various positions who are committed to working together as a team and who are focused on the goal of winning. The goalie has to stay in position and guard the net – he can't be skating out around the ice doing the job of a Center... the

defensemen have to stay in position in order to prevent the other teams forwards getting a breakaway and going up against the goalie one-on-one or worse two-on-one and so on.

And when someone on the team has a bad game and doesn't play their position well - it's very obvious to the fans and the sportswriters and that player will get criticized and taken to task for not doing their job.

But, a good team won't throw that player under the bus - they stay unified and stick together and encourage each other to do better in the next game, maybe work on a specific issue at practice to get better – because that's what a winning team does.

Now if we take the general knowledge that we've identified to this point about a sports team that wins games and wins championships and apply it to our goal as a church by saying how does one build a church that is successfully making disciples you will see the same principles at work. That's what the Apostle Peter is describing in 1 Peter 4:7-11.

Vs. 7 *“the end of all things is near, therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you can pray”* - A winning church needs players who see that the playoffs are coming up, and they are focused on them, they want to push hard in order to achieve the goal of making disciples and will practice hard... pray hard... for that to happen.

Vs. 8-9 *“love one another deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”* A winning church is committed to working together as a team, regardless of the mistakes and faults and difficulties and inconveniences that will come from working together. Nobody gets thrown under the bus for a mistake.

Vs. 10-11 *“each of you should use whatever gift you have received - as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”* A winning church is made up of players who know which position they play and they stick to that position and play it well so all the bases are covered when it comes what is needed to win – to successfully make disciples from all nations.

However – brothers and sisters, the whole point of this series that we’ve been going through over the past months has been to help us understand that there are a few more bases that need to be covered in making disciples than what we might assume - so that we can use this to go deeper in blessing...

Just like sports fans might mistakenly assume that it’s only the on-ice action and star players like Brady which lead to a winning team and championships... we can mistakenly assume that it’s primarily the pastor and Sunday morning worship service and everything that goes along with that which leads to a winning church that attracts people and successfully makes disciples.

If you’ve ever seen movies like “Moneyball” or “Draft Day” you will know that there is much more going on in the world of a professional sports team than the regular season games.

A sports team is not just a team – it’s an entire organization with owners and managers and a variety of coaches and talent scouts. It has a business money making side, a marketing and

PR side, a facilities management side and a medical side and a recruiting and training side.

And when that whole organization is healthy and each part is doing its job well – that is what leads to teams like the Patriots and the Red Wings winning back-to-back championships

Likewise, when a Church is aware that there is more to making disciples than having Sunday morning worship – when a Church understands what is involved in each of the 8 Steps of Discipleship and is making sure that there are gifted people looking after each step and doing the work involved – that Church is going to be a winning Church, they will go deeper with blessing people.

And helping people understand this process and helping them to identify what part of the process Christ has gifted them to participate in and Calls them to be a part of is Step 7 – Connecting to the Calling.

And as we move into looking at Step 7 this morning it is important to hear the reminder from the Apostle Paul in Eph 4:1 that we are to *“live a life worthy of the calling that we have received”*

Friends, just as no one in any professional sports organization is there because they decided one day they wanted to work or play for that team – they have to be scouted out and drafted and chosen and called up to play – we are not here as part of the Church because it we decided it would be so.

Rather it is God who has called you, summoned you, chose you - as 1 Peter 2:9 articulates so well *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”*

Now living worthy of this calling is about remembering that we were called out of darkness into light and thus there is no reason for us to be proud or arrogant or think that we are the star of the team.

Which means that the same general principles that make the on-ice action between the players successful from 1 Peter 4, also apply to the whole organization - and we see Paul emphasizing that in Eph 4:2-4.

He echoes Peter saying *“bear with one another in love”* and *“keep the unity of the Spirit”* and mentions how there is *“One body, one Spirit, one Lord, One faith, One Baptism and One God and Father of ALL, over ALL, through ALL and in ALL”*

So just as in a Professional Sports organization the various departments need to be unified around the goal of producing a winning team - so to in the Church all the various ministries need to understand how they are unified around the purpose which Christ called and equipped His Church – disciple-making.

All the parts of a Church, all the ministries of a Church, all the people of a Church need to know how they are supposed to work together in order to be unified around the command which Christ gave us when he said *“Go, make disciples of all*

nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Mat 28:19)

Now if the terms and words that Paul uses in vs 4-6 in Eph 4 remind you of Jesus words in the great commission then you’d be correct.

As Paul is teaching us about the importance of being called, and maintaining unity and understanding our gifts and becoming mature – he is helping us understand how it all connects and leads back to Christ by connecting this to the last words of Christ’s ministry at His ascension and to Pentecost.

In verses 7-9 Paul refers to Christ ascending – and we remember that the ascension is an essential part of Christ’s work because in ascending to heaven He then is able to send the Holy Spirit at Pentecost – just as He promised the disciples He would.

And Paul very cleverly refers to Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit in this passage by referring to Psalm 68 – which was a Psalm used in the celebration of the Feast of Pentecost – quoting verse 18 where it refers to the giving of gifts.

So, with a little bit of study it becomes pretty clear that this passage is all about our task of making disciples of all nations and relating to how we are called and gifted by the Holy Spirit – who was sent by Jesus Christ – to be successful in that task.

Then Paul makes his main point about this in vs. 11. He says *“So Christ himself... (not us, or tradition or worldly wisdom) gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists and the pastors and teachers”* to the church so that the church is equipped to build up the body of Christ.

Now we’re going to come back to look at these five ministries and gifts in just a moment – but I want to take a quick look at how Paul describes this work of building up the body of Christ, and achieving unity and knowledge of God.

In vs. 14 – 16 he talks about it in terms of human development. He describes how we go from being naïve and gullible children who do not have the capacity for discernment or any life experience and go through a growth process and become mature adults and all that being mature implies, and he recognizes this process is as much about biology as it is about emotional and mental capacity.

He speaks about how the ligaments support and join the body together, or perhaps a better more accurate translation is how the connecting vessels supply what the body needs in order to do its work.

So the implication is that the work of making disciples needs a physical organized structure and articulated process as much as it needs to be about connecting to people to Christ through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

So we’ve looked at the organized structure and process of discipleship as we could describe it in 8 Steps – so let’s just review that for a moment.

Step 1 - Connecting to the Community. *Discipleship key: an unbeliever realizes that someone is seeking them out because of love.*

Step 2 – Creating credible Connections. *Discipleship key: a Christian gains credibility with unbelievers and has earned the right to be heard by them.*

Step 3 – Connecting People to Christ. *Discipleship Key: life shifts from being human centered to God centered through regular participation in worship.*

Step 4 - Connecting People to the Congregation. *Discipleship Key: Learning to love each other as Christ loved us so that people are grafted into the Body of Christ.*

Step 5 - Confession & Confirmation of Faith. *Discipleship Key: Learning what it means to trust and have faith in Jesus Christ and marking that point of going from unsaved to saved.*

Step 6 – Commitment to Crosstrain. *Discipleship Key: Going through that initial affirming Type A growth, and then experiencing Type B growth through hardship and discipline.*

Step 7 - Connecting to the Callings. *Discipleship Key: Understanding the process of disciple-making and how you are called and gifted to contribute to it.*

Step 8 - Completing the Cycle. *Discipleship Key: you're not fully a disciple until you are working to make disciples.*

So there we have a process by which we attempt to mark out what needs to occur in order for someone to go from being a naïve infant to a mature Christian.

Now – brothers and sisters, the question is how do our gifts and ministries match up with this process? Or even more important - do we understand that all our gifts and ministries and activities that we are busy with in the church need to be aligned with this process?

Because that's why Christ has gifted us...

Let's go back and look at the gifts / ministries which Christ has given the church in vs. 11 and if we identify what the main purpose and feature of each gift / ministry you will see that it reveals a process of discipleship.

The list starts with the Apostles- which literally means those who are sent out... so we this is starting off a ministry / gift that is focused on Steps 1 and 2.

Next are the Prophets – and a correct biblical understanding of Prophecy has to do with God confronting His people telling them what they have done wrong and calling them to repent of it and turn back to Him.

So this gift / ministry relates to Step 2 – in that once you have credibility with people you can tell them what's wrong in this world and in them - how sin affects us in order to set them up for the good news in Step 3 – being Connected to Christ as savior - which is the next gift/ministry that is listed: "Evangelist" which literally means - being a "good news-er."

Do you see how this is developing here?

Then you have the gift/ministry of pastor, which involves shepherding and caring for people who are responding to the good news and are being saved and walking alongside them in their day to day life offering support and healing and guidance – drawing in the sheep who are prone to wander and helping them become a part of the flock.

And this covers Step 4 and supports people as they going through Steps 5 & 6 where the next gift / ministry of teaching helps people learn the faith in order to confess it, and grow through cross-training and move into Steps 7 - as we are doing today.

Then as people move into Step 8, in whatever capacity they are called and gifted for – it is back to the beginning, back to the first gift/ministry of being an apostle, in the sense that not only you but the church is aware of your calling and gift and affirms that and sends you into that ministry.

So – the point here is that spiritual gifts and ministry callings are not given for our own sense of personal fulfillment or to make us feel like we all have a place because of how unique we are – though it does have that effect...

Christ gives these gifts and ministries with the express purpose and intentional focus to help us ensure that the entire process of discipleship is covered.

Which takes us back to the question – are we using the gifts and ministries which Christ has given us at Valleyview to cover the whole process from Steps 1 through 8? Well let's take a quick look at what Steps our main ministries and major activities would cover...

We can start with our Sunday worship –really our main ministry, it happens every week - many people utilize their gifts and participate in it... a great deal of time and energy is spent on preparing for it and it really is the heart of our church.

And it would cover mostly Step 3, touching on a few aspects of Steps 4, 5, 6 – but it's mostly Step 3.

Step 4 on the other hand is where we can locate a variety of activities and events that we host such as the Christmas Party, the Multi-cultural dinner, our Souperbowl Sundays or a youth event such as Snow-tubing, as all of these provide the kind of context that is more conducive to connecting people to the Congregation and grafting them in.

And our Children and Youth programs with their emphasis on teaching would certainly be mostly focused on Step 5 - in fact our hope is that through being in our children and youth programs the Christian faith can be taught in developmentally appropriate ways to help our children and youth come to make a Confession of Faith.

I from time to time I will offer the Valleyview 101 Course for those who are older and want to make that Confession of Faith and Membership Commitment.

And further growth and discipleship opportunities for Step 6 exist one of our two Christ Care Groups or our Men's Group or when there is enough interest for me to run the 3 Colors of Spirituality Course.

And currently the only ministry I can think of that would help to train and equip someone to find their place in the discipleship process would be the Christ Care Leadership Training course

So in terms of a representation of where the bulk of our ministries and gifts are being used across the discipleship process its weighted mostly in the middles steps. When it comes to Steps 1 & 2 and Steps 7 & 8 there is very little to help facilitate that part of the process.

And brothers and sisters – if we were looking at a professional sports organization this would be the equivalent of the Calgary Flames not having any scouts going out to find new talent and meet them and try to recruit them into the Flames organization, having no way to take talented Jr. players and

train them on a farm team in order to eventually call them up to play on the NHL team.

Don't misunderstand me here – this is not a criticism of how much we have invested the resources and giftedness into our worship and children and youth and hospitality ministries.

But it does show us that if we are going to do the work of making disciples – it is going to be much harder to be successful and build a winning church in this matter if we are not creating specific ministries for Steps 1 & 2 and Steps 7 & 8 are identifying those whom God has called and Christ has gifted through the Holy Spirit to do that work and releasing them into it..

If we are not ensuring that all of our ministries understand what part of the process they are contributing to and are working together to move people along towards maturity in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, this is how we can be “*alert and sober minded*” as 1 Peter 4:7 instructs us to be - we are knowledgeable and aware and we understand how the process of discipling occurs and how Christ gifts and organizes the gifts He gives to assist this in happening.

And that means we can also pray towards this. Because if we see, as we do, that there are some gaps that need to be filled in with specific gifts and ministries - then we can pray and ask the one who gave us this commission to supply us with what we need where we are short.

So – pray.

Pray that Christ will gift us at Valleyview with an Apostolic ministry and gifts where we can ensure that we are investing significantly in Steps 1 and 2 – perhaps the Lord is calling you to that and wants to gift you for that?

If he is – it is time to live a life worthy of that calling and step into that role and Connect to the Calling – and be intentional about talking the blessing deeper this year.

Amen.