Today we are wrapping up our sermon series on the church and the vision that God has called Riverside to have. This is really a jumping off point for us to think about our collective identity. What we have been doing is taking the themes that God has given us through his Word and discussing how they apply to what we want to do both in our individual lives and in our church.

We have pointed out three movements: planting seeds or allowing the Holy Spirit to get going in us, developing into mature plants or disciples that follow after Christ, and finally producing fruit or producing life change in ourselves and other people. These are the three movements that make up the Christian’s faith walk and they are the movements that we want to emphasize when we think about what it means to be Riverside.

The final thing that I want us to talk about this morning is seeking to be united and in harmony in our lives together. In our culture today, rightness and individuality have led us to think more about how something may or may not benefit us and not about whether it is beneficial for the community. We seldom think about our collective identities.

Let’s read Ephesians 4: 1-16.

This chapter in Ephesians spells out just how demanding it is to live together as a community of faith as it urges us to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Our ultimate mission as a body of believers is to be one with God. The church unites with the mission of God to unite all things, to bring the whole creation into harmony to the praise and glory of the creator.

T.S. Elliot once rightly said, “What life have you if you have not life together? There is no life that is not in community, and no community not lived in praise to God.”

This wondrous possibility, participation in the life and mission of the church, does not come naturally, though. It does not occur without some effort, a significant degree of personal engagement.

“Church” is not just the sum of individuals who have a private relationship with Christ and a private inspiration of the Holy Spirit. We are to be collective discerners. We don’t discern individually and then compare our thoughts, but we actually make our discernments in fellowship and discussion with one another.

When Dana and I were going through the various search processes at different churches attempting to hear from God with regard to where we were to be, we believed that God would give us a collective call. We were in partnership with one another through marriage and God had bound us together, and we thus believed that he would give us together a clear vision for where He wanted us to be. But we did not each discern the various situations individually and then compare our conclusions. We spent hour upon hour discussing them. Praying over them in our hearts. Weighing the good things and the bad things
about each situation. Arguing. Getting frustrated with one another. And ultimately finding harmony in our decision to serve Riverside.

In many ways the life of the church is like a marriage. When I marry a couple I go to great lengths to point out that they are two individuals today becoming one. Clearly this does not mean they literally become one, they still remain two people. And it is equally true that neither person gives up their differences. When a couple is married an analytical groom does not become all feelings and a kind and compassionate bride does not become hard-nosed. What happens is that the good individual characteristics of the bride and groom, their differences, actually enhance their oneness. In Jerry Maguire style, they complete each other as they create oneness out of their diversity. It is a higher unity than just being alike. They don’t just become like each other, but they become something entirely new together . . . something better, something that hopefully enhances both of their positive qualities . . . that makes them better as one couple than as two individuals.

1 Corinthians 13 says that this type of bound love is able to bear all things and endure all things. But participation in this oneness does not just happen. It requires the active involvement of our hearts and minds.

The church should be understood in these same terms of love and oneness. Later on in Ephesians, Paul uses this language himself. He describes Jesus as the groom and the church as Jesus’ bride. The church is people who are married to each other and to Jesus. When we commit ourselves to being a part of this fellowship, we are admitting that we are better together than we would be alone. We acknowledge that collectively, with all of our diversity of experience and journeys, we are more fully who God wants us to be.

In our passage in Ephesians, Paul emphasizes oneness. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

One. That is what we are to be. I have said this many times, but God’s Word makes it abundantly clear to us that we were created to be in relationship and community. It is not an option. It is essential.

This past week at the Men’s Bible study on Monday night we were talking through 1 John and discussing the implications of sin in our lives. During the discussion I asked the men whether they had at least one other guy in their lives that they were close enough too . . . that he could point out sin in their lives. Have they developed a close relationship with someone who will walk through life with them and be honest enough to hold them accountable to their commitment to Christ.

Most of the guys said “no” and this is not uncommon . . . but we all must find it. We can’t be one if we don’t really know each other . . . if we don’t share our lives with one another . . . if you don’t have Christian community, you need to join a small group . . . or you need to develop relationships through the men and women’s Bible studies . . . or you need to contact me and I will help you get connected.

Today I also want to share with you where I think we are at in our strengths and weaknesses together as a community. And then speak about what we are going to try to do about them in the next year.
If you remember a couple weeks ago when we talked about discipleship I showed you a triangle and then described the 3 simultaneous movements of a disciples of Jesus Christ: up, in and out. We can also speak in terms of this sermon series, we are to: plant seeds of faith, grow mature disciples, and produce fruit in our lives and in our world.

Let me start by saying that we are a fellowship that is strong in relationship. As I mentioned earlier, we have room to grow in the intimacy of those relationships, but one of Riverside’s gifts is fellowship. People find our community welcoming and they feel like they can quickly feel comfortable with others. This is a good thing and should be encouraged and we will continue to, but the negative consequence of this is that we have not been as effective as I believe we can be in bringing new people to a commitment to Christ. We have experienced significant growth in the past year or so, but much of that growth has come from Christians as opposed to new people finding Christ. This is not to say that we have not experienced several commitments and for those we are grateful, but I believe we can be more effective. I believe all of us can be more intentional about our relationships with those yet to know Christ.

From Riverside’s start, the overarching mission was always to reach new people in Tippecanoe County with the Gospel. And this continues to be a primary task of the church. It should be of any church. We hold two calls together. The Great Commission: to make disciples of all nations. And the Great Commandments: to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and to love others as ourselves.

To do these well, though, we must be plugged into the sources through which we receive God’s will and guidance. And that is where our work in the next several months will begin. We are going to read the Word of God together and we are going to work on prayer both in our individual lives and in our corporate worship.

Beginning in January of this upcoming year, we are going to embark on a church-wide Bible reading plan. It is called the Essential 100 Challenge. We want to challenge you over 20 weeks to read the 100 Essential passages in the Bible. Each week you will read 5 passages from the Bible on the same theme. For instance, the first week you will read texts about “the Beginning” of the world, later you will read passages on “the Prophets” and “Paul” and finally, “Revelation.” You will read 50 passages from the Old Testament and 50 passages from the New Testament. The goal is for you to get a “big picture” of God’s Word and in the process develop a daily Bible reading habit.

This plan is for everyone. Especially for people that have said things like this in the past. “I’ve tried to read the Bible, but I have never made it all the way through.” “I’ve read bits and pieces of the Bible, but I don’t really know how they all fit together.” “I’ve never read the Bible, but I would be interested to find out what’s in it.” “I love the Bible. I just need a little help in understanding how it applies to my life today.”

The Essential 100 passages that you will read are designed to give you a big picture of the story of God. How is the Bible connected? How are all of these different books and stories related to one another? Ultimately, what difference does it make for us?

I want to be very clear about this challenge. Our goal is not to get you in the Bible for 20 weeks and then for you to put it back on the shelf and be proud of yourself. Our goal is to get you to fall in love with God and His Word. We want this to be a jumping off point for you. We want this to be the start of a life of daily Bible reading. We want you to grow to rely on the Bible for truth.
The other area of spiritual growth that we will be focusing on is prayer. We regularly acknowledge that prayer is vital for our communication with God, but we have not always made it an emphasis in the daily life of our church. In the next couple months we will be starting an intentional Prayer Ministry at Riverside. I want to call it the Underground River . . . but we will have to make sure everyone is on board with that. It will serve two functions. One is to encourage corporate prayer. The second is to encourage all of us to be more regular and deeper pray-ers in our own lives.

We do have a prayer team through the Women’s Ministry that prays for the requests of the church that are conveyed each week, but we want to be more intentional about providing opportunities for prayer in our community. Each week we will have a prayer gathering that will have two purposes. The first is to help anyone who attends to connect and communicate with God through prayer. Part of the time together will be spent learning about and practicing a particular form of prayer. The other part of the time together will be spent praying over the church, God’s will for us and all the various concerns and praises of all of us.

We want to open the lines of communication not only between us and God but between each other. We are planning to more regularly include corporate prayer in our Sunday worship services and to provide more paths for you to share the praises and concerns of your lives. We want to create a culture where you go first to your brothers and sisters in Christ and to God when you have a need or praise.

The primary goal of these two pushes is to open up your daily access to God. We want to teach you how to develop your faith on your own. We want you to know your Bible and how to pray so that you can more effectively share with your friends, neighbors and family. And we want to help you do this, but it starts with our relationship with God.

There are also several other things we will be addressing as well.

Closely related to the Prayer Ministry is Riverside’s care ministry. If we are called to be intimately connected in relationship with one another, we want to provide an increasing number of ways for this to happen. The Pastoral Relations Committee and the Leadership Team have begun to discuss how to develop a community in which people regularly get one-to-one Christian care when they are experiencing hurt or hardship. We want to increase our ability to extend quality care to the various needs of our congregation and community.

Another initiative that we have started and will continue to develop in 2010 is called Faith at Home. Relative to Riverside’s size, we have a very large number of children and we take our responsibility for their faith development very seriously. Our Children’s Ministry Director Dar Muehlhausen works each week to prepare an environment where our children will develop their faith and enjoy community with other kids. But we have realized that we are not doing an efficient joy in equipping you as parents to develop the faith of your children at home. Ultimately, Riverside has your kids a few hours each week if we are lucky. You are with your children much, much more. And we want to help you help them in their understanding of God. Our first step was to begin a tradition of placing age-appropriate Bibles in their hands so that parents can spend time reading those Bibles with children at home. We hope that the Bibles will spark conversations with your children and that it will become a priority in all of your lives. And Discovery Hour kids are being encouraged to memorize scripture at home each week. But that is only a start. We want to ultimately provide you with age-appropriate activities and things you can do with your kids at home. Ultimately, though the most effective way of growing your kids in faith is by demonstrating
faithfulness in your own lives. You can urge your children to read their Bibles and pray until you are blue in the face, but unless they see you reading your Bible and praying, they won’t catch your vision.

You should be excited about the things that God is doing in our fellowship. There is a lot to be grateful for. But God is calling us to do more . . . to be more. If you remember during the weekend I candidated to serve as your Pastor, someone asked me by what standards I believed we should measure our success as a church. I said that I hope we are a church that our community needs. That if our fellowship were disbanded, if we stopped meeting, if Riverside ceased to be . . . that the community would notice. That we would be missed . . . because we were a beacon of God’s light in a broken world.

Paul understood what it meant to be the church. He ends our passage with our words of call. “speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 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.”

We work together and will work together . . . as one body, not for press, or bigger buildings, or cooler technology . . . but to grow up together into Jesus Christ. May we speak God’s truth to each other and our community in love. May we grow together into Jesus Christ, our head. May we be bound together, building each other up. And may we be God’s obedient workers in the world. May this be who we are as Riverside.

References consulted:

