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Speaker: Matt Loveday – Family Ministries

Scripture: We Believe ~ Statement 7&8

Many of you will know of the story of the Ugly Duckling. It's the heart breaking yet beautiful story of a young swan that hatches mysteriously into the wrong nest...a nest full of ducks. It isn't too long before the ugly duckling realizes that it simply does not belong, that one of these things is not like the others. And so, the ugly duckling embarks on an unsuccessful quest to find acceptance and love with others, only each and every time to be rejected, left on the outside looking in. Until at last, the ugly duckling is found by a family of swans, bringing the realization that it is not a duck at all...but is and always has been a beautiful swan. And so the story ends with the joy and happiness that finally finding a place to belong (to be accepted and loved) can bring.

The Ugly Duckling a story about being different, about identity, and ultimately it's a story about belonging and family. First written in 1843 by Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen, the story of the ugly duckling has been adapted and retold in various forms including Walt Disney's award winning short film produced in colour for the first time in 1939.

Why does a simple story like the Ugly Duckling strike such a cord with us? It's because it identifies a common struggle we all know, the tension between our individualism and our desire to find belonging with others in a larger community. All of us, at one point or another have felt like the ugly duckling, feeling like we're on the outside looking in and searching for a place to belong. In society, especially in the west, our individualism is highly valued—we speak of our individual rights and freedoms, of our autonomy and the ability to make our own decisions for ourselves. We value self-expression and the freedom to dress, look and act as

we want. Being an individual is important and wonderful—and yet it can be hard to be an individual and live in community with others.

I just think of my own family. My wife Christine and I have 3 boys and we are all individuals and unique, and we love each other deeply, but when it comes time to choose what to watch on Netflix, or what everyone wants to eat for dinner—it can be hard to come to agreement, we're all so different. This is the tension of family and community, this is the tension of togetherness—to be a collection of unique individuals where there is room still for our individualism to breathe, but where we live, work and play together with others in unity and a sense of belonging.

We are into week 4 of our fall sermon series called *We Believe* where we've been talking about our statement of faith. It's those two small letters W and E—that make a big difference. Yes, in one sense each individual believes on their own, but our sermon series isn't called *I Believe*, it's called *We Believe* because our statement of faith identifies for us core beliefs that we share, understanding that in community we must leave room for our individuality but also know our places of commonality. In the past year, our statement of faith was reviewed by members of our staff, elders board and congregation and represented to the elders and then to the congregation for approval. Many thanks to those individuals who spent hours packaging this up so nicely for us. So far in this sermon series we have examined the first six statements of faith...by way of review, let me just read them for us...starting with the preamble.

North Park is a non-denominational Christian church. With the whole Church, we affirm The Apostles' Creed and The Nicene Creed as foundational summaries of the Christian faith.

We believe... There is one true God, the creator and sustainer of all that is, who exists eternally in three persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

God's original creation was perfect, but the first humans sinned against God by willful disobedience and passed on a corrupted nature to all humanity. Our sin alienates us from God and brings us under his condemnation.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, God's only Son, was born of the Virgin Mary, is truly divine and truly human, yet is without sin.

Jesus died in our place, reconciling sinful humanity to God, and offers salvation as a gift received by faith.

Jesus was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is the mediator between humanity and God the Father.

The Holy Spirit, who is the eternal Spirit of God, leads people to repentance, lives in them, and is transforming them to be more like Jesus.

These statements clearly define our understanding of God as our Creator and our Redeemer. They also clearly define our understanding of ourselves, created in God's image, separated from God because of sin but offered forgiveness and redemption through the work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Today we're going to look at statement's 7 and 8 and talk a little about the idea of belonging and how we embrace our individuality while and at the same time embracing our togetherness in a community of faith.

Statement #7 sums up what we believe about the church when it says...

The Church is made up of all believers, who are adopted into the family of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship God, build one another up, share the gospel, and promote justice and love in the world.

Notice in our statement that we capitalize the word church, or what we sometimes call the Big C church. This capitalization is not a sign of superiority but rather of unity and togetherness. We can understand our view of the big C church by clarifying what we sometimes mean when we talk about the church. Sometimes we talk about our local church—like North Park Community Church, the place where we attend, serve and grow in faith with others. We can also talk about the church global. North Park isn't the only church in London, let alone Ontario, or Canada or the world. The global church expands our understanding of the church further. But then there is the universal church that spans not just the globe but also time—this is what we mean by the big C church—the whole people of God. And this big C church, this church universal, is made up of all believers. All

believers—referring back to statements about Jesus, God's only Son, who died in our place and offers us salvation through faith. The church is made up of believers, people who place their hope and trust in Jesus. The Greek word used in the new testament that translate into church is Ekklesia and it is never used to refer to a building or a place, instead it always refers to a people. And here's the thing we need to always remember about the big C church—that being made up of all believers it is always more inclusive than exclusive.

You see, Jesus is the only way to salvation, don't hear me wrong. Being more inclusive doesn't mean that there are many ways to salvation. Jesus is the only way the only truth and the only life—but Jesus' arms are open wide. From the early days of the church, this was wrestled with and yet confirmed time and time again.

John 3:16 says it best,

for God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son, that whosoever (anybody) believes shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The church is made up of all believers in Jesus Christ...who are adopted into the family of God. I love this. The New Testament uses the word ekklesia—a gathering of believers—when it speaks of the church, but it also uses many metaphors to describe the church and the most common and perhaps the most powerful is the metaphor of a family.

And notice this about the family of God—we are all adopted into it. It's not like some of us are in and some of us are out but allowed in...no, we are all out...sin has separated us from God, but through belief in Jesus we are adopted into the family of God.

John 1:12-13 states this clearly,

But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.¹³ They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

The Ugly Duckling is a great story of discovering true identity and finding acceptance as the swan comes to know it is a swan, but the ugly side of the ugly duckling story is that the swan is rejected by other kinds of birds. The whole idea of adoption is

the inclusion of the outsider, the outcast and the sinner—that's each and every one of us. And when we chose to believe, when we chose to embrace the invitation of God in Jesus Christ, we are not cast aside, but adopted into the family of God and given a place to belong—no matter how different we are.

Let me take a moment and tell you a story that speaks to me of this idea of acceptance and belonging. When I was in my late 20's I decided to get my motorcycle license. I had ridden a small dirt bike a couple of times when I was younger, but I hadn't been on a bike in quite a few years. I bought my bike right here in London at Hully Gully – a 500cc Kawasaki Vulcan and after passing the written test I was free to ride. I remember picking up my bike and circling the parking lot a couple of times trying to remember how to ride. I was terrified as I worked up the courage to hit the busy street. I got out on the road taking it nice and slow, my knuckles were white from holding on so tight, my muscles were tense trying to not crash. About 2 minutes into my ride I saw some other motorcyclists riding toward me and as they passed me they did the most amazing thing—they lowered their hand and gave me a little wave. They must have thought I was pretty rude because I didn't wave back I just kept holding on for dear life. I didn't know these motorcyclists, and I'm sure they didn't know me or that I had literally only been on a bike for 5 minutes, but because I was on a motorcycle I was accepted. I was a biker. If you're a biker, you know what I mean...you get the wave. A simple but powerful gesture of acceptance.

When we are adopted into the family of God we are given a place to belong—a place where we are accepted, not for what we have done or for how well we have done it—but because in the family of God we all share a common belief in Jesus Christ. And because we believe, we are accepted and adopted...we are in...we belong to the big C church. But we aren't just given a place to belong in the family of God—we are also given a purpose as statement #7 finishes off by saying that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to do four things,

1. To worship God.
2. To build one another up.
3. Share the gospel.
4. Promote Justice and love in the world.

Again, let's remember that this empowerment of the Holy Spirit and these four purposes are given to all believers—all believers who are all adopted and who are all empowered to live a life of purpose. Often we can get stuck on church being a place of belonging and there is no doubt that it is that, but it is also much more than that—the church, the family of God is purpose driven. Let me just quickly touch on these four purposes.

First, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship God. We worship God in many ways as the church but our worship of God is not circumstance driven, but God driven. What exactly do I mean by that? Well, I mean that no matter what it is we face in life—we can always worship God. Life can be full of hardship and heart-ache, it can be full of uncertainty and difficulty—we have all experienced this in the past 6 months as our world has been deeply impacted by COVID-19. And yet, we can still worship God and we do still worship God as the church. We proclaim together that God is still good, that God is still in control and that God's ever faithful, ever-loving presence is with us through it all. Holy Spirit empowered worship is not dependent upon circumstance—it is driven by our thanks and praise to God that we express in all seasons and times of life.

Second, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to build each other up. We support one another, we encourage one another and we pray for one another through all of life...as our mission statement says, we inspire, support and mobilize one another to live more like Jesus so that we can be a life giving and transforming presence in our families, community and our world.

Like our worship of God we do this in many ways, big and small and during this pandemic we have continued to build one another up. One quick story I will tell of our kid's ministry. This summer we had over 50 kids in grades 1-5 sign up to be secret agents with the challenge to live out our mission statement. One of their tasks was to make a picture or a card and send it to someone in our church family who might be a bit lonely or need some cheering up. What a beautiful but simple way to encourage one another and build one another up. Holy Spirit empowered encouragement doesn't come from only a few people in the church, it should come from all of us. Each and every one of

us reaching out to each other to build each other up. This is what we as the church do for each other.

Third, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to share the gospel. We call this evangelism and it can be a scary word to some, but really it's about simply speaking out our story of faith in Jesus to others as opportunity arises. We do this in word and in deed. This is why purposes 3 and 4 go together, we share the gospel and we promote justice and love in the world. Again, let me use a practical example of how we as a church have been doing this over the past 6 months. We have purchased water bottles, Gatorade, freezies, granola bars and we have made cookies and muffins and then given them to Sanctuary or Ark Aid. We have donated money to help Lord Elgin School build a playground for their kids. We have shown the love of Jesus to others in deeply practical and powerful ways. Together we share Jesus with the world—we use our words to tell others our own story of hope that is found in Jesus Christ and we demonstrate Christ's love to the world by living out our faith each and every day promoting the justice and the love of God through our actions.

The Church is made up of all believers, who are adopted into the family of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship God, build one another up, share the gospel, and promote justice and love in the world.

We are a bunch of unique individuals, adopted into the family of God through faith in Jesus Christ to find belonging and purpose together in community.

We, as the church, also believe in the authority of the Bible. Statement #8 says it this way...

We believe...the writings of the Old and New Testaments comprise the divinely inspired, fully trustworthy, supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

The bible is more than the best-selling book of all time. It's more than a good book or even the good book. Over the years you may have heard the bible described in one of these ways: God's love letter to the world, God's owner's manual for life, or God's roadmap that guides us through life. These are all true—but the bible is more than that. The bible is actually a library—it is comprised of 66 different books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. These 66 books were written over

hundreds of years by dozens of different authors and are composed of many different styles and forms including books of history, prophecy and wisdom. And just as the many individuals are brought together to make up the church and the family of God, in the same way, the many individual authors of the bible and their contributions are brought together under the inspiration of God.

So much could be said about the composition of the bible. There is just so much rich history in how the bible that tells us the story of God's amazing love, has gotten into our hands to read. We can't possibly cover all of this today—but what we will cover are the three main statements about the bible that we believe.

First—it is divinely inspired, meaning God has controlled the narrative—that God led and directed the men and women who authored the bible to each play a part in the telling of God's story. As it says in,

2 Timothy 3:16

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.

Questions will always arise about how to interpret certain passages of the bible, but we do not question the fact that God has spoken. In this way, we always hold divine inspiration over human interpretation. The reality is that our understanding of truth is always assisted by God's Spirit within us. I had a professor in seminary who always said—it's not about how many times you have been through the bible—it's about how many times the bible has been through you. This statement has always been a reminder to me that just as God has played a part in inspiration, so God also plays a part in our interpretation and we must allow God to lead us into the truth that he is speaking to us through the bible.

Secondly, the bible is trustworthy, meaning we don't have to understand it all in order to understand the depths of God's love for us. Something is trustworthy when we may not know everything about it, but we know it works. Take flying in airplanes for instance—remember when we used to do that? How does something made of metal and carrying dozens of passengers soar through the air?

Sure you can study velocity, thrust and air pressure, but you don't have to because we know that planes fly. We have seen them in the sky and perhaps we've even been on one. Now don't mishear me on this—I'm not saying we don't need to study the bible. In fact I'm saying just the opposite—we do need to study the bible, we do need to dig deep into God's word. But there will be some things we just won't get the answers for, but this doesn't mean we can't trust God's word. The bible is fully trustworthy.

And this leads me to the third truth we believe about the bible—that it has supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of life and conduct. Again, the bible won't reveal to us everything, but it will reveal enough.

A number of years ago I travelled abroad and found myself in a foreign city, surrounded by people who spoke a language I did not understand. It was before the days of smart phones and GPS, so I had a simple map to help guide me to where I was to spend the night at a youth hostel. And what I thought was pretty clear on paper all of a sudden didn't seem so clear as I stood on a street corner unable to read signs or speak to anyone about where to go. I needed more information, I needed help, but through some trial and error and the friendly help of others, I arrived at my destination. It would have been much easier to have all the information—take two steps forward, turn right etc., but in the end while I didn't have all the information I needed, I did have enough information to get me where I was going. The bible doesn't reveal everything to us, but it does reveal enough to get us to where God is leading us.

As a community of unique individuals in different stages of life and with different experiences of life—the bible is God's word that leads us all forward in faith. In preschool ministry we teach from the bible, in kids ministry we teach from the bible, in youth we teach from the bible, in small groups we teach from the bible, at ESL we teach from the bible, at North Park Huron and North Park Stratford and North Park Fanshawe we teach from...you guessed it...the bible. We do this because...

We believe...the writings of the Old and New Testaments comprise the divinely inspired, fully

trustworthy, supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

Let us close our time together by reading statements 7 and 8 together.

We believe...

The Church is made up of all believers, who are adopted into the family of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship God, build one another up, share the gospel, and promote justice and love in the world.

The writings of the Old and New Testaments comprise the divinely inspired, fully trustworthy, supreme and sufficient authority in all matters of faith and conduct.

North Park Community Church...this is what we believe.

Points to Ponder

We Believe. Exploring Our Statement of Faith Statements 7 & 8 – The Church and the Bible

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions...

1. When in your life have you felt like you were on the outside looking in and searching for a sense of belonging? What do you perceive are the biggest barriers to others accepting you? What do you feel are the biggest barriers for you accepting others?
2. We believe that the church is not the building, but rather the people. What have you found most challenging about the past six months of COVID-19 and not being able to gather in a large group? What do you feel God is wanting to teach you through this?
3. Being the church means finding belonging AND purpose. Of the four purposes listed in our statement of faith, which one is easiest for you to live out? Which one is the most challenging? Why?

4. Describe a time when God has used the words of the Bible to grow your faith. Do you have a favourite passage or story from the Bible? If so, share it with your group and explain why it means so much to you.
5. What struggles do you have in understanding and interpreting the Bible? In what ways (Bible study, being mentored etc.) have you tried to deepen your knowledge of God? What tools or resources have helped you in Bible study?
6. What lessons in life and faith is God teaching you through this message that you can apply to your life this week?

Prayer and Action Item

Take a few moments to think of specific people you know and care about from North Park Community Church (our local church) and pray for them. Next, consider sending them a text, email or card to express your appreciation for them.