

Message Notes October 11th, 2020

The Good and Beautiful Community Week 5: The Christ-Centered Community

(Matthew 28:18-19; John 17:20-21; Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

• One-Note Orchestra

- I got my first violin for my birthday when I was in 4th grade. My dad gave me lessons for a couple years and in middle school, I joined the school orchestra. Yes, I was an “Orch-Dork” all the way through high school and even a little bit in college. (Shout out to all my Orch-Dorks and Band-Geeks out there!) We were lucky at my high school to have a full orchestra, where all the strings and the band combined to play some amazing symphonic works. Those are great memories!
 - An orchestra is really an incredible thing. So many different instruments and voices, so many different sounds, so many different textures and emotions—sometimes *hundreds* of instruments brought together to make *one sound*. All of it is united by one song from the imagination of a gifted composer and the direction of a skilled conductor.
- Suppose the dozens of people and instruments in an orchestra decided they didn’t want to play the song or follow the conductor—suppose everyone just wanted to play their own song and do their own thing. That would be a *cacophony* rather than a symphony!
 - Suppose all the violins got together and decided they didn’t like that cellos, the flutes, the tympanies, the tubas, or anyone else: they just wanted to be around other violins. So, they made an orchestra of *all violins*, nothing else allowed. They might be able to make some pretty music if they were gifted, a very high and pure sound. But, their sound would be severely *limited* compared to the rich tapestry of sound that a full orchestra is capable of creating.
 - Suppose, one of those violinists decided she *only* liked the sound of the high-G. She created an orchestra of all-violins who *only play* the high-G on the E-string and *nothing else*. A bunch of violins just droned on and on with that one, single note and nothing else. Pretty soon, it would cease to even be music—it would just be a noise.

• All Nations

- Today, we’re continuing in the Good and Beautiful Community series to explore “the Christ-Centered Community,” and we’re going to be talking about *unity*.
 - Unity is something that most people like, in theory. Most of us think it’s a good idea.
 - But, while most of us like the *idea* of unity, our default tendency is to want *uniformity*—like the one-note orchestra. Put another way, we want to distance ourselves from people who are different from us, people who threaten our convictions, people who disagree with us, and stay close together with people who are like us. It’s part of our human nature at this point to want to group together with similar folks and keep a safe distance from dissimilar folks.
 - Lesslie Newbigin, a British Theologian and missionary, said, “There is a longing for unity among all human beings, for unity offers the promise of peace. The problem is that we want unity on our terms, and it is our rival programs for unity which tear us apart.”
- Many of us are familiar with “the Great Commission” of Jesus in Matthew 28. Jesus has risen from the dead and appears to his disciples before ascending to heaven, and he leaves them with this awesome mission; he says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”
 - The word for “all nations” here is “ethnos” which is where we get our word “ethnicity.” Jesus is telling his followers to spread his mission into all the world, to people of *every kind*: every ethnicity, every culture, every race, every language, every personality, every class and status. Now, think about that. That’s a *lot* of different voices, right? The Good and Beautiful Community of God’s people is to be the social-equivalent of a richly diverse *symphony*, the farthest thing from a one-note orchestra.
 - Paul expressed the nature of this New-Covenant Community as a “new humanity” (Ephesians). The Church was a kind of people the world had never seen: people of all kinds of previously divergent cultures, viewpoints, and statuses, now united into the life of the risen King of kings.

- In this new community, Paul says there is no longer, “Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all,” (Colossians 3:11). That is an *astounding* statement. Gentile and Jew was one of the greatest cultural boundaries of that time. “Barbarians did not speak Greek and were thought to be uncivilized. Scythians were considered ruthless, crude and violent,” (James Bryan Smith). Male and female, slave and free, all were now one because, “Christ is all, and Christ is in all.”
- *Everyone* is invited to enter this community and become a new creation in Christ, no exceptions. There is one and only one basis for the unity of this community: *Christ is all and Christ is in all*.
- The Church is *one* body, *one* people, *one* bride because of Christ. This is God’s Mission: unite everything in Christ, where our differences don’t dissolve into uniformity, rather our complexity is united in *harmony*. All of our different voices now join in one Song with one Conductor. The Song is the Gospel and the Conductor is Christ.
 - In Christ, God is making a tapestry of many different threads; He’s joining together the discarded scraps into an ever-growing masterpiece; He’s grafting together the broken pieces into one beautiful mosaic. His ability to create harmony out of our different sounds is far greater than our ability to make dissonance.
- In his final moments before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed for all his followers: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me,” (John 17). This is a radical prayer that can only be accomplished by a wonderful God with a beautiful Kingdom.
- **To Divide or Not to Divide?**
 - But I can hear your thinking, because I’m also thinking, *what about when we disagree?*
 - Sometimes, we do need to distance ourselves, sometimes we do need to draw a line in the sand, sometimes we do have to separate in some way. It’s not unheard of in Scripture: in one instance, Paul separated from another companion on his missionary journey, because they determined they could not serve together. There are instructions for how to approach moments of division, how to reconcile, and if all else fails, how to distance peacefully.
 - But here’s the problem: in all of this, our first instinct when we disagree has become to *divide*. It seems today that our *default* is to seek *division*, rather than strive for unity in Christ.
 - It’s *easier* to divide. It’s simpler, it’s more comfortable to separate when we differ, rather than strive for unity.
 - Yes, there are times when division becomes inevitable. But our *default* as the body of Christ is to seek harmony, to pursue unity at all costs and only part ways as a *last resort*. Too often today, we seek separation as a first resort. What if the master conductor could over time make our dissonances into harmony, because *Christ is above all and Christ is in all?*
 - Again, I can hear you thinking, “Pastor, it’s simple, just stick with the truth: it’s black and white, if someone can’t see that then they are the problem! God’s word says it, I believe it, that settles it!”
 - Yes, yes. But what about this? “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall be fully known, even as I am fully known.” That’s the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13—you know, the person God used to write more than half of the New Testament?
 - When we get to the other side and see God face-to-face, all of us will have one thing in common: all of us will realize we were wrong. All of us will see that we had something wrong, we saw something imperfectly, we came to the wrong conclusion somewhere, our theological understanding was imperfect. We’ll see once and for all how dependent on grace we really are.
 - True may be true and false may be false, but if I think that I have the perfect viewpoint on every detail and the God’s-eye-view on every matter, that my interpretation of God’s Word is flawless and everyone else is wrong—then I am very false indeed.
 - In his preaching to the early Methodists, John Wesley picked up an idea from Augustine and said: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things charity.” (Can you be charitable to those whom you think are wrong?) Wesley continued, “I ask not therefore of him with whom I

would unity in love, 'Are you of my Church? Of my congregation?'...I inquire not, 'Do you receive the Super of the Lord in the same posture and manner that I do?'...Nay, I ask not of you...whether you allow baptism and the Lord's Supper at all. Let these things stand by: we will talk of them, if need be, at a more convenient season. My only question at present is this, 'Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?'" He also said, "...although a difference of opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may."

- I can think of churches in our backyard, in the Danville community, whose positions I disagree with. I can think of pastors with whom I would not be able to fully unite in an external, organizational, manner, because some of the issues we differ on would prevent this from being practical. Yet, I can say to these churches and these pastors, "We are one in Christ, because we agree on one essential thing: Jesus is Lord."
 - James Bryan Smith says, "If your heart beats in love for Jesus, then take my hand and we will walk together in fellowship."
- Our culture has largely lost the ability to disagree respectfully. Our society no longer knows how to talk about challenging, complicated subjects without attacking each other. (Did you watch the presidential debate? I'm not going to say anything else about that!)
 - Sadly, this same attitude has worked its way into churches. *But this is not the culture of the Kingdom.* The culture of the Kingdom says, "I honor you, even though I disagree with your opinion." The culture of the Kingdom says, "We may not be able to dwell together on every issue, but we have one thing in common: we share from the one cup of Communion, the one loaf of Christ's body—we are fully reliant on the grace of one God."
 - What if we, the Church, led the way? In this world of division, polarization, and constant bickering, could the church possibly be the greatest hope for unity? Take time this week to pray for someone you disagree with. Take time this week to pray for a different church in our community besides our own. Take time this week to pray for the unity of Christians of all shapes and sizes, all denominations and perspectives. Because one day, the only thing that will matter is that *Christ is all and Christ is in all.* Amen.