

## **You Can't Spell Community without Unity – Oct. 25, 2020**

I was looking on my DVR on Saturday night for a sporting event I had recorded. There were almost 50,000 people in the stadium. No one was wearing masks. Two teams from different countries were climbing all over each other – there was no such thing as social distancing.

Anyone have a clue what the event was that I pulled up? If you're watching live type your guess into the chat box.

Could it have been a football game in the US – maybe right after a Trump rally?

Could it have been a game recorded in February before this nightmare began?

Any ideas?

What if I told you that it was a beautiful Spring day? What if I said that it was a Rugby game? What if I said that it wasn't recorded, but was a live game.

It was match 2 of the Bledisloe Cup held in Auckland between the All Blacks – New Zealand's national team, and the Wallabies – Australia's national team. You probably know that there is a little rivalry between New Zealand and Australia.

Anyway, the All Blacks thrashed the Wallabies 27 to 7.

But what's surprising in this story is not that the All Blacks beat the Wallabies – they are the best rugby team in the world – but that this all happened in an environment that looked like COVID didn't exist. No social distancing. No masks. No community transmission. No lines to get tested. It was a little island of sanity in the midst of a world of crazy!

Now many of you know that I'm a citizen of the two best countries in the world: NZ and Canada. One was by birth, and one by adoption.

And New Zealand's COVID miracle has largely been credited to our young Prime Minister, Jacinda Adern. She's received a lot of attention on the world stage in the last few years, and for good reason.

As COVID was bearing down on the world, and cases were increasing in New Zealand, she took a very bold stance. She appealed to her "Team of 5 Million" to make some sacrifices. When it came to lockdown she called upon her team to "go hard and go early." And while the rest of the world was battling to flatten the curve, New Zealand managed to squash it completely. With the virus safely stopped at the border and quarantined there was no social transmission within the country for 102 days. After the initial couple of months of hardship the country exited lockdown to freedom without fear. Even when a few cases broke through about 6 weeks ago, they were quickly isolated and within a few weeks the country returned to normal again. As last weekend's rugby game showed.

Last week Pastor Steve kicked off our new series, called "The WE factor" showing us how "We were created for community." This week and for next 2 weeks we're going to look at some of the practical implications of this idea.

The subject this week is unity – and my message is titled "You Can't Spell Community Without Unity." When we think of unity at church we usually think of unity of vision and mission, or unity of method. Or even unity of doctrine. These are all good, and possibly what Steve wanted me to talk about, but that's not what I want to talk about today,

In fact, I feel like a warning needs to be put up here. It's like on tv when there's bad language or violence.

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*Warning: This message contains themes that may make you uncomfortable and may challenge your pre-conceived ideas about Church. Viewer discretion is advised.*

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In fact – I may say something that is not politically correct – I usually do. I may say something that you disagree with. But what I hope, more than anything, is that I don't say something that God disagrees with.

As I was preparing this message it took a turn that I wasn't expecting, and I know that I'm not going to do it justice in any way. But I want to be honest to the text, and to what's happening in the world around is.

Our passage today is Ephesians chapter 4, versus 1-6

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*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 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 to one hope when 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. (Ephesians 4: 1-6)*

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First, I want us to look at verse 1:

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*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Eph 4:1)*

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What is this calling that this young group of believers has received? In the first 3 chapters of Ephesians Paul is talking about this “mystery” that the Gentiles have been included in the people of God. This was a radical idea – with HUGE consequences for both Jews and Gentiles.

Now, for the sake of simplifying things, when I say Jew – I mean a descendant of Abraham who identified themselves religiously as Jewish, and when I say Gentile – I mean basically everybody else – for the sake of our text they were generally Roman citizens living in what is now South-Eastern Europe and Turkey.

Paul's main point up to now is that what was once divided is now reconciled. It goes back to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12: 2&3

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*I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12: 2-3)*

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Even though God scattered the nations and divided their language, his intention was always to bring them back again. Abraham and his line were central to that plan – they were to be the seed-keepers – the ones who would bring forth the one who was to unite humanity – Jesus.

The central issue here in Ephesians is racial reconciliation. This is such a hot topic right now, but unfortunately this is nothing new, not even for Paul.

So let's start with a little bit of background to Ephesus and Gentile Churches. Many of these churches were founded by Paul on his missionary journeys, or by people who went out from those churches. The usually started with a few Jews who believed in Jesus the Messiah, but quickly spread to the non-Jewish population.

The Jews didn't think much of Gentiles, and the Gentiles weren't too fond of the Jews either – it was a mutual loathing – a bit like Kiwis and Aussies. Many of the Jews continued to practice their old ways, which offended the Gentiles. And the Gentiles did things that offended the Jews. This caused division within the church with both sides thinking that they were better than the other. Some started meeting separately.

So when Paul writes the letter to the Ephesians, which was probably a circular letter intended for several churches in the region, he knows that he has to address this thorny issue. He knew that for the Church to be effective, to achieve its mission, this issue of racial equality must be dealt with.

Paul knew from the scriptures that God had created man and women in His image. To steal a line from the US Constitution, “that all people are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”

He knew that for the Church to be what God called it to be both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus had to live together in community as equals, serving and respecting each other; showing to the rest of the world the right way to act.

Now, lets work backwards in verse 1:

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*As a prisoner for the Lord, then,  
I urge you to live a life worthy  
of the calling you have received. (Eph 4:1)*

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It is not enough to believe that we are all equal – we must **act** like we are all equal.

One of the implications of Paul's language here is a comparison to how they lived before becoming a Christian. Paul is calling them to a higher standard than they used to live, and certainly to a higher standard when compared to the world around them.

Paul starts the verse with a phrase he uses quite a lot:

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*As a prisoner for the Lord then,  
I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. (Eph 4:1)*

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Paul literally was a prisoner – chained to a Roman soldier on his way to or in Rome, awaiting trial before Caesar. He knew that the charges against him were fake, and yet here he was.

One of the sayings that Paul used a lot was that we are no longer slaves to sin BUT slaves to Christ. It's a bit of an oxymoron. It doesn't make sense.

Paul reminds us that our freedom in Christ comes at a cost. Yes, we have freedom in Christ, and yet we choose to restrict that freedom for the sake of Christ and of others.

So let's now look at verses 2 and 3 where Paul tells us HOW to live a life worthy of this calling. He says:

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*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Eph 4: 2-3)*

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I can imagine some of the issues each side would have felt here. Today we might even use the word "privilege." The Gentile believers were accepted in their culture and could make things happen – they certainly had cultural privilege. And the Jewish believers had a deep knowledge of the scriptures – much more than these new-comers – they had a form of spiritual privilege. Each side had reason to believe that they were better than the other.

Yet Paul's instruction is for humbleness and gentleness. He pleads with us not to place ourselves over the other, and not to think so highly of ourselves so that we stomp on others.

Humility and gentleness weren't seen as virtues in the Roman world where might was right and peace was achieved through violence, not love.

Paul is reminding us of the way of the cross; of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit, and the meek, and the merciful, and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers." This is what Paul is calling us to live out – especially when we are the ones in positions of power or privilege.

It makes me think – that of all the ugly and horrible things we have seen over the past few months – in our Police departments, in our hospitals, in our streets – how many of them would never have happened if people had taken these two simple words – humility and gentleness – and put them into practice.

Be completely humble and gentle, Paul says. But it's not easy. Is it? It's not easy to remind yourself that your rights come with responsibilities, and that we are called to be a slave to Christ and not to laud our freedoms over other people.

It is easy to point the finger and to lay blame. And there certainly is plenty of blame to go around these days. But it's much harder to look in the mirror and acknowledge that you too, no matter what your race or colour or origin, have been guilty of prejudice and dis-unity.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to blame the victim here. But Paul doesn't seem too interested in taking sides. His focus is on building unity, not division.

Be patient, Paul says. Bear one another in love. Even when we are wronged and injustice has been done against us. Paul knew this all too well – after all, his Roman captor was sitting right next to him as he wrote this.

Peter, too, writes about it in his letters. And James reminds us to:

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*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1: 2-3)*

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Jesus even taught us to turn the other cheek.

Even when we are the oppressed, Paul reminds us to “Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Eph 4: 2b-3)

Now I don’t have answers for what is happening out in the world right now when it comes to racial inequality. All I know is that it is not good, and it needs to change. I’m not smart enough to know how to fix it.

But what I do know, is that if I start right here – with me, and with us, then all things are possible.

You see we have something that the world doesn’t have. We have the unity of the Spirit.

At a wedding it is often said that what God has bound together let no man cast aside. I believe that this is exactly Paul’s point here when it comes to the Jews and the Gentiles and their issues of reconciliation. God has called them together. And what God and his Spirit have joined, no one should cast that aside or tear it apart.

This idea that a group of strangers, who would normally have no association with each other; who would normally be separated by cultural and ethnic barriers; who would look down on each other, and the powerful take advantage of the weak; that this group with nothing more in common than a professed faith in Jesus and held together by his Spirit; that this group would be a little island of sanity in the midst of a sea of crazy!

Paul ends this section with a sentence that is almost musical. He says:

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*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when 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. (Eph 4: 4-6)*

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There are seven sets of ones here. Paul is ramming home this idea of unity. It is tied up in the very nature of God. There is no room for division, no room for separation, no room for inequality.

Paul is reminding us that the Jewish believers had the same Spirit, the same Lord and the same God and Father as the Gentile believers. He says that there is only one body of believers. Only one hope. Only one saving faith. Only baptism into one name. And that is all in the name of Jesus, who, to borrow the words of John in the Revelation, “was and is and is to come.” The one in the words of Peter in Acts 4 “for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

Now I’m so thankful for our community here at Cornerstone. And I feel like I’m preaching to the choir here with this message. Because I know that we all understand this.

I'm thankful that 20 years ago Pastor Andrew stepped out of a Chinese church with a vision for multi-cultural, diverse and inclusive church – do you know how rare that is?

I'm thankful that when I look around at our church community – whether it's on our town hall zoom meetings or back when we could meet in person, that there is a sea of faces from all over the world – standing shoulder to shoulder worshipping and praising God.

People from China and Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, Russia and Poland, Germany and France, Canada and America, New Zealand, and yes, even sometimes from Australia.

I'm so thankful that our leadership team and our staff team model racial diversity and inclusion.

I'm so thankful that we have a heart for those outside our walls that are suffering and in need.

And I'm so thankful that I see our team of 1000 here at Cornerstone practicing humility, gentleness, patience and love in our midst and our world every day.

But I don't ever want to assume that we've "arrived." As long as there is injustice and inequality in our world, there is still work to do.

So as we wrap up this message I want to encourage you to do a few things.

First, if you're not already in a small group – what are you waiting for? In fact, I'd go as far as to say that, especially in these days, if you're not in a small group, you're not doing church!

Second, in your small group or with your friends, can I encourage you to share your stories of race and prejudice and inclusion – the bad and the good. I think that it's not until when truly hear each other's stories that we start to build real community and real unity. There are discussion questions available online for every message that will help you in your conversation.

And finally, if you're new to Cornerstone, and I know that there are many of you out there who have started coming during lockdown, please sign up for our Discover Cornerstone event. You'll get to know our church story, our staff and other people. Our next event is November 15.

Let's end with a word of prayer.

Father God I acknowledge that this topic can be hard for some people. I pray for your spirit of healing and restoration and reconciliation to be at work on our church and in our wider community. We pray for those whose stories of injustice have been shared publicly in recent times. May you bring healing to their lives and to their families. And we pray for the many, many more whose stories have not been told. May you comfort them, and deliver them.

Father we look around at the cries for justice and equality in our world at the moment. We cry out for your shalom to be present in this world and for all your children to be treated with dignity and respect and equality. It pains us when we see that this is not happening.

Lord would you help us to be agents of change. Start here in our midst, and flow through us into the world around us. We cry out Lord for your spirit of compassion and reconciliation to be poured out.

Jesus we want our world to be better than this – we want more than this. Send you Spirit through us. Breathe in us. Consume us with a passion for the things and the people that you love. Start with us Lord – have your way with us. Amen.

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## Discussion Questions

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*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 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 to one hope when 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. (Ephesians 4: 1-6)*

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### LET’S TALK

1. What impacted you the most from this week’s message?
2. Read Ephesians 3 and summarise “the calling” that Paul is referring to.
3. Peter stated that the issue for Paul in this letter is racial reconciliation. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. We don’t really have this same issue here (Jews vs. Gentiles). What related issues do you see in the culture around us? What about in the church?
5. Where have you seen people acting with humility and gentleness when it comes to racial equality and reconciliation?
6. What does it look like if the church is to be “an island of sanity in the midst of a world of crazy?”
7. Share a story from your experience where you have been treated different or unequal because of your race? If you can’t think of one, share an example of someone you know.
8. Going deeper: Share your own reflection on ways that you have acted out of privilege or superiority. Ask for feedback on how you could make this more equal. (There is no judgement here – simply share from your heart and humbly listen to feedback).
9. How can “our team of 1000” at Cornerstone, or even “your team of (how many are in your small group)”, “keep the unity of the spirit through the bonds of peace” when it comes to racial equality?

### LET’S PRAY

Spend some time in prayer together. Pray for the racial issues in our world, your shared experiences, and for our church to be leaders in this area.