

Today we're wrapping up a 3-part series called *Living Out Unity in Ethnic Diversity*.

We've been talking about how the church *by its very nature* is meant to be a community of unity in ethnic diversity. In fact, this is *central* to God's purposes in Christ, as God works to unify all people and things in heaven and on earth together under the authority of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

I'm originally from a very white suburban area in the US, and last Sunday I shared that two days after I was born, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was tragically assassinated. I shared about how, even though I was a baby at the time, that event, through the influence of my late elder brother, was significant for my own journey in becoming, by God's grace, a person with a deep heart for racial and ethnic reconciliation. If you missed it and would like to hear more about that story, you can check out last week's message online.

But I'd like to begin today's message by circling back to Dr. King — specifically something he said— a lament he articulated about the church. As you hear these words, keep in mind that Dr. King was himself a church person, a pastor. He said:

I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America.<sup>2</sup>

What's happening at eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings? It's the church hour, more or less. It's that time of week when most Christian congregations gather for worship.

In his context, Dr. King was of course referring to the American church of the 1960's.

But cannot the same thing still be said today not only of the American church, but also of the Canadian church? Is not eleven o'clock Sunday morning one of the most segregated hours in *this* nation?

Canadian Mennonite missiologist Sherman Lau says that it is. In a recent article in the Canadian magazine *Faith Today*, he contends that the root issue of this problem has to do with something called systemic tribalism.<sup>3</sup>

According to Lau, tribalism can be defined as the "behaviour and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's own tribe or social group. It is the belief that only my own kind will be able to protect and look out for my own interests."

As a result, congregations across Canada often exclude those outside of their own group in order to remain loyal to their particular ethnic church heritage. Here are a few examples of how such tribalism finds expression in Canadian churches today:

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<sup>1</sup> See Ephesians 1:10

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Meet the Press* interview, April 17, 1960. Cited from Stanford University transcription: [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/Vol05Scans/17Apr1960\\_InterviewonMeetthePress.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol05Scans/17Apr1960_InterviewonMeetthePress.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Sherman Lau, "[Does Systemic Racism Exist in the Canadian Church?](#)" *Faith Today*, July-August 2020 issue.

- Global Christians are often expected to assimilate to the worship styles and governance approaches of so-called mainstream (that is, mostly white) Canadian church culture.
- Local church leadership is often disproportionately represented by a church's founding ethnic group. When other ethnicities do get included in leadership, it often amounts to little more than tokenism.
- Ethnic churches in Canada rarely break through to truly reach and welcome people from backgrounds other than their own, even after several generations.

When I consider these examples of what this author calls “ethnic tribalism” in the Canadian church, I think of Cornerstone’s journey. I think of how far we’ve come, on the one hand. But I also think of how far we have left to go. For example:

- Where might God be calling us to stretch in terms of becoming more culturally varied and inclusive in our worship style and approach?
- While we do have ethnic diversity on our leadership teams, how can we be more intentional about incorporating a more global representation of sisters and brothers into church leadership?
- How can we then make sure that those leaders are empowered to help shape the church’s present and future out of the unique gifts and perspectives they bring from their culture-of-origin?

These are challenging questions, and Cornerstone has some real learning and growing to do in these areas. But this doesn’t change the fact that God has brought us a very long way already in terms of becoming a church of unity in ethnic diversity.

Many of you know Cornerstone’s story, but on any given Sunday we have lots of newer people here who will not yet be aware that Cornerstone has its roots in a Chinese church context. And we’re grateful for those roots. Those roots are an integral part of our story, a vital aspect of who we are as a local church.

That said, Cornerstone was founded on the deep theological conviction that when legitimate language and geographical barriers are no longer in play, no good reasons remain for Christians to segregate themselves from one another along national, ethnic or cultural lines. One of the things that makes Cornerstone’s story quite notable is that by God’s grace alone, it is one of only a handful of North American congregations with ethnic church roots that have, within the span of a single generation, morphed from an essentially mono-ethnic church into an unmistakably multi-ethnic church.

To borrow the words of the psalmist, “The Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.”<sup>4</sup>

Especially in an area as diverse as the GTA, eleven o’ clock on Sunday should never be the most segregated hour. It should be the most integrated hour, the most inclusive hour. It should be an hour that looks like an earthly version of John’s heavenly vision in Revelation chapter 7 that Pastor Andrew preached on two weeks ago— a vision of a vast crowd from every nation, tribe and language united in their worship of Jesus, the Lamb of God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 118:23

<sup>5</sup> See Revelation 7:9-10

For Cornerstone, this question remains: As a church comprised of people from more than 40 different countries of origin, how can we relate to each other more authentically across our ethnic and cultural differences, both in our Sunday worship gatherings *as well as* our day-to-day life together as a church family?

The answer, according to the Bible, lies in *accepting one another*. We find these very words at the heart of the passage we'll be looking at today:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.<sup>6</sup>

It sounds basic enough. But what does it really mean?

In our modern society, acceptance tends to be seen as mere tolerance. We're taught to overlook our differences, and work hard not to offend anyone else for the sake of a more harmonious society: "You do you and I'll do me. You stay I your lane and I'll stay in mine, and we won't get in each other's way. Live and let live."

But when the Apostle Paul urges us to *accept one another* in his letter to the Romans, he has something much deeper and far more challenging in mind than that. Something infinitely more hopeful and satisfying. Let's go to the sacred text now to learn more.

Please turn in your Bible to Romans 15:1-13. I invite you to follow along as I read from the NIV, the New International Version.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;  
I will sing the praises of your name."  
Again, it says,

"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."  
And again,

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 15:7 (NIV)

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;  
let all the peoples extol him.”  
And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,  
one who will arise to rule over the nations;  
in him the Gentiles will hope.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>7</sup>

In the time that remains, we’re going to consider, on the basis of this passage, **three keys for accepting one another across ethnic difference**. The first key is to:

### **1. Adopt the self-denying posture of Christ.**

Paul begins by saying:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. <sup>8</sup>

What does he mean? This statement points back to the issue Paul was addressing in the previous chapter, Romans 14. That chapter describes a dispute that had broken out between two groups of Christians in the church of Rome: those who (to use Paul’s words) were “strong” in matters of conscience concerning Jewish food regulations, and those who were “weak.”

Some background on that: In the Old Testament, especially Leviticus and Deuteronomy, you’ll find lists of so-called “clean” foods that the people of Israel were allowed to eat, alongside lists of so-called “unclean” foods that were prohibited. These food laws were there primarily to give the people of Israel a distinct sense of national identity as a minority people surrounded by pagan nations, as well as to remind them that coming into the presence of God required cleansing.

But in the New Testament, Jesus, the Messiah, abolishes these dietary regulations, declaring all foods clean. <sup>9</sup> Followers of Jesus were now free to eat any foods (although we aren’t free to be gluttons, just to be clear).

In the church of Rome, some Jewish Christians struggled to eat formerly forbidden foods with a clear conscience. For them, it wasn’t so simple as, “Hey, did you hear? Jesus declared all foods clean; let’s go fry up some bacon!”

Stepping away from centuries of religious and cultural tradition comes more easily for some than it does for others. Although himself a Jew, Paul’s conscience allowed him to eat any kind of food with gratitude to God.

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 15:1-13 (NIV)

<sup>8</sup> Romans 15:1 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> See Mark 7:18-19

And then there were Gentile Christians— non-Jewish Christians from a variety of ethnic backgrounds— pagan backgrounds. They hadn't grown up with Jewish food regulations, and generally didn't struggle with questions of conscience along those lines.

Do you see what Paul is addressing here? Behind the obvious matters of food and faith, Paul is addressing an issue in the church of Rome that was, in large part, *dividing Christians along ethnic lines*.

To use Paul's terminology, in the church of Rome there were the "strong" whose conscience allowed them to eat freely, and there were the "weak" whose conscience did not allow them to eat freely. And these divisions fell primarily along ethnic lines. What was to be done?

What was to be done, says Paul, is that the strong— people like himself— shouldn't just please themselves, blatantly flaunting their freedom by eating whatever they feel like in front of the weak. Neither should the strong make it their goal to win the food debate.

Instead, the goal of the strong should be to *bear with* their so-called weaker sisters and brothers with a view to *building them up*. The verb "to bear with" doesn't simply mean to tolerate or overlook differences. It means to carry another's burdens. And to carry another's burdens you have to be in relationship. You have to get close enough to enter into their story and understand how they have come to hold the views and values that they hold.

Contrast this with today's prevailing culture, which says that if you don't share my views and values, I have no need of you; I have no time for you. Oh, you can still do you, but as for me, I'll just stick with those who do share my views and values— I'll stick with *my tribe*.

In contrast, Paul calls us to an acceptance of our sisters and brothers that reflects the way Christ himself has accepted us. While food regulations aren't a pressing issue in today's church, the principle of acceptance Paul teaches in this passage still very much applies when it comes to relating to each other across ethnic difference: We are called to *adopt the self-denying posture of Christ*.

Jesus came into our world, and into our lives, to identify with us, accepting us as we are, and not as we "should be." As *The Message* version of Romans 15:3 says:

That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out. "I took on the troubles of the troubled," is the way Scripture puts it.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus waded right in and helped out. To accept as Jesus accepts doesn't mean you agree with everyone or adopt their perspectives. But it does mean you get close enough to understand their story, their perspective, their life experiences, why they see things as they do, and do things as they do. Biblical acceptance means to expand the circle, to adjust your life and make space for those who are different from you.

In the often-challenging journey of accepting each other across ethnic difference, Paul reminds us once again in our passage to adopt the self-denying posture of Christ himself:

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 15:2 (MSG)

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>11</sup>

These verses bring us to our second key for accepting one another across ethnic difference, which is to:

## **2. Join together in the unifying power of praise.**

In accepting one another across ethnic difference, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains that, “what needs to be built is the common life of praise and worship.” <sup>12</sup> The goal, as we just saw, is that:

... with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>13</sup>

According to Wright, this verse describes:

that glad unanimity of praise and worship which indicates both to the watching world and to the Christians themselves that they are not worshipping a merely local deity, the projection of their own culture, but the One True God of all the world, the God now known as the Father of Jesus the Messiah. <sup>14</sup>

Whatever our ethnic, cultural or other distinctions may be, it is Christ who unites us. Jesus is the focus of our unity. The more we agree with Jesus, and the more we agree about Jesus, the more united we will become. With this in mind, Paul goes on to say:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. <sup>15</sup>

Our acceptance of each other across ethnic difference brings praise to God. Why? Because as we talked about last Sunday, through his cross, Jesus unites diverse people together in God’s family— both Jews and Gentiles from many nations. And as a result, people from every nation can now “glorify God for his mercy, as the text says, joining God’s people in a great chorus of praise and worship.

Because through the cross, *all* who follow Jesus have been reconciled to God, and also to one another. In Christ, the dividing walls that once separated us— ethnic walls, cultural walls, gender walls, social walls, political walls— have been torn down. <sup>16</sup> As followers of Jesus, it is now our job to *live into* this unity that he bled and died to make possible. How can we do so?

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<sup>11</sup> Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

<sup>12</sup> N.T. Wright, *Romans for Everyone*, p, 114.

<sup>13</sup> Romans 15:6 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *Romans for Everyone*, p, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 15:7-9a (NIV)

<sup>16</sup> See Ephesians 2:11-22 (for a sermon on this passage, see: <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/sermons/boundary-breaking-embrace/>).

One of the most fundamental ways to do so is to join together regularly in the unifying power of Jesus-focused praise. When we, people from many different nations, tribes and tongues, come together for worship each Sunday, we are (as Paul puts it), uniting our minds and our voices by focusing our praise on Jesus our Lord.

We live in an era when regular church attendance is down considerably, even among those who describe themselves as committed Christians. Here at Cornerstone, we track certain stats that would suggest the average congregant attends Sunday worship— guess how many times per month? Approximately 2 times per month. This phenomenon can be seen across the wider North American church. Just Google “church attendance trends” and you will quickly find articles that talk about it.

I want to encourage and even exhort you to make consistent Sunday worship attendance a given in your life, and that of your family. We live in a world where we are inundated with messages that are contrary to the gospel of Jesus, messages that serve to accentuate our differences and disagreements, message that serve to divide instead of unite us.

What else do you do during a given week that allows you the chance to unite your minds and your voices with diverse sisters and brothers in Christ in harmonious praise and worship to God? What better chance to you get to do that than on Sunday mornings at 9:30 or 11:30? Can you honestly find a better way, a more important or significant way, to spend your Sunday morning than that? As Dr. King said, the worship hour should be the best picture of unity-in-diversity that the church has to offer the world. Let’s all be a part of it consistently, amen?

The third key to accepting one another across ethnic difference is to:

### **3. Act in the hope that God is always true to his promises.**

In verse 4 of our passage, Paul writes:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.<sup>17</sup>

We find such enduring hope through the scriptures because the scriptures demonstrate that God has always been and will always be faithful to his promises. For example, we’ve already looked at verses 8-9, where Paul says:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.<sup>18</sup>

It is the scriptures that tell the story of how God promised Abraham that he would bless his descendants—the people of Israel— *so that* through them all nations would be blessed. This promise has been fulfilled, and continues to be fulfilled, through Israel’s Messiah, Jesus. Through his cross, Jesus now reconciles all who follow him to God and to one another— people of every nation, tribe and tongue. Gentiles all around the world now glorify God for his mercy to them in Christ.

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<sup>17</sup> Romans 15:4 (NIV)

<sup>18</sup> Romans 15:8-9a (NIV)

Paul goes on to quote several Old Testament promises about this very thing:

As it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;  
I will sing the praises of your name.”  
Again, it says,  
“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”  
And again,  
“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;  
let all the peoples extol him.”<sup>19</sup>

The scriptures unfold the story of how God has been and will continue to be true to these promises, and this diverse congregation is a living breathing testament to that. The scriptures for us, then, are the earlier part of the story that is still unfolding today, as God, ever true to his word, continues to fulfill his promises in Christ.

And do you know what this means? It means we can do the often-challenging work of accepting each other across ethnic difference *with confidence that our efforts will not be in vain!* We can act courageously in the sure and certain hope the same God who has proven himself true to his promises again and again throughout scripture will *always* true to his promises.

Paul then shares yet another Old Testament quotation:

And again, Isaiah says,  
“The Root of Jesse will spring up,  
one who will arise to rule over the nations;  
in him the Gentiles will hope.”<sup>20</sup>

Who is the “Root of Jesse”? Well, Jesse was the father of King David, and it was through David’s ancestry that the Messiah, Jesus, came to us. In quoting this verse from Isaiah chapter 11, Paul had the wider context of that chapter in mind.<sup>21</sup> And that chapter speaks of a coming day of universal peace, of *shalom*, when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, and *people of all nations will rally to the Root of Jesse— to Jesus.*

This promise is our hope. And because scripture shows us that God always has always *been* true to his promises, we can act in the hope that God will indeed bring about this future. We can do the sometimes hard and messy work of accepting each other across ethnic difference today, knowing that God will use our efforts toward making Isaiah’s vision a universal and eternal reality.

As we accept one another across ethnic difference, churches like Cornerstone will become a preview, a foretaste of that final unity of all people and all things at the end of time. And when people outside the church see this—those who do not yet follow Jesus— they’ll be drawn to him and more and more people from every nation, tribe and tongue will be drawn into God’s family, joining the great chorus of praise to the Lamb who sits upon the throne—Jesus Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> Romans 15:9b-11 (NIV)

<sup>20</sup> Romans 15:12 (NIV)

<sup>21</sup> See Isaiah 11:1-10



As the worship team makes their way back up, let me share with you Paul's concluding benediction in our passage:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. <sup>22</sup>

May he fill you with all *joy and peace*. Some of you will remember that Cornerstone's Ministry Theme for 2023 is pretty much exactly that: *Making space for joy and flourishing* (the word "flourishing" is another way of talking about biblical peace, or shalom).

This series on *Living Out Unity in Ethnic Diversity* has been all about God's ultimate vision of joy and flourishing for the world, and how we as his people can live into the vision right here, right now. Most everything we've done this year at Cornerstone, from sermon series to special events, fits into that theme of joy and flourishing.

I'll close by telling you that our leadership shares the conviction that God is calling us to carry that theme over into 2024. We sense that God does not yet want us to move on from an emphasis on *Making Space for Joy and Flourishing*. Together we've discerned Ministry Objectives and have laid out a robust range of ministry plans for next year under that theme.

Next Sunday, in place of the usual sermon, our Executive Team— Pastor Andrew, Lisa and myself— will be share a preview of our ministry plans for 2024. Will we see you here for that?

Today, we've seen three keys to accepting one another across ethnic difference:

1. Adopt the self-denying posture of Christ.
2. Join together in the unifying power of praise
3. Act in the hope that God is always true to his promises.

Let's prepare our hearts now for offering, and after that, to join together once again in the unifying power of praise as we sing to Jesus our Lord.

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<sup>22</sup> Romans 15:13 (NIV)