Belonging Across Culture
(Ephesians 2:14-17)

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- Opening comments and a story

[What is Culture?]

But first, let's talk about the word "culture".

Every time I start teaching about culture in my work at the TIM Centre, most people immediately think about ethnicity. So, when you hear a sermon topic about "Belonging across Culture", you would not be wrong in thinking "Oh, we're going to talk about Belonging among all the different ethnic groups here at Cornerstone."

And while it is true that ethnicity is part of culture, it is only one aspect of culture. Culture is a much wider term.

I like to describe culture as the "unspoken rules" in the room. It's the "taken for granted way of behaving". It is the operating system in each of our heads that helps us make sense of the world and it's that filter we use to interpret each others' behaviours.

I have a friend – an older Chinese gentlemen. He told me about a time he was hosting a family gathering at his house. He forgot to buy pop. So he called his daughter-in-law, newly married into the family, to see if she would mind picking up some pop on her way over. When she arrived, she gave him the pop, and my friend said "Here let me pay you back" and he pulled out a $20. She took the money and said "Thanks Dad" and went on her merry way. After the weekend, he pulled me aside and told me the story. With surprise in his voice, he said "I can't believe she took the money!!!"

So what happened here? Culture happened here.

They were both operating by different unspoken communication rules.

If you're curious about decoding what happened here, come talk to me after the worship service.

The point is, that culture is nuanced and subtle and it is always operating in the background when we interact with each other. We each bring our assumptions into every interaction.

- Facial expressions do not mean the same thing in every culture
- Body language do not mean the same thing in every culture
- Tone of voice does not mean the same thing in every culture
- Colour does not have the same connotation in every culture – happy colours
- Good music is not the same in every culture

- Expectations of good leadership and expectations of timeliness are not the same in every culture.

So when I talk about culture differences today, I'm not talking about the different ethnic groups we have gathered here at Cornerstone, I'm talking about the deeper, more nuanced aspects of cultural differences and ***assumptions*** that we all carry when we interact with each other.

Theological Foundation

So let's start with some theological groundwork for this topic. Afterall, diversity, culture and belonging, these are pretty trendy words these days. The previous preachers in this series have laid the foundation that Belonging starts with God's initiative and is rooted in our identity in Christ. Today, I want to add a couple of more pieces to that theological foundation.

Our passage for today is in Ephesians.

Paul is writing to the churches in Ephesus. Ephesus was one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, home to people from many ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. The churches in Ephesus were multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and had a wide spectrum of socio and economic diversity.

In Ephesian 2, Paul writes about the creation of God's multi-ethnic family.

Eph 2:14-16

14 For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people
when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. 15 He
did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace
between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two
groups. 16 Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on
the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

Through Christ, two groups who were historically separated (by religious boundaries, by social boundaries, by historical suspicion of each other), are now brought into one community. Jesus pulled down the barrier, the dividing wall, that kept the two groups apart. And what were those barriers? Well, first, there was the system of laws – the code of behaviour that marked who was in and who was out, who was clean and who was unclean. Then, there was an actual physical barrier – a wall in the Jerusalem temple that kept the Gentiles physically stuck in the outer court and separated from the Jews.

Paul is saying that through Christ, Gentile and Jewish Christians are now coming together as one new people. One new family. They now belong together. But in this coming together, did God erase all their cultural differences?

No. Jews and Gentiles are coming together as a new family AND their cultural differences remained. Neither the Hellinistic Gentiles nor the Jewish Christians were complete on their own. They each enriched the other and needed the correction of each other in order to mature into the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13).

The differences remained but the division is gone.

And this is key so I'm going to say it again - The differences remained but the division is gone.

God intended for cultural differences to be built into the DNA of this new family – to be built into the DNA of his Church.

But Paul wasn't finished. Not only are Jews and Gentiles coming together in one new family – and all the cultural differences remain - but Paul says that HOW this new family comes together – with all of these cultural differences - reveals the manifold wisdom of God:

Ephesians 3:10

10 God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.

How we live – reconciled to God and with each other – with all of our cultural differences – ***with all of its rich variety -*** is to display to the seen and unseen world of God's manifold wisdom.

So what does that mean for a church like Cornerstone?

It means that HOW we "come together" as the new family in this local expression of church – how we ***navigate all the cultural differences that are gathered even in this room right now*** - will display God's story and God's creativity to a watching world.

As pastor and writer Dr. Sherman Lau says:

We should not pursue racial or cultural diversity simply because it is politically correct or it is the latest theological fad. We should do it because it is the Gospel.

So, if:

- cultural differences are built into the DNA of God's new family and
- HOW we navigate those cultural differences displays to a watching world the good news of the Gospel, then

How do we do this? How do we live in community with each other like this?

As I have worked with churches and organizations across Canada, I have noticed several paradigm shifts that churches are making in order to move from Welcoming to Belonging Across Cultures. In the time we have remaining, I'm going to share just two of those shifts with you today.

From Difference is a problem to Difference is curriculum

The first paradigm shift is to move from “Difference is a problem to be solved to Difference is curriculum for learning”

As we trace the history of humanity, we can see that humanity isn’t all that comfortable with difference. In fact, the history of humanity shows that we would much rather have sameness. We see this even as early as Genesis.

After God created humanity in Genesis 1, he blessed it and said, "Now I want you to go and I want you to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth."

And that's exactly what happens. By the time we get to Genesis 10, we read that 70 distinct people groups have emerged.

But that’s when we start seeing the pull towards sameness. Humans wanted sameness. Humans wanted monoculture. And so they resisted God’s plan to fill the earth. In Genesis 11, they decided to stay in one place, one language, one big city, one big tower, one big name for themselves. They thought life would be easier if everyone was the same. They thought their group would be stronger if they were all the same. They thought they would be more united against the outsiders if they were all the same.

We can be like the people at Babel sometimes too, can’t we? There is comfort in sameness. There is efficiency in sameness. There is something in us that longs for the simplicity of sameness. It’s just more comfortable when everyone speaks the same way, thinks the same way, and operates by the same assumptions. Wouldn’t your team at work get along so much better if everyone operated by the same cultural norms? Wouldn’t decisions happen faster if everyone shared the same assumptions? Wouldn’t children’s ministry be so much easier if all the parents in this church parented their kids by the same cultural norms? Wouldn’t the friction in our marriages, friendships and even church conflicts be far fewer if we all engaged with the same unwritten cultural norms?

On some level, we know that difference makes things richer, but if we’re honest, we tend to default to sameness because it just makes things simpler. Difference causes friction but sameness feels harmonious. Difference can be threatening but sameness feels like unity. Difference feels like disruption but sameness feels like efficiency.

But here’s the truth. I think sameness actually fosters exclusion. I think sameness can foster division. I think sameness can actually foster hate. If the ideal is that everyone in our community acts the same way so that we can all get along, then any newcomer who comes into our community who is different will stick out. It doesn’t matter how welcoming the community is. If sameness is the goal, then this newcomer has two choices. Either adapt to the way things are done around here, or remain on the outside looking in. They might be welcomed into the space, but still wonder whether there is room for them to show up as they really are.

Now, all that might happen if sameness was the goal. But sameness isn’t the goal in God’s new family. Remember the theological truth in Ephesians? God designed the Church INTENTIONALLY to have cultural differences. Through Christ, the division is gone but the difference remains.

So if cultural difference is God’s intention, then we need to shift from treating difference as a problem to be solved and instead see difference as curriculum for learning.

Cultural differences is curriculum for learning because it is an invitation to lean in and be curious. It is curriculum for learning because it opens up the opportunity to have a conversation that leads to mutual understanding. It is curriculum for learning because it offers an opportunity to co-create belonging together.

And, if the thought of leaning in and having those kinds of conversations is intimidating to you, well, it's intimidating for all of us. Intercultural Competency is a skill that we can develop. And like a muscle, it gets stronger with practice. We practice holding the tension of different views and different ways of being. We practice enlarging our capacity for complexity. We practice putting aside our own ethnocentric tendencies and becoming aware that our familiar ways are not neutral norms.

So be encouraged, Cornerstone. When friction happens in our faith community – and it will inevitably happen – we can actually see this as a positive sign. The friction doesn't mean that we're failing at belonging. The friction means that people are showing up authentically and intercultural life is happening. It's an invitation for us to grow in interculturality.

At the TIM Centre, we call this ***productive friction*** – it's a gift, however uncomfortable, that can become a pathway towards deeper understanding and mutual transformation. It means that God's Spirit is at work even in our hardest encounters with each other.

From Multicultural to Intercultural

The second paradigm shift I have noticed is a shift from Multicultural to Intercultural.

Now, let's hit pause for a second. You've probably noticed by now that I have been using the words "multicultural" and "intercultural" and for me, these words are not interchangeable. Afterall, I am the Director of the Tyndale ***Intercultural*** Ministries Centre. What is the difference between intercultural and multicultural?

Canada is a multicultural country – first to....

Canadian multiculturalism is characterized by:

- Acceptance
- Tolerance
- Peaceful co-existence

And while research has shown that Canadian multiculturalism has had a positive impact on Canadian Christians, influencing our attitudes towards wider ethnic diversity in our churches, I think that Canadian multiculturalism falls far short of the Kingdom imperative to live as an intercultural community.

This is the way I see multicultural...

[show slide of crayons with the word "Multicultural"]

This is the way I see intercultural....

[show slides of art supplies and blank canvas with the word "Intercultural"]

When I was growing up, the city that I lived in had a multicultural festival every year. The event took place over the course of a weekend and it was called "Mosaic". Each ethnic group set up a pavilion and guests could buy tickets and sample the food, listen to the music, and enjoy the cultural dress.

I notice that a lot of churches across Canada are now doing their own multicultural fair. The intent is to celebrate the diversity of the culture groups that are represented in their congregation. These festivals are always a lot of fun and they are so much work to put together. I love seeing this happening. I think this is a great starting point. But I have to admit, a small part of me is worried that we are becoming consumers of culture—celebrating the differences we can see without necessarily allowing those differences to change how we live together.

But then, I came across a couple of stories. I'm always learning from other church leaders. I think we're all learning how to navigate the complexity and beauty of intercultural life through Jesus.

One church held a "Dumpling Night". And they defined dumpling as "anything that can be wrapped inside something else". So they saw pierogies, and burritos and calzones and a whole bunch of other food items. But what made the difference was during the night, each contributor was asked to share the story behind their food. Stories of family memories in making this food together and values passed down from generations, stories about migration, being uprooted and becoming refugees and how this food brings them comfort, even stories about colonization about how that

food had come to their country because of oppression and how that mindset still shapes them today.

You see, there is a difference between "multicultural" gatherings and "intercultural" engagement.

So, let's turn back to our bibles. What does the bible have to say about "multicultural" and "intercultural".

After Babel, we now have a multicultural world. There are different people groups, different languages and different cultures. But God wasn't finished yet. He had a plan to move us from multicultural to intercultural .

This happened in Acts 2. In Acts 2, Jews from "every nation under heaven" were gathered in Jerusalem. These included foreign born Jews. In today's language, we would call them diaspora Jews. Jews born and raised in other countries. Ethnically Jewish. But born and shaped by the cultural norms of the countries they were born in. They are now converging on Jerusalem for the Feast and they bring with them different languages and different cultural norms.

2 On the day of Pentecost[a] all the believers were meeting together in one
place. **2** Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty
windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. **3** Then, what looked like
flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. **4** And everyone present
was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages,[b] as the Holy Spirit
gave them this ability.

5 At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. **6** When they
heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their
own languages being spoken by the believers.

You see, the miracle at Pentecost wasn't that everyone started speaking the same language. The miracle at Pentecost wasn't that difference was erased. Instead the miracle at Pentecost was that the people could understand each other across the cultural differences. The Spirit was the gift that enabled them to interact with each other. The Spirit did the translation.

That matters for how we imagine the church.

God isn't creating a community of sameness here at Cornerstone. He doesn't give us the Holy Spirit so we can speak the same language and smooth over our differences. Instead, he gives us the gift of the Spirit so that people can remain culturally different and yet can still genuinely encounter one another.

As Pastor and writer Dr. Pablo Kim Sun says:

The conditions for actual intercultural life are created by the Spirit's gift

But that's not all I see in this passage. I think there is something especially challenging in this passage for those of us who consider ourselves the "insiders", those of us who are the majority culture in the spaces we inhabit, those of us who are usually hosting the space we inhabit instead of being guests in those space.

I think it is really important that we don't miss this.

You see, the Spirit empowered the insiders to move towards the outsiders.

The Spirit enabled the insiders – the Apostles who probably spoke Aramaic or Hebrew -- to move towards those on the margins, towards the diaspora, towards the newcomers and to learn to speak THEIR language, shaped by their culture, and in a way that resonates with their hearts. The Apostles didn't stand in the centre and say "Come over here and learn how we speak. We'll show you how." Instead, the insiders are the ones who crossed the linguistic and cultural distance. The carriers of the Gospel message bore the linguistic burden. The insiders were the ones who moved.

When someone new comes into our spaces – at work, at school, in our friendship groups, in our small groups or in our ministry and leadership teams at church -- whose responsibility is it to do the adjusting?

Do we expect the newcomer to learn how we communicate, how we build relationships, how we make decisions, how we participate?

Because perhaps Pentecost invites us to see welcome differently. Welcome isn't simply saying "Come into our space". Perhaps Pentecost is an invitation for us to move toward someone else's world and learn to speak THEIR language.

And by "language", I don't only mean words.

I mean another person's way of relating. Another person's way of expressing emotion. Another person's understanding of what a family is. Another person's experience of church. And Their assumptions about leadership. And Their way of worshipping Jesus.

As Dr. Pablo Kim Sun says:

A congregation can be multicultural in composition (people from many backgrounds in the building) without being intercultural in practice. The question is not whether diverse people are present. The question is whether the Spirit's ongoing work of translation is actually happening among them. Do people with different languages and cultural formations encounter each other in ways that change all of them? Or do they coexist in parallel, sharing a building and a service time without genuinely speaking each other's tongues?

And that is why I make such a distinction between the words "multicultural" and "intercultural".

Multicultural tells us something about ***who*** is in the room.

Intercultural tells us about ***what happens*** when we are in the room together.

[Conclusion – Show Title Slide]

As our time draws to a close, I go back to the question I posed at the outset "Is welcoming the same as belonging?"

Intercultural Belonging is a posture. It is a posture that we discern with the Spirit that leads to mutual understanding and mutual transformation. In a world that is increasingly divided and polarized, HOW our faith community comes together, navigating across all our cultural differences, where we can all belong and still express ourselves as our authentic selves – this will be a sign of hope that through Jesus, the rich variety of our cultural differences remain but the division is gone.