

Have you ever had a moment where you said too much? A moment that after you spoke, you knew there was no going back to how things were before?

Long before I ever preached a sermon, I fancied myself as a bit of an unpaid freelance sermon critic. After all, I had grown up going to church my whole life, and I was a youth pastor, which was *just like a pastor* but cooler....and as my dad was fond of saying, I may have “gotten a little too big for my britches.” I remember sitting down to a baseball game at PNC Park in Pittsburgh with my good friend, Brent, the young associate pastor at our church at the time. The game hasn’t started yet, but we’re talking shop, and I hop on my soapbox to lodge a complaint about the Senior Pastor’s preaching. I tell my friend Brent, “see the problem is, he just launches right into the sermon without any kind of hook or interesting story. Like the one a few weeks ago. His whole opening is “What do we know about Jeremiah?” I tell Brent: “why would people care about Jeremiah? I’m already bored.” Brent just slowly turns his head to look at me and says, “Jim, that was MY sermon.”

The book of World Records says that the longest baseball game ever played was in June of 1981. But, they’re WRONG. It was the rest of the game with Brent that day. THAT was the longest game ever.

It’s hard to come back from putting your foot in your mouth that bad 😊

But, I share that story because I feel like our country is in a similar predicament. During this last year or two...during the COVID crisis, race riots and the venomous mudslinging that we call politics, we’ve said and done some things as a country we can’t easily undo...we’ve exposed divisions and hatred that’s not easy to come back from. Now certainly America has always been a place for widely differing views and we’re no strangers to controversy or protest. But, it feels more personally divisive than I can remember. Neither side has won, but it feels like we’re losing some of our humanity everyday.

Maybe you’ve noticed this too... The divisive spirit you feel doesn’t say confined to conversations about politics or mask mandates. There are major divisions showing up in local government and school districts, they’re impacting the our universities and Alma maters. It’s issues of sexuality or identity or critical race theory, but it’s also just basic assumptions about how we see the world, and authority, and fairness.

A few years ago, I moved into a neighborhood with a Homeowner Association, and I’m CONTINUALLY stunned by the way people talk to other people within their OWN neighborhood. These aren’t people on the other side the world on social media, these are people 3 doors down. And it’s not life and death issues...it’s street parking or a storage shed, but with all the anger and name-calling of cable news pundits. It leaves me wondering: Why would folks want to bring that onto the street where they live or into their home?

Friends, I'm so glad to work here at Shell Point. I think you can agree this is a warmer and friendly and more gracious community than almost anywhere else. But, here's the truth: Satan loves to divide....and He'd love nothing more than to poison this set-apart community with the same brand of evil divisiveness that is flourishing out there.

My wife reminded me as I was preparing this sermon that these kinds of issues impact everyone differently. For those that keep the news on and pay close attention, maybe you get really worked up and feel a lot of **anger** towards certain leaders or groups of people. Or maybe you hear what's going on and feel a **sense of disappointment and sadness** that your groups and organizations seem to be heading a certain way. Or maybe you're **worried** about what this will mean *for the church that you love*, for the impact it could have on your *children* and *grandchildren*, or what kind of world your great grandchildren will step into.

Division, the breaking down of community and relationship, is the *natural* tendency of things in a fallen world. I didn't pay real close attention in Physics class, but I do remember hearing about the second law of thermodynamics. You remember this... The law says the natural tendency of any isolated system to *degenerate* into a more disordered state or maximum equilibrium. For example, you draw up a relaxing *hot* bath, you slide in for what feels like 2 minutes, and it's already room temp. You take ice from the freezer, and put it in your drink. Does it stay that way? No, five minutes later, it's turned into water ring stains on your coffee table. ☺ The point is: This is true in even social systems in life....THINGS DON'T TEND TO COME TOGETHER AND GET STRONGER WITHOUT APPLIED ENERGY, INSTEAD eventually THEY FALL APART.

[THESIS] The good news that we'll remind ourselves of tonight is that there is a SAFE SPACE when our hearts are troubled by the state of the world. There is a source of energy that can keep our families and beloved institutions together and united. The truth that many of us know, but we need to CONTINUE to commit ourselves to, is that CHRIST and HIS CHURCH are THE HOPE for unity in an increasingly divided world.

[Let's pause to pray before I read God's Word -- PRAY]

Let's take a closer look at our hope for unity together. This is part of God's exquisite plan and design and we get a beautiful glimpse in the prayer that Jesus prays in John 17, starting in verse 20 and reading through verse 23.

Jesus says, *"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. I have given them the*

glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23)

How beautiful Lord! Your plans for us. Let’s consider for a moment the words...

“my prayer is not for them alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,”

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus has been praying for His disciples who are with Him, but now he turns his attention to all of us...those generations of believers who would follow after. How cool! And knowing that Jesus is praying for YOU, don’t you want to just *lean* in and know what He prays for us??

“that all of them may be one, Father...just as you are in me and I am in you.”

That we may be one. And oneness like neighbors in an HOA? NO! OAs He is with His Father. Seems hardly imaginable that we could experience oneness as God experiences oneness in the Trinity: Jesus is in very essence God! And His great plan and intention is that we’d increasingly experience that oneness with Him and with each other. What an extraordinary gift!

This is where we need to almost throw out our pre-existing human ideas. “this love and unity is CLEARLY not a moral effort powered by human energy; he can’t be describing anything like the human associations or the most INTIMATE of human relationships we see in our world.... This is supernatural.

It’s also important to remember that this prayer is Jesus’ last before going to the cross. The hour of His death and His unfathomable separation from God is almost here. He goes willingly, because there is NO greater divide or division than what was brought about by our sin.

It will be HIS sacrifice on the cross that allows us to be united with God. Jesus Himself experiences ultimate separation and rejection from the Father so that we never have to. Remember the cry, “Why have you forsaken me?” God turns His back on His own son, because He bears OUR guilt and shame. Jesus takes the horrible cost, the irreparable separation WE deserved, on Himself. And remember what happens when that price is paid?? ALL divisions separating God and man are broken. The temple curtain is torn from top to bottom. Jesus even bridges the divide of death. He sends the Holy Spirit so that we can have the VERY presence of God in our hearts, at any and every moment. There is no restless night that God is not with us. NO “neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

In today's society, where there is so much "US vs THEM" mentality, and IDENTITY politics, it is GOOD to remember that God's grace not only UNITES us with God in heaven, but it is ALSO the great EQUALIZER with each other. (Romans 3:23, 3:10) says ALL have fallen short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous, not even one." All of the manmade rankings of righteousness are rendered NONSENSE and IRRELEVANT because of grace. The self-righteous Pharisees, the deeply religious, those who have been labeled unclean, unworthy, NOW together go boldly to the throne of grace to receive mercy according to Hebrews. (Hebrews 4:16)

Ephesians says, "you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." – Ephesians 2:17-22

This UNITY that we can experience in the body of Christ...it's a lot like sanctification. Through Christ, we've become instantly unified at the moment of salvation. And yet, we know there's still work to be done. We're not experiencing that perfect picture of what will be. Not by a long shot. There is a progressive nature of unity...Something that is still being worked out through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

We see this in **verse 23**, when Jesus prays, **"may they be brought to complete unity..."**

If I'm honest, in my humanness...I read, "brought to complete unity" and I think, Jesus, that's really nice, but are we going to get there in this life? Is that even possible?

After all, even our churches and denominations are divisive at times. They can be POOR representations of Christ...and at their worst, unhealthy churches and pastors can really hurt people and stand in the way of them finding Jesus's love.

But, the HUMAN impossibility "of spiritual unity" seems only to confirm what Jesus says. How like GOD to set before us such a lofty and beautiful vision of what COULD be, and yet be completely UNATTAINABLE *apart from His Spirit at work in us*. Over and over in Scripture, God leads His people to what they can accomplish ONLY through dependance on Him. Only His Spirit and the grace of this incredible Gospel working its way from our head to our heart could bridge divides of race and politics and jealousies and the past.

And notice that this unity, this love shared between each other and our God will be what *lets the world know that Jesus was sent from God* ("let the world know that you sent me") and really IS God. Jesus prays that twice in just those three verses....that through our unity, the world will know that Jesus has been sent from God.

God's love demonstrated in us and in our relationships IS the witness. When our churches are largely people who all look the same, who share similar interests and styles, who

are from the same social and ethnic circles...there nothing unusual about that. It's well within our human ability to gravitate towards people who are like us and who like what we like. Remember Jesus' words in **Luke 6:32 & 33**: "*If you **love** those who **love you**, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you **do good** to those who are **good to you**, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that.*"

The point is: Jesus sought the lost, he brought together unlikely followers. Our sinful society had tried to isolate and divide people, but Jesus' life and ministry was defined by His refusal to observe those manmade boundaries. He loved tax collectors, sinners, the untouchable... 'those' people. And if you and I say we "follow Jesus," we NEED to be actively building relationships with ALL people, including those that don't look like us. Jesus' love broke the social divisions of His day, and if it His people aren't breaking the divisions of OUR day, is it really Jesus' love that we're representing?

But, how are folks like you and me going to be bridge builders in a broken and divided world? I'm limited in my own human strength. I know where I'm most comfortable. But.....The ROCKET FUEL for this kind of spirit is at the very end of the passage!

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (WE ARE LOVED BY GOD WITH THE LOVE HE HOLDS FOR HIS SON!) Friends! Can you imagine how much greater that love is than we have ever known? The perfect love He has for His Son? In spite of all of my unworthiness, He could possibly look upon me like He looks upon His Son with whom He is well pleased? "God, I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, but I've been touched by the righteousness of Jesus, and God declares, "your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." That unmerited grace, that extravagant love is what compels us closer to our God and closer to one another. The Gospel is what makes unity in the Spirit possible.

Ok, so as we near the end, let me get practical.

Unity can get complicated. We know this. **UNITY IS NOT UNIFORMITY.**

It doesn't mean we don't have denominations or disagreements. Sometimes REALLY important disagreements. It doesn't mean we do everything the same. Sometimes, it means that we work hard to celebrate diversity and different ideas. Sometimes REAL unity comes at the difficult cost of parting company with others who don't stand for the most CRITICAL things.

We cannot have real unity without a vigorous commitment to what unites us. Otherwise, it's universalism. It's just 'whatever anyone believes.' But, Christian unity has a FOUNDATION. **Ephesians 4:3** tells us to "keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." **1 Cor 12:13** says it's "one body by one Spirit." Christian unity grows out of the Gospel and it's sustained by God's Spirit.

AND WHEN WE DISAGREE on IMPORTANT things, we need to do so CAREFULLY to preserve our UNITY in the most essential. Here's a wonderful quote from Charles Spurgeon, where you can feel the tension and balance of his strong emotions and competing loyalties.

Where the Spirit of God is there must be love, and if I have once known and recognized any man to be my brother in Christ Jesus, the love of Christ constraineth me no more to think of him as a stranger or foreigner, but a fellow citizen with the saints. Now I hate High Churchism as my soul hates Satan; but I love George Herbert, although George Herbert is a desperately High Churchman. I hate his High Churchism, but I love George Herbert from my very soul, and I have a warm corner in my heart for every man who is like him. Let me find a man who loves my Lord Jesus Christ as George Herbert did and I do not ask myself whether I shall love him or not; there is no room for question, for I cannot help myself; unless I can leave off loving Jesus Christ, I cannot cease loving those who love him. (*The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. XII, 6)

That's the spirit! STRONG disagreements but BOUND by an even greater love!

Tomorrow morning early, I'll be heading to my first General Council of the C&MA, with several members of the church staff. I LOVE the history of the Alliance, I love the intentional BIG umbrella of like-minded Christians who are passionate about the spread of the Gospel. I love the BIG things that we're about NOT getting in the way of the LITTLE things that might divide us. That's why the founder, AB Simpson, didn't even want to start a denomination.

But, this year, I'm sure like most years, there will be some significant disagreements that will be discussed. Important issues that will fire up folks who believe strongly on either side. The question will be: Will we do any better than those outside the family of faith? Will we characterize and label those who understand scripture differently as less genuine or less committed to scriptural authority? Or will love for Christ and those who love Him govern those disagreements?

Our unsaved friends and family are not looking to see if our theology on the end times is consistent or if the terminology in our statement of faith is uniform. But, they MIGHT just notice if our love for ALL people is reaching over the divides and barriers that litter our country and culture.

Finally friends, when you see division and anger and bitterness in our world....when our hearts are discouraged, and we're fearful for the family we love and the institutions we care about....there is SO MUCH we CAN do:

We can unite our hearts with God's heart in the great privilege of prayer. Emilie Griffin wrote, "Prayer is the perfect remedy for world weariness." Isn't that true? Division in our world can draw us closer to God, it can help us renew our focus and PASSION on experiencing ONENESS with our loving Father. And when we do, God will use us to build UNITY in Christ with others around us. God can use US to make sure that our community in larger Lee County can SEE the love of Jesus....God can use His love in US to help our beloved Shell Point STAY forever committed to "the service of God and the care of all HIS people." We have a mission here at the Village Church to NEVER STOP building and GROWING a greater community of forgiveness, purpose and hope in Jesus Christ. This is our joyful response to our divided times until that glorious day when we're forever united with God and all the saints forever. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, our prayer is for us and for all who will believe through the Gospel going out, that ALL OF US may be ONE, as you are ONE. Help us to be in YOU, so that the world may believe that you have sent us Jesus. Help us to be bearers of Your glory. Bring us to complete unity so that the world will know Jesus, and the world will know that YOU have loved them even as You loved Your son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.