

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: Reconnected

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Scripture:

Ezekiel 37:15-22, 24

¹⁵ The word of the Lord came to me: ¹⁶ “Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, ‘Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him.’ Then take another stick of wood, and write on it, ‘Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him.’ ¹⁷ Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand. ¹⁸ “When your people ask you, ‘Won’t you tell us what you mean by this?’ ¹⁹ say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim’s hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah’s stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand.’ ²⁰ Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on ²¹ and say to them, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. ²² I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. There will be one king over all of them and they will never again be two nations or be divided into two kingdoms. ²⁴ “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.

Philippians 2:1-11 1

¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by

becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Transcript:

Amen. Well, good morning. Good morning to those watching online. As Colin mentioned earlier, Scott's home, he kind of lost his voice. It's a little hoarse today for him. So you get me and like a kingdom crowd, love it. Thank you. Like a nervous mariner crowd watching and slowly over the hill relief pitcher come in. We're going to see how this goes. No, it's going to be great. Jesus, would you take the words of my mouth and Scott's hand and the meditations of all our hearts and may they bring glory to you and change us to be a little more like you Jesus. In your name, amen. Well, there's an old saying that goes, I think the whole world is crazy except for you and me. And sometimes I wonder about you. As we've gone through the last 18 months of pandemic and political divisions, have you ever thought something similar? Like everybody has just lost their minds. We're fighting over well everything.

This chart shows the incidence of unruly passengers on airplanes has skyrocketed in the last year. One flight attendant was punched in the face and lost two teeth by a passenger who didn't want to wear a mask. On social media, people describe the other side of them as politically evil, or the enemy. And of course the ever popular comparison to Hitler and yes, some people are evil, but we're overusing the term. Couples are getting divorced over politics, people of color face racism, and feel unheard. Churches are splitting apart and families are estranged. Where's there division in your life? Maybe it's not even political division, but other kinds of divisions with friends, parents, kids, workplace, school, all of which creates stress because we're mad all the time. And it wrecks families, schools, neighborhoods, nations. Jesus has a better way. And historically, there was no other movement that has been better able to heal divisions between vastly different people than the church.

Now, of course the opposite is also true. The church has also caused divisions. But when the church is being who Jesus calls us to be, there is unity in diversity. And I'm not talking about always agreeing. We won't always agree. I'm not talking about all of us being the same. We're not all the same and that's good. I'm talking about a deep unity of very different people that can only be accomplished through the Holy Spirit, which makes us more joyful because we're not mad all the time. And we give our country hope. Just like the early Christians in a very divided Roman Empire, seething with racism and conflict. They put Jews, Gentiles, Africans, Middle Easterners, Europeans, rich, poor into one community that loved each other.

For the past few weeks, we've been looking at Ezekiel chapter 37, about a valley of dry bones that God brings back to life. And when God starts to remake them, Ezekiel says this. "There was a rattling sound and the bones came together, bone to bone." It's an image of disconnected things being unified. And then right after the bones come back to life is the text we just read. Where Ezekiel takes a stick and writes the word Judah on it. And then another stick and writes the word Ephraim on them and he puts them together.

And what's going on is that Israel used to be one nation, but then they had a civil war and the nation split in two. The northern part was called Israel. Though sometimes it was also called Joseph or Ephraim. And the southern part was called Judah. Ephraim was wiped out by the Assyrians and then 130 years later, Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. But here God promises that he's going to reunite the two nations, which may not have been good news to the people of Ezekiel's day because they were from the southern part of Judah and they viewed the northerners as traitors. But God is canceling their divisions. So where's there division in your life? Because Jesus unites what the world divides in a couple of ways.

First, Jesus brings unity by giving us one king. After Ezekiel put the two sticks together, God says, "I will make them one nation. There will be one king overall. My servant, David will be king over them and they will all have one shepherd." The word one shows up 10 times in the passage we read today. It's about unity. And the text says, "David will be their one king and shepherd." David was Israel's greatest king, but he lived hundreds of years before Ezekiel. So how can David be the king over united Israel once he's dead? Well, you're in church. So whenever a pastor asks a question, just say ...

Jesus.

Works every time. Just say Jesus. You see Jesus is David's descendant. He's even called Son of David. So this refers to Jesus, and when Jesus is our only king, he gives us something bigger to unite us than the things that divide us, which is why the early church was the first multiracial, multi socioeconomic community in history. Humans are essentially tribal. And if our identity is in our political tribe or social tribe, we'll be divided, but Jesus gives an identity bigger than any tribe because the ticket for admission into the church is the admission that I'm sinful and need a savior.

This transcends every tribe, which leads directly to the second thing that creates unity. And that is humility. If what unites us is that we're all a sinful mess in need of a savior whose name is Jesus. It kind of makes it hard to think you're better than anyone else. That is if you really understand your sin and stop pretending it's not that bad, it makes you humble, which is liberating. Theologian, C.S. Lewis says, "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less. The wonderful freedom of not thinking about me."

In the Bible, the Apostle Paul puts it this way. And remember last week when I said, sometimes the Bible is most helpful when it tells us what we do not want to hear, because then it corrects us and you all thought that was a good point. Remember that as I read this. "In humility, value others above yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of others." That's challenging. Is this the kind of person I am? Is this the kind of church that we are? Valuing ourselves above others, looking out for the interest of others, where people are saying, no, really don't play the music I like in church. I want everyone else to have the music they like. But wouldn't it be a better world if you're looking out for someone else and they're looking out for you. Then everyone gets looked out for.

Now this passage doesn't mean we allow ourselves to be abused emotionally or physically. It also isn't about being weak. It takes a lot of courage to put others ahead of yourself. That's the courage that causes someone to give their life for another person. And you might say, but pastor don't we have to fight for what's right? Yes we do. The question is what's the biblical way of doing that? Because the passage I just read goes on to say, "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ, Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage. Rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. To the glory of God, the Father."

Nobody had a bigger impact on history than Jesus, but he didn't do it by conquering. He did it by dying on a cross to pay the price for our sins. It looked weak, but it was the most powerful world changing event in history. And when we are humble, knowing we're just as prone to be wrong as anyone else and humbly look out for each other, it frees us from the quarreling and divisions, and shows the world that there is a better way. Okay, so how do we put this into action? Let me give you some practical steps.

First boycott the merchants of fear and rage. The talk shows, social media, don't pass on that inflammatory post about Democrats or Republicans, especially since we know that some of those inflammatory quotes, news items, they're generated in Russia or China and their goal is not to get this person or that person elected. They don't care who gets elected. They just want us divided and at each other's throats to weaken us and they are winning. So if you want to be Putin's puppet by all means, keep stoking the rage on social media. I don't want to be Putin's puppet. Besides do you really think that inflammatory post changes anybody's mind about anything? It just makes them dig in deeper. So get your news from sources that don't stoke the anger. Dial down the rhetoric, chill out, don't click, don't watch, don't read, don't listen. Put the merchants of rage out of business.

Second, don't get on the roller coaster. When I'm mad about something or worried about something, Christina sometimes says, "I ain't getting on your rollercoaster, Scott. You just ride it all you need to. Do all the dips and curves you want. And when you're done, I'll be here. But I ain't getting on your rollercoaster." So when you're trying to work through some divisions, some disagreement, consciously choose not to get on the roller coaster of anger, but instead listen to understand. People do things for reasons, try to understand other people's reasons. You don't have to agree, but try to understand, because then you can have more reasoned discussions.

Third, practice unity and little things. How we do little things is how we do everything. So we can learn to seek reconciliation in the little things. Maybe we can learn to do them in big things. A while back I was pulling my car out of a parking lot and started to drive away when I noticed the guy in the car behind me, got out and looked at the back of his car. So I stopped and said, "Did I just hit you? Because I didn't feel anything." And he said, "I think so." And then he said, "Look, see those scratches." And there were some small scratches there, but people respond differently to that sort of thing. I wouldn't want the hassle to fix it so I just ignore it.

A while back, I told you that our daughter wrecked one of our cars and the entire front section was falling off. We duct taped it. And we drove it that way for several years. Years. You've heard the phrase, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. For Christina and me, it's also, if it is broke, don't fix it. Like just don't bother. But this guy had a newer, nicer car. And I said, "Okay, let me give you my phone number." He said, "Actually, can I take a picture of your driver's license?" And I'm not proud of this, but I was a little suspicious. I was like, why does he want that? Is this identity theft? And I think some of that is the toxic climate we're in. We just don't trust each other anymore. And he said, "You can cover the driver's license number if you want." So I did and he took the picture. And he said, "I'll let you know how much it is."

Well then when I got home, I thought I didn't take a picture of the damage. What if he tries to rip me off, decides to get a whole new paint job or something like that? Rats. Language, God. But I didn't get on the rollercoaster. Instead I prayed, God help me be the right person in this. Later that day he texted me that his rear camera was also damaged and he'd take it to the shop and let me know the bill. I texted him back and said, "I'm so sorry you have to spend your time doing this because of something that I did." He texted back, "No worries, stuff like this happens." What a gracious response. How rare and refreshing.

Several days later, he texted me and said, "I didn't take it to the shop. I took it to a friend instead. He fixed it all for \$100." So I said, "Thank you. You didn't have to do that." And I Venmoed him \$100 plus an extra \$100 and I said, "You had to give up valuable time to take care of a problem I caused. So go out to a nice restaurant on me." And we both agreed that in such a divisive, angry, immature culture right now, it's nice to see folks can actually work these things out.

Now that is not a heroic story of reconciliation. It's just two people being decent to one another. It wouldn't be worth telling except for the fact that being decent seems in short supply right now. And how we do little things is how we do everything. So maybe if we start unity with smaller things, we can work towards bigger things.

And Bell Pres, this is where we have an opportunity as a church. God is doing something unique here. Most churches are composed of people all the same age, either all older or all younger, same race, same politics, same socioeconomic class, because it's easier. People like to be with people just like them. So they don't have to deal with politics or music or viewpoints they don't like. There's just two problems with that. First, I don't see it in the Bible. The New Testament church was every age, race, politics. Second, a church that's all the same doesn't heal the world. It's a country club that reinforces all the same divisions, but God is putting people of all kinds of different ages, races, politics, different languages here in this church so that we can be a church that helps heal a fractured culture. Amen.

And yes, it's hard to do. It means there'll be things that I won't like and that you won't like, but it's not about me or you. It's about what God is doing, which is assembling every tribe, tongue, and nation. And yes, it's hard. For Bell Pres, we do hard things because we know it's not done by our efforts. It's done by the Holy Spirit. As a church, we've been blessed to be involved in Rwanda for over 16 years, we have seen victims of the genocide reconcile with perpetrators and sometimes even go to the same church and call each other brother and sister in Christ. You've heard from pastor Joseph, who told you some stories. They're inspiring and I'd encourage you. Come back tonight at five o'clock to hear more about God's reconciling work in Africa because it shows that Jesus unites what the world divides.

I came across a story about a man named Dr. Robert Smith, who is a pastor and seminary professor. His 34 year old son worked at a restaurant which got robbed one night and his son was shot and killed. Dr. Smith said, "My heart broke into a million pieces." He said, "During the trial, I saw Tony's murderer, then 18 years old. I saw his mother and family weeping as the judge sentenced him to many years in prison. I prayed about my feelings towards this young man." Notice all the prayer in this story. "And the question God kept asking me in prayer was, do you really believe what you preach? For 44 years, I have preached about the forgiveness that Joseph, Job and Jesus extended to those who brought great pain in their lives. I know how to explain and illustrate it. And now God was telling me if I really believe what I had been preaching, then I must by his grace live that forgiveness now.

So I asked [inaudible 00:16:26] to pray for me. And it took me over a year, but the Lord worked on my heart to write the young man who murdered my son. And it took him over two years to respond. But eventually he did. And this is the letter I received.

Dear Mr. Smith. Let me say that I am truly sorry for your loss. I really am. Also, I hope that this is really you that I'm writing because I have received a lot of threat mail from your

family and friends. So that's why I never wrote back. But today I thought I should give it a try because I really wanted to talk to you. I've been locked up three years now and it's the worst three years of my life. I grew up in church my whole life, but I hung with the wrong crowd that night. I'm so sorry. I hope to hear from you very soon. Thank you for forgiving me. Can you keep praying for me too? This is getting too hard for me to bear. And sometimes I feel just like giving up on life."

Well, Dr. Smith said, "Well, the Lord just kept working on my heart month by month and the Lord let me see what it took for me for him to forgive me. He let me see what a mess I was. He let me understand that when he forgives, he forgives unconditionally. He wanted me to understand that if you ever want to get beyond this, you've got to forgive and that you can't do it on your own. You need Jesus. So I wrote this young man back because I want to be on his visitation list. I want to go up to him and tell him about Jesus. I want to let him know that I love him. I want this young man and my son to hug together in heaven one day, because forgiveness is not difficult, forgiveness is impossible without God." Jesus has the power to unite what has been divided. No other force on Earth can do that. And there is redemption for Dr. Smith and that young man for the world to see what Jesus can do. So how can you be an agent of healing where you live, work, play, learn?

Maybe it's just starting with something small, just getting up in the morning and saying self, let's not be a jerk today. Just don't hit send on the angry email. Don't repost the inflammatory thing you saw on social media. Just don't label people or a this or that. Have this mind among you that was in Christ Jesus, who did not count equality with God, something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant. If we start small and then go deeper and seek [inaudible 00:18:59] reconciliation and reconciliation politically, reconciliation our families, schools, church, nation, people will see the power of Jesus to unite what the world divides. Until that day when every knee will bow and every time confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God, the Father.

So Jesus, thank you for this good word, the testimony through Ezekiel, through Jesus that in you, we can have true reconciliation. Holy Spirit, this is hard and so we need you. Would you please do this work in my heart and everyone's heart listening and watching in this room, for our sake, but also for the sake of the world that you love. And pray this all in your name. Amen.
Amen.

Discussion Questions

Read Ezekiel 37:15-22, 24 and Philippians 2:1-11 and answer the below questions with your friends, family or All In small group.

Opening Question:

- Icebreaker: If you had a time machine that would work only once, what point in the future or in history would you like to visit?
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions – *Together read Ezekiel 37:15-22, 24 and Philippians 2:1-11 and discuss the following:*

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions – *Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:*

- How does Philippians 2:1-11 challenge you?
- How does Philippians 2:1-11 give you hope?

Closing Question and Application:

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer:

Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.