

BELPRES CHURCH

BETTER TOGETHER

John 17:20-23; Philippians 4:2-3

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So Holy Spirit I ask that you would do what my words can't do and help us know you more and follow you better. We ask this in your name Jesus, amen. Well, I want to say hello to 11 O'clock and our middle schoolers and our high schoolers and people online and all of you here. It's great to have you with us. I want to start by asking you a question. If you were the devil, which I know is a little bit rough way to start, but if you were the devil looking at this church, lots of people, resources, located in a very globally strategic city, so much potential to do, so much good, if you were the devil, what would you do to disrupt all that?

See, I believe there is a God and I believe that there's a force in the world that works against God's good purposes, the Bible calls him the devil. And if it were me looking at this church, you know what I'd do? I would get us focused on the three Fs, fighting, fussing, and feuding about anything I could get us fussing about politics, culture, theology, you name it. And that is always the devil's number one strategy to mess up anything good that's happening anywhere, to cause division and discord, conquer and divide. That's always his strategy. And the problem is it is just so easy for him to do because we love to be divided.

I remember once when my son was about five, my youngest daughter was three, and I heard my son singing one of the songs from our Sunday school and I was excited because he hadn't shown much interest in spiritual things. So I thought, oh man, this is progress. Well, a few minutes later my daughter started crying and said, "He hit me." And so I asked, "Well, why did you hit Ari?" And he said, "She interrupted my Jesus song." Well, now there's a reason, right? Like, Jesus loves me, Pow! That's just how we are. We're just divided and we are living in a very divided country right now. Oh man, families are divided. Friends are divided. Churches, workplaces, schools are divided. Some couples have even gotten divorced because their spouse voted differently than they did in the last election.

And all of that division is wrecking families, it's wrecking friendships. It's wrecking us. We're angry, we're stressed, and it's tearing our country apart. And that's why the two texts that we just read, I think are really important because in them Jesus calls us to unity starting first with Christians who are then supposed to carry that unity and heal the divisions in our culture. The problem is church folks can fight

just as much as everyone else about all kinds of things. Theology, politics, you name it, church folks fight. Not how God meant it to be. This winter we've been talking about what does it mean to be an all in Christian as opposed to just a consumer Christian. And one of the things all in Christians do is they seek unity.

And the first text we read, Jesus is praying for everyone, all of his followers throughout all time. And he says this, "My prayer is that all of them may be one so that they may believe that you have sent me, may they be one as we are one so that they may be brought to complete unity, then the world will know that you sent me." Over and over he uses the word one and unity and he says the stakes are high because it's by how we love each other, by how we are united that the world is going to know that Jesus is God in human form who is now making all things new. Our doctrine isn't going to do that. Our theology isn't going to do that. Our unity proves that Jesus is who he says he is.

That's why in the second thing that we read, the second thing that we read from the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in the city of Philippi, he says this, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." Now, what you got to understand is back then these letters that Paul sent to various churches, these letters would have been read out loud to the whole church so you kind of got a picture of the scene. They're reading Paul's letter in church one day and lots of good stuff about Jesus and faith and all of that. And all of a sudden he says, "Oh yeah, tell Euodia and Syntyche to stop fighting." And they'd be like, "Do we have to talk about this here?"

It'd be like right now if I said, I'm just preaching away and I'm like, "Evan, Anthony, stop fighting with each other." I mean, it's this super awkward moment. Does the whole church need to hear about this? Yeah. You know why? Because one little fight can make a big difference. Everything adds up. A few insults here, a couple of eye rolls there, and pretty soon you got a wrecked marriage or a wrecked friendship. An angry post here, an angry tweet there, and pretty soon you've got a culture that is more divided than any time since the 1960s. Little by little things can get worse or little by little things can get better. And the people who call the name of Jesus are sent by him to make things better, but I fear church folks are making things worse right now.

But we're called to make it better, rich and poor Christians together, black, white, Latino, Asian Christians, older and younger Christians, Republican Christians and Democrat Christians, classical music loving Christians and rock and roll music loving Christians and really messed up Christians who like country music. Dog people Christians, and there are no cat people Christians. That is a contradiction in terms. It is a historical fact that one of the reasons the early church grew so rapidly was because it was the first multiethnic, multi-socioeconomic group and community in all of history. People who had been killing each other for centuries suddenly started to love each other.

Nobody had ever seen that because it's too hard to do and it was evidence that something supernatural was at work in that community. Now before I go on, I want to make sure I define what unity is not. Okay? Unity is not always agreeing. We're not always going to agree. People in the Bible didn't always agree. Unity is not uniformity. God made us different on purpose because it takes all of us to reflect who he is. And unity is not about being nice. It's not about being a jerk either, but it's not about being nicey nice and sweet. We can hold our positions firmly and still do it lovingly and do it in unity.

And the passage we read today shows us how. The apostle Paul says this, "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." And notice he doesn't say agree. He says agree

in the Lord. So what does that last little phrase mean? It means a couple of things. The first thing it means is that unity is not natural, it's supernatural. It is not in human nature. Our natural instinct is to create an us and a them and to feel good about being us because us is so much better than them, whoever they is, are, whatever that is, whatever the grammar would be there. Unity is not natural. It is supernatural, and we need Jesus' help to make it happen.

And if we are just as angry, if we who call ourselves Christians are just as angry at people who think or vote differently than we do as the rest of the world and the rest of our country, then it is evidence that God's love has not gotten deep into our hearts because when we feel truly loved by God, we begin to love others better. Second thing agree in the Lord means is that we are on a level playing field. Every division is based on a very simple narrative that there are good people in the world and there are bad people in the world and I'm one of the good people. And if only there were more people like me, the world would be better. That narrative is at the heart of all of our political animosity right now.

I'm one of the good people who believes all the right things about the economy and immigration and the climate. And if only there are more good people like me, this country would be a better place. It underlines divisions between friends and roommates and spouses. I'm right, and if only you'd see how wrong you are and apologize, we could be friends again. So come on, let the healing begin. Just say you're sorry. See how simple it is. All right? But the good news of Jesus obliterates that narrative, it just obliterates that narrative because the premise is I am a sinner in need of God's forgiveness. I got stuff, you got stuff, all God's children got stuff. We are stuffy people. And my stuff, my sin is not trivial. It hurts people. It hurts people badly.

And Jesus died to pay the penalty for all the hurt I've caused that we all deep down know a penalty has to be paid or there is no justice. And then he gives me a new identity as a child of God. And we all need that forgiveness. So here's what that means. Stop judging people just because they sin differently than you do. Stop judging people just because they sin differently than you do. We stand on level ground at the foot of the cross. Nobody is better, including me. Nobody is worse, including me. And the only person that is right all the time is Jesus.

Which brings me to the third thing agreeing in the Lord means, and that is we go to Jesus with our disagreements because the more we seek Jesus, the more unified we're going to be, even if we don't always agree with each other. I once counseled an engaged couple and they had reached an impasse in their marriage. He wanted to live in the Bay Area where he'd been offered a job in a tech firm. She wanted to go to South America to do social work after they got married. So they were like as far apart for the vision for their life as you could possibly be. So they decided that they would spend 30 minutes every morning praying about this and then they would call each other at 6:00 AM every morning and pray together on the phone.

And he would pray for the opposite of what he wanted. He would pray, "Lord, help me want to go to South America." And she would pray for the opposite of what she wanted. She would pray, "Lord, help me want to live in the Bay Area." Well, four months into this, out of the blue, she was offered a job in the Bay Area working with Hispanic immigrants, which is what she really wanted to do anyway. Meanwhile, he started wanting more of an adventure and South America started to sound pretty good to him. So now they had the reverse fight because God had changed their minds. So the resolution was

she would do that job for a couple of years in the Bay Area and then they would go to South America after that. They took it to Jesus and he resolved it.

Now, it doesn't always work out that neatly, but here's what is always true. What is always true is the closer we get to Jesus, he helps us see things from the other person's perspective. It's sort of like this chart that I've shown you before. There's me, there's you, and we may be in disagreement, but the closer we get to Jesus, next slide, the closer we also get to each other. All right? It works interpersonally between people. It works with politics too where our country is so divided right now, where as a church we are divided. You all don't agree, some of you are Democrats, some of you are all over the... it's just we don't agree. And it's fine to disagree. That's normal. It's not okay to break unity over it.

So when you hear something in a sermon or read something online or something someone says about politics, consumer Christians ask the question, "Do I agree with this? Does this match my politics?" Because if it doesn't, I'll find a different church. I'll find a different friend. I'll find a different spouse. Consumer Christians ask the question, "Do I agree with this?" What do all in Christians ask? What does the Bible teach? Let's look at that together. And if we do that, I think we're going to have a very jumbled politics looking liberal on some issues and conservative on others. Jesus had strong words for both the liberals and the conservatives of his day. If Jesus had a political party, it would have been called the something to offend everyone party.

And yeah, yeah, yeah. There're some things in the Bible that are not 100% clear and we will still disagree, but there's a lot that is clear and all in Christians submit their politics to scripture rather than bend scripture to fit their politics and stay united even in disagreement. Jesus modeled this with his 12 disciples. Jesus chose a guy named Simon the Zealot as one of his disciples. Zealots were terrorists who used violence to try to get rid of the occupying Roman army. And as a Zealot, the only people that that Simon would have hated more than the Romans were tax collectors who collaborated with the Romans to oppress their fellow Jews.

So what does Jesus do when picking his 12 disciples? He says, "Simon, you're a Zealot who hates Romans and tax collectors, I'll take you." And then he says to a guy named Matthew, "You're a tax collector, so I'll take you too. Here, why don't you room with Simon?" This is Bible study from hell. And yet somehow they were united because Jesus' love united them even in their disagreements. Over and over and over Jesus says to us, "See that person over there completely different than you racially, politically, economically, socially, love them." Whether that's someone of a different age, a different race, a different political affiliation, LGBTQ people, Christians disagree with each other on that, but surely we all agree, everyone is made in God's image. Everyone deserves to be treated with dignity.

And the more we experience God's love for us, the more loving we become with others. I remember once visiting a church in Washington, D.C. and politics was just the air that church breathe. And the woman who was preaching talked about being both a Christian and a Democrat, and she loved Jesus more than being a Democrat, but only just a little. And she told this story about being invited to a prayer meeting with a Republican senator. And all of her friends said, "You can't go. He's Republican, you're a Democrat. You can't go." She went anyway. And during the prayer meeting, she heard the senator pray authentically and passionately and she said, "I realized he loved the same Lord that I do."

And then she realized that he wanted many of the same things for this country that she wanted. He just had a different idea of how to get there. Well, afterwards she got to meet this Senator who had different politics from her, got to meet him and she said, "When I shook his hand, I looked into his eyes and I noticed how handsome he was and my heart melted and I thought, oh, who cares how you vote?" And then she looked at us and she said, "And that my friends is the problem with prayer meetings. That is the problem with prayer meetings because the more we experience Jesus' love together, the more united that we're going to be."

So then what are some practical steps we can take to be more united with family, with friends, at work, at school, as a church so that we can be agents of reconciliation and healing in a very divided, angry culture right now? A couple of practical steps. First, pray. We need supernatural help. So we got to pray. Now through this sermon, you may be going, "Well, what if I don't want to be unified with those people?" Whoever those people are for you. "What if I don't want, they're wrong. They're messing up the country. I don't want unity with them." Well, you know what, take it up with Jesus. He's the one that commands us to do this. So I'm just the messenger here. You argue with him and pray, Lord, I don't even want to like those people, but help me one to one to be reconciled with them.

Start there. Second, get curious. Because see, when you understand a person's background, their experience, their hopes, their fears, their dreams, they make sense. It doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with them, but they make sense. You can see where they're coming from. And there are reasons why they feel the way they do, why they think the way they do. Get curious about those reasons. The class I taught more than any other at Stanford was Persuasion Writing and Critical Thinking. What makes a good argument? What makes a weak argument? I am very tempted to teach that course here. And I used to tell students, "Look, your opposition almost always has at least one good point and you need to adjust your argument in light of that good point."

So get curious. Why do you believe that? Why do you think that way? What led you to think that way? It'll expand your worldview and it will help you be more sophisticated in how you approach complicated, complex problems. Now what that means is we're going to have to talk with each other and talk with people we disagree with. Notice the word I use there, with, not talk about, not talk around. We tweet, we post, we text, we email, but we don't listen to each other to understand, we listen to refute and that's a different thing. Okay? The Bible says a soft answer turns away wrath, but a fool sends email. God gave you two ears and one mouth. That was a hint. All right?

Two to one. It's a ratio. And a really helpful resource in all of this is a website called allsides.com especially in a divisive political year. Allsides.com, it reports the news, but it has three different columns from the right, from the center, and from the left. And you can read about the exact same event from all three of those perspectives. Sometimes it's funny even, they're so different and it will help you have a more sophisticated worldview. Pray, get curious. Next, practice saying this phrase, I may be wrong. And we're going to practice that right now. And 11 O'clock, you're going to do two. Okay, 11 you guys repeat after me. I may be wrong.

I may be wrong.

Some of you are like, "I'm not saying that." Uh-uh (negative), I'm never wrong, I'm never wrong. After the apostle Paul tells Euodia and Syntyche, by the way, none of us know how to actually pronounce those names. Right? Euodia and Synthesis or whatever it is. After he tells these two women to get along, he says to the rest of the church, "Help these women since they have contended at my side in the course of the gospel." So in other words, come on church, help out Evan and Anthony here, they're arguing. They're not really arguing, so just for the record. What that also means that he's saying to these women is be open to input from others about how you may be wrong.

He's encouraging them to listen to input from others. Hey, Euodia, it seems like the real issue here is your pride has been offended. Syntyche, it seems like maybe part of the problem here is you're afraid that you're going to lose something here and you're afraid. What is it? I think you're both a little bit off base. Pray, get curious. Admit you may be wrong and finally don't be a tool. Okay? It's just that simple. Don't be a tool. All right? Dr. Tony Evans says that the main reason for disunity is that the devil encourages it because he knows that when we are divided, God will not work because God refuses to endorse disunity. And Dr. Evans is an African American preacher and he was talking about racial reconciliation in the context of that quote, but it applies to all kinds of reconciliation.

The devil does not want us working together because he knows we are stronger together than when we were divided. So he loves to get us fussing and feuding and fighting about whatever he can. And when you get so mad at someone that you break unity with them, the devil is playing you like a cheap fiddle at a hoedown. So refuse to be played. My wife has this little mission statement that she says, don't be a tool of Satan. So get up every morning, look in the mirror. Let's get out there today self, and let's not be a tool of Satan today. When you say goodbye to your spouse in the morning, say, "Remember dear, don't be a tool of Satan." When you're getting really mad at someone, tell the devil to go back to hell where he belongs. Say, "I refuse to be played."

When you start fussing over things that don't matter at work or school or church, just say, "Demon of fuss be gone in the name of Jesus." Cast the demon of fuss away. Don't be a tool. It's just that simple. Don't be a tool. Because here's the bottom line. Here's the bottom line. We are better together than divided. When scientists get stuck on a particular problem, often what they'll do is they'll put the problem out to other disciplines, people from other disciplines. So for instance, when the inventors of Prozac got stuck, they put their problem on a website asking for solutions. All the breakthrough solutions came from the scientists outside of the discipline of pharmaceuticals because they were not stuck in the same thinking ruts as the people inside the discipline.

We are stronger, better together than divided. Our differences make us better. And there's so much power when people who are apart from one another somehow come together. It shows the power of the Holy Spirit. As we've shared before, it happens in this church every Sunday morning with New Hope Revival, the African Fellowship, the worships here on Sunday with us. And I've told you before and you know there are people in New Hope from the tribes that are currently being killed in ethnic violence in the Congo and there are people in New Hope from the tribes that are doing the killing. And every Sunday they worship together and call each other brothers and sisters in Christ every Sunday right here on this campus in spite of the ethnic violence that's going on back home.

That shows the power of Jesus to break down the dividing walls of hostility. And if New Hope Revival can do it under such dire circumstances, surely, surely, surely we can get along with that person at work who votes differently than we do. And I keep mentioning New Hope because New Hope is not here on accident, guys. New Hope is here on purpose to teach a lot of divided Americans right now what unity really looks like through the power of Jesus. One of the places, one of the times I learned this lesson very clearly of unity was back when I was a college pastor in California and after one Sunday where I preached in the main church, I got a white hot email from an enraged man. He didn't go to our church. He was visiting, but he'd heard the sermon and he hated it and he was angry.

He said I was watering down the Bible. He said my theology was all wrong. He said I was leading people astray. He even said I dishonored God in the sermon. So knowing all the things that I just preached about on unity, I flamed him right back. With astonishing alacrity, my hand hit the reply button and I tapped out a passionate response the first sentence of which began, "Had you actually been listening?" And it just got better from there. I was eloquent, I was persuasive, I was fantastic. I was so convincing and I triumphantly hit send and felt better sort of because I realized that I had just hurt him the same way that he had hurt me, but I got over it faster than I should have. Three months later, he emailed me and said, "I emailed you a pretty rude email three months ago and when I got your response I realized that I had hurt you and I want to say I'm sorry."

And I felt in that moment like a very small man. So I emailed him back and I said, "Can we get together and talk about this?" So we met at In-N-Out, best hamburgers in the country, right? All my California people, right? Best hamburgers in the country, right? If you can't resolve it in In-N-Out, it can't be resolved. So we sat down and I said, "Look, you did not deserve that email I sent you back. I did not disagree with you in a loving way. And you were just concerned that God's word would be rightly preached. You had good motives. And I know you had good motives." And he said, "Yeah, but I hurt you and I shouldn't have." And I said, "Well, it's a good thing that Jesus forgives both of us, isn't it?"

And we started talking some more. Well, it turned out he was a pastor also, right? It's like, right? So we started talking about ministry and how hard ministry can be. And he jokingly said, he said, "I know, right? Ministry is so hard. All those angry emails. Who does that?" But then we started talking about all the ways that ministry had blessed us, the friends we'd made, the miracles that we had seen. And then we prayed for each other. And the kingdom of God came right there in In-N-Out. Now, along the way, we also talked about preaching and theology. And there was still lots that we disagreed about, lots.

But we did it in love because we knew that we are both sinners who had been forgiven for hurting all kinds of folks in all kinds of ways by the grace of Jesus and that in light of how big and amazing and loving and glorious Jesus is, the things that divided us were very small and very petty. And we realized the enemy wasn't each other. The enemy is the enemy. The enemy is the enemy who's trying to stir up division and discord and nothing unites like a common enemy and we have a common enemy and his name is Satan and he is trying to undo what God is doing by creating division and discord and destroy God's good purposes. But Jesus tears down every dividing wall of hostility. That's what he's been doing for 2000 years.

So as we enter another divisive political year, how can you be an instrument of unity and love? It doesn't mean you're always going to agree with everyone. It just means we disagree lovingly. And in a culture

that is so angry and hostile and divided right now, I got to believe that that's going to seem like a breath of fresh air to people. So BelPres, what if? What if what people said about us was, "Have you been to that church, BelPres? Have you been there? Man, there're black people and white people and Latino and Asian and they are loving each other even when they disagree and they are learning from each other's differences. You've got to see this church, man, they have older people and younger people. They have people who are wealthy. They have people who are less wealthy. They even have Republicans and Democrats."

Oh my goodness. It's a miracle because it is. It's supernatural and it comes from Jesus. Jesus, while we were running away from him, while we were yet sinners, when he had every right to argue with us and convince us how wrong we were, instead, he died to pay the price for all the hurt we've caused, all the sins we've sinned and he rose from the grave and he gave us a new identity so that we could act as his instruments of grace in a graceless world and restore what is broken and reunite what has been divided. So that in a country that is divided between red states and blue states, black and white, Latino and Asian, wealthy and not wealthy, old and young, Republican and Democrat, we will know and the world will know that Jesus is Lord and is making all things new starting with me.

Amen.

Discussion Questions: Read John 17:20-23; Philippians 4:2-3

1. Read all of John 17. This is Jesus prayer before he is crucified so it represents his top concerns. What are the main things he is focused on in this prayer?
2. What kind of unity does Jesus pray his followers would have and that we would have? What's the model for this unity?
3. How does the Apostle Paul advise the Philippians to deal with conflict and disagreement? What does "agree in the Lord" mean? How do we get to that?
4. From these two passages of scripture, how would you describe Christian unity? What should that look like in a church? What things get in the way of that unity?
5. How important is unity with others to you? Do you experience it? If so, explain.