

This is Us

Unified

Today, we're finishing up the series "This is Us," where we've been looking at some of the key ways that we live out our calling as a family of God on a mission from God. Today, we're going to talk about living in unity with those who follow Jesus. Turn with me to John 17.

I was brought up with siblings. I have 2 amazing brothers. I'm the middle child, which explains a lot about me. The first part of my life, we lived in a pretty remote area, which meant that most of the time in order to avoid boredom, we would play together. That's by far the best part of having siblings growing up: the entertainment!

We would play baseball, ride bikes, or make up ridiculous games. I remember one the dumber ideas we had was to invent what we called a "pillow race." We would put our heads on pillows on our cement basement floor, hike our butts in the air and run as fast across the basement as we could. It was really fun until my little brother couldn't keep it together... his head slid off and hit the concrete, splitting open his chin and we had to rush him off to get stitches.

Now that we're a little older, we still enjoy playing together, but there are other benefits, like having someone to talk to about difficult things in life and enjoying holidays or vacations together.

But there's a downside of having siblings too! You realize that not everything can be about you! You have disagreements and get in disputes. You have to share...

When the internet first was a thing, you couldn't use it without a phone line. One of us would try to get on the phone only to hear this terrible screeching noise instead of a dial tone. We would scream at each other to get off the internet so we could call our friends (those of you born after 2000 never knew this problem). Being together in a family wasn't always easy!

When it comes to being in the family of God that we call the church, none of us are an only child. When we decide to follow Jesus, we're brought into God's family with fellow siblings in Christ. Like any family, there's some dysfunction and tension to navigate. But because our Heavenly Father is good, we can trust that embracing our spiritual siblings will be fulfilling, leading us to God's purpose for us and helping us to become like Jesus.

But sometimes we might prefer to live like we're the only child. Maybe that's because of selfishness- we just prefer to have our own way. At other times, it's because we've been hurt by other siblings. Because the church is comprised of humans, we're bound to experience brokenness here.

Whatever it might be, as we read John 17 today, we're going to see Jesus' heart for us to live united with our family in Christ. These words we are about to read are the final words that Jesus prays before he is arrested and executed on the cross. It shows us what was on his mind before he died: it was his church!

John 17:9, he prays, "My prayer is not for the world, but for those you have given me, because they belong to you."

Jesus is praying specifically about those who belong to him. John 3:16 shows us that God loves the whole world, which is why God the Father sent Jesus to save us in his sacrificial love, but what's concerning Jesus just moments before he is arrested is the church, since they are going to be the ones showing his love after he leaves.

Let's continue in verse 20-23, "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. "I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them, and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me." (NLT)

This tells us that **knowing Jesus unites us with his Church.**

When we believe in Jesus through the message that Jesus is Lord, we now become a part of a family much bigger than us! This also means that our pursuit of Jesus brings us together with people who look different than we do, hold differing convictions than our own and have different experiences than us. We are united with them not because we try to conjure up some warm fuzzy feeling of unity, but because we belong to God's family.

My brothers and I aren't siblings because we felt like it was a noble idea. We grew up together because we shared the same parents! Sometimes when we think of being united it means that we ignore our differences and pretend to sing, "Kumbaya."

Jesus' prayer shows us that unity isn't about *our* efforts to stick together, but from *knowing him*. That means that you'll interact with people you otherwise wouldn't be around!

When my wife and I were putting together our wedding, we invited people that we had known throughout our whole life. Part of the challenge with that was making seating arrangements. We had a pretty big range of people who we knew! Many of them didn't know each other and that made their seats tricky. We wanted people to enjoy each other!

Some of them were friends I knew from music school or people that I had met at art galleries. Let's just say, that the artsy type is a very specific vibe that's different than someone like my wife's grandfather, who was a 90+ year old WWII veteran. Some were

parents bringing kids and we didn't want to put them with the crazy aunt or uncle who you never know what they are going to say.

One neat thing that happened was that there were a couple of our friends who didn't know each other, but we thought they would hit it off. We put them at a table together and we were right. They're now best friends and run a business together. That's a really good match!

Not everyone who sat a table together that night had a new BFF, but here's the thing: what brought people together that day wasn't their likes or dislikes, age or income. It was that they knew me and Anika! That's the one thing they all had in common.

What brings us together today has nothing to do with how similar we are, or at least it shouldn't. It's that we know Jesus. As the church, we're not just invited to his wedding, we are a part of his Bride, the Church! Being on the same path as Jesus and our spiritual siblings changes how we live our life.

Our united pursuit of Christ means that we get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

One of the striking aspects of Jesus' followers is how different we are from one another. It's normal to be able to get along with people who are like us and have our same interests, but when we seemingly don't have anything in common or we even disagree on something, it can get awkward.

But when we follow Jesus, it should be normal for us to be outside of our comfort zone. Look at Jesus' followers: one guy is working for Rome, and another is trying to overthrow Rome. Imagine their conversations! I bet they got uncomfortable.

When the church was born on Pentecost, people from different countries and languages all decided to live the ways of Jesus together. Imagine what a hot mess it must have been to try and organize meetings together! Jesus loves putting people together that would never even associate with each other if not for him.

As a pastor, I meet people who are checking out the church and they'll say that they're "church shopping." They'll say they're looking for a worship style that fits their taste. Sometimes they just want a small church where they can know everyone or a big church where they don't have to know anyone! Others look for a place that matches their exact theology. What you won't hear much when someone is church shopping is, "I'm looking for a place where I can meet people different than me so that I can be uncomfortable." Don't get me wrong, it's important to be a part of a community that God calls us to. But sometimes we bring our desire for comfort into our journey with Jesus. But that's not how the early church was.

One recent study showed how different people in the early church were from one another. The average size was about 30. Out of those 30 people, this is a sample of who was likely there:

- A. A craftworker and their spouse, children, their male and female slaves, and a dependent relative.
- B. Tenants of the person who owned the property, their slaves and dependents who lived in the other rented rooms.
- C. A couple of slaves whose owners don't attend the church.
- D. A couple of homeless people.
- E. Migrant workers renting small rooms in the home.
- F. Jewish folks and perhaps an enslaved prostitute.¹

I don't know about you, but I bet the early church wasn't a very comfortable place to be! You'd be challenged at every turn in that kind of company. What's more, Jesus changed the nature of their relationships with one another so that they saw themselves as "brother" and "sister." The letter of Philemon in the New Testament shows Paul helping Philemon, a master of a slave, to see a fellow Christian not as his slave, but a brother in Christ! I bet that letter made Philemon get outside of his comfort zone.

If you want to be comfortable, following Jesus is not for you. You are constantly going to be put around people and situations that are going to stretch you!

Our united pursuit of Christ means that we celebrate the diversity of the Holy Spirit's work.

"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message."

When we decide to follow Jesus, we become a part of the ancient path Jesus blazed that has now become a global family. We're a part of the most diverse movement that the world has ever seen.

We're on the journey following Jesus along with Peter, Paul and Mary... not the folk singers... the Jesus followers! We're walking in the same way as the great heroes of our faith, like Frederick Douglass or John Wesley, Corrie Ten Boom or Mother Teresa. We're also joined together with people we've never even met before who live a life that looks nothing like ours. We are united because of our shared pursuit of Jesus.

This means that we can appreciate the various ways that people express their faith throughout the history of Christian tradition, even if it doesn't mix with our taste.

I love the way my Catholic friends express their love for Jesus through all kinds of prayer. The Episcopalian church worships in a way that you get a great sense of the holiness of God because of their music and traditions like burning incense. The Pentecostal church shows us how to be open to God's Spirit moving in every moment.

¹ Mcknight, Scot. A Fellowship of Differents, pg. 15

As Jesus followers, we want to learn from those who might worship in a way that looks different than ours. Because the Church is global, we can celebrate the ways that Holy Spirit is working through different ethnic groups, too.

The church in China and Iran have a lot to teach us about how to persevere through suffering and persecution. The Holy Spirit has not just helped them survive, but to thrive under oppressive conditions as they follow Jesus in countries that don't allow them to fully follow Him.

The Korean Church is one that Crossroads has benefited from as we seek to become a house of prayer. Prayer is a pillar of the Korean church, to such an extent that in the Kyonggi province, there is a whole mountain dedicated to prayer!

Some parts of the African church show us what it's like to worship God with our whole self. Every emotion and expression is brought before God in worship. Their call-and-response show us how we can experience God in community together.

Some of us are called to the homeless, others to Fortune 500 companies. Some of us are introverts, others are extroverts. God's got us in the same family on purpose so we can reflect the diversity of His kingdom.

It's better to think of the church as a salad rather than a melting pot. In a melting pot, everything forms into the other so it's all the same. But in a salad, you've got all kinds of distinct flavors thrown together that make it what it is. You need the greens AND the tomatoes. You need the dried berries AND the nuts (you nuts know who you are, but still, we need you).

There's no one way that's better than another, we are made to show the diverse expression of God's handiwork.

Our united pursuit of Christ means that we sacrifice to accommodate the other.

Verse 19, "And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth."

God didn't wait until we could get to Him. He sent Jesus so that He could be with us. He accommodated with where we are by sacrificially loving us on the cross rather than insisting that we get on His level.

Theologians will say that when Jesus died on the cross, he made an atoning sacrifice for our sins. There's a lot of meaning behind the word "atonement," but one of the most poignant ways of understanding it is as an "at-one-ment" with Christ. Because Jesus sacrificed to accommodate to us, we can be "at one" with him. Verse 21, "I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you."

Jesus shows us the way for “at-one-ment” with each other: we lay ourselves down for the good of others.

Our united pursuit of Christ means that we have a collective witness.

In verse 18, Jesus says, “Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world.”

Jesus is sending us into the world to continue his work of bringing heaven to earth. In verse 23, we see how we will be effective in our mission. “Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

When we live in a united pursuit of Jesus as one family, we are showing what God is like and people will come to know Jesus as a result.

We tend to think of witnessing and evangelism on such individual terms. But in the New Testament, most every time disciples are evangelizing is in collaboration with others. Jesus sent out disciples in pairs. In Acts, we see Peter and John working together and Paul with Barnabas.

When Jesus calls Peter to be a “fisher of men,” we might consider fishing to be a solo activity. Today, someone can go fish on their own if they just get their own fishing pole and bait. But Peter would think of fishing as a group affair. They would cast out their net together and work with others to get their catch for the day.

The best way to evangelize isn't to be able to preach like Billy Graham or T.D. Jakes as much as it is to be unified with the church! Remember, we aren't the only child in God's family. He's put us here with others. As we embrace the family that He's placed us in, we will be able to reach others.

Coming together to pursue Jesus in Life Groups is a powerful witness. As divided as our nation has become, when people see that we live as family with those completely different than us, it shows that Jesus is alive!

This summer, our Life Groups will be celebrating what we're calling our “Summer of Go.” We've all been cooped up inside over the past year, and now it's time to get out and play! This means we are each setting up social and serving opportunities, which are the perfect chance to invite others along. When they experience the love of Jesus through his followers, it's a powerful witness!

I'd encourage you, if you're not yet a part of a group or maybe it's been a while, to get plugged in. On June 13 we're going to be having a Kickoff party for our Summer of Go where you can find a group that works for you. When we live united with others, it provides a way for others to know Jesus' love.