

It was several years ago, I had a privilege and an opportunity to preach at my family's church in Peoria, Illinois.

That is where I first heard the gospel.

That is where I grew up in the faith.

That is where I was mentored and equipped for a life in ministry.

Walking in, seeing the smiling and familiar faces of family and old friends, it all warmed my heart.

The songs and the prayers, they all spoke to my soul in a way I remembered as a child.

Part of me was instantly at home.

The place that had buried my mother, my father,

a sister, a nephew, and a niece.

But in that familiar but largely homogenous environment, another part of me, though at home, still felt distance, a sense that I did not fully fit in anymore.

And so it was after the service, a brother, bless his heart, he walked up to me after the service and he said, boom, good sermon.

but you kind of preach like them white folk now.

He meant it as a compliment.

At least I think.

I hope he did.

But if I'm honest, it hit me.

It weighed heavy on me.

I realized that though I was home, I was also now other people.

because it's because of my connection to white evangelical spaces, that has become difficult for some of my own people, including my family, to understand.

I've lost credibility.

Now you fast forward this.

God couldn't have orchestrated this no better.

You fast forward this to one week later.

Literally the next Sunday, I preached at a predominantly white church.

Church where I had apprenticed for a couple of years.

I have lasting relationships there.

I received care there when I needed.

During a season when I and my family really needed it.

I knew intellectually that

that I was welcome and loved and appreciated.

Yet even there, I remained aware of my otherness.

although I was welcome, I still wrestled with that nagging sense that I did not fully belong.

Two churches, two communities that helped form me, two places where I was genuinely loved, and yet in both places, part of me felt like a perpetual outsider.

Maybe you too know something about that feeling.

You can be welcomed into a room without fully feeling at home.

You can be surrounded by people and still wonder, is there room for me here, for all of me here?

Maybe you're a woman in a position or profession where you are usually the only one.

You probably would know what that feels like.

Maybe you are the only couple in your circle, your friend group, your small group without children.

Maybe you are single and constantly surrounded by celebrations of marriages and you are still waiting on the Lord to send you your boo.

Or maybe...

You feel unseen, alone, unheard, inside a marriage everybody else assumes is fine.

The details may be different, but many of us know what it is like to question whether we really belong.

And Heartland, I want you guys to know this is an ongoing struggle, an ongoing battle with me.

And I'm asking you guys, would you as family pray?

For me.

Thank you.

It was W.E.B.

Du Bois, who was a pioneer African-American sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and co-founder of the NAACP.

He gave language to part of what I have experienced through what he called double consciousness.

And he wrote, it is a peculiar sensation

this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others.

One ever feels his two-ness.

An American, a Negro,

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two worn ideals in one dark body.

Du Bois was describing the particular experience of black people in America in his time, living within an awareness of who you know yourself to be while also being forced to see yourself through the eyes

of a culture that considers you other.

Not enough.

Not fully human.

That language helps describe some of my own experiences, like I said, but it also points us toward a broader human struggle.

It's what happens when the different parts of our identity seem to collide.

What happens when the community around us suggests that one part of us must disappear before we can fully belong?

And so there was thousands of years ago that tension was threatening this church in Galatia.

And there was a Jewish rabbi named Paul who he wrote to this Christian community who was struggling with religious extremism and division across cultural and ethnic lines.

Although they lived far away from us, long before us, the issues they faced sound similar.

painfully familiar.

They were tempted to divide over ethnicity, culture, religious background, and social status.

They were attempted to allow their preferences and their prejudice determine who could fully belong.

And so Paul knew this tension personally.

We're going to be looking at a few verses in this letter he wrote to this church.

He knew this because he was Jewish, trained as a rabbi.

He also was a Roman citizen.

So he possessed cultural fluency in more than one world.

But he understood something that trumped all of that.

And that the gospel was not calling Gentiles to become culturally Jewish.

He highlighted how the gospel, the good news, was that Jews and Gentiles were both made right with God by his grace through faith in Jesus alone.

Nothing else.

Now, we all approach scripture with different perspectives.

Some of us believe the Bible is the inerrant, infallible word of God.

That's the camp that I'm in.

Others, you're still deciding what they believe about Jesus, the Bible, or the church, and I want you to know that's okay.

Whether you've been following Jesus for decades, or you're simply exploring faith, or you're here because someone brought you, or you're on a date.

I'm glad that you're here.

And I'm glad for you to be a part of this sensitive conversation we're about to have.

Because we all recognize the truth that we often avoid discomfort by distancing ourselves from those the gospel considers family.

That's the problem that Paul was addressing, and I think that's a problem that our cultural moment shares with that audience.

And so here's my sermon in a sentence, just in case I don't get done in time.

By the way, the clock ain't counting down, so that means I got forever.

And so here's my sermon in a sentence, and my sermon in a sentence is the gospel confronts the segregation

Fear creates and forms a family where difference can belong.

And so we're going to look at these three questions that we see in this letter that Paul is writing.

And there's this confrontation he's having with one of his brothers.

This is going to help us.

Here's the three questions I hope help frame the rest of our time.

First, what causes us to segregate from people the gospel calls family?

Second, is segregation more than a social problem?

Is it more than a social problem or is it just a social problem?

And third, what kind of community does the gospel create?

Let's begin with the first one.

What causes us to segregate from the gospel?

And my first observation, it is simple and it's going to be clear on the pages of the text.

It is fear.

Fear causes us.

To segregate from people the gospel calls family.

So now let's look at this letter.

And we have to remember this is a letter that Paul was writing.

This was a letter he was writing to his people to encourage and to equip them to continue to pursue Jesus faithfully and very deeply.

difficult times and we're going to pick up in what's called chapter 2 verse 11 and we're going to do about we're going to go to about verse 16 and I'll read a little bit and I'll try to explain a little bit and here's what it says right in verse 11 it says but when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face

Because he stood condemned.

The same one who will later give us the words, there is no condemnation for those who in Christ Jesus.

He says here that Peter stood condemned.

Now, Cephas, just so we're clear, not assuming that everybody in here grew up in church and read these stories.

Cephas is actually Peter.

He was not simply one of Jesus's friends.

He was a foundational leader in the early church.

Some will consider him to be the primary communicator for the church.

And here's what we learn from this.

Even influential and spiritually mature people, mature leaders, they can stumble.

Paul uses strong language.

I opposed him to his face.

I condemned him.

Strong language.

Because something serious has happened.

Something serious that warranted Paul to publicly confront this leader in the church.

And this is how I explain it.

Just keep reading with me in verse 12.

He explains why.

He says, before certain men came to Antioch, came from Antioch,

He was eaten with the Gentiles.

My translation says for certain men came from James.

He was eaten with the Gentiles.

But when they came, he drew back and he enjoyed them to come and be with his people.

They introduced them to some lamb chops, some lamb tacos.

No, when they came, it says he drew back and he separated himself.

Again, what causes us to segregate?

Fear.

Here's what it says.

Fearing the circumcision party.

Fearing those who had influence.

Fearing those who was connected with James, Jesus' younger brother.

Peter knew that the Gentiles belonged.

God had already confronted Peter's assumptions and shown him that Gentiles were welcome into God's family through faith in Jesus alone.

Amen.

Peter had eaten with them.

He had worshipped with them.

He had shared fellowship with them, took communion with them.

He hung out with them.

He would have watched a game with them, went hunting and fishing with them.

But when a certain group arrived, Peter changed tables.

The wording says that he drew back and separated himself.

And I want you to know that word in the Greek for separated, we can also translate that.

And I think a better translation for that is it was more than just separation, like just creating some temporary distance.

He segregated himself.

He said that I'm rocking with my people over here, with the Jews, and it's okay if y'all go head over there as Gentiles and do y'all thing.

He segregated himself, and Paul tells us why, because Peter was afraid.

See, this table fellowship, it represented something bigger, something broader, something more beautiful, helping us see Jesus as more believable.

It represented fellowship and acceptance and belonging.

And by changing tables, Peter communicated that the Gentiles were acceptable,

Kind of.

Until influential people showed up.

Peter did not necessarily change his theology.

He changed his behavior.

But by changing his behavior, he contradicted his theology.

Because fear caused Peter to segregate from people the gospel had already declared family.

And his fear did not just affect him.

Let's keep reading.

Verse 13, it says, and the rest of the Jews, they stood up.

They pushed back.

They said, hey, Peter, we love you.

We know you was Jesus' boy, but we think you're a little off here.

Is that what y'all translations say?

No, it's not.

It is not.

This is what it says.

And the rest of the Jews acted.

hypocritically along with him.

Damn, these aren't my words.

These are in the testimony of scripture.

This is what Paul is saying.

He said the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him so that even Barnabas, the little homie, was led astray by their hypocrisy.

What?

Peter's action gave others permission to follow.

Even Barnabas of the leader, known for his generosity, longed to be a great encourager.

He was also swept up into the segregation when those influential people came.

Because when leaders create distance, others learn whom they are supposed to be to avoid.

One person changes tables and soon an entire community becomes divided.

Peter's fear became contagious.

But the opposite is also true and this is good news.

because courage can also become contagious.

When one community refuses to surrender its faith or accommodate injustice, its witness can give someone else the courage to stand.

We see that clearly in the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer is remembered as the German pastor and theologian who resisted Hitler and the Nazi regime.

But part of the courage we admire in Bonhoeffer, it was formed years earlier.

It was formed through his encounter with the historic black church.

It was in 1930 while he was studying at Union Theological Seminary in New York, a black classmate named Frank Fisher introduced him to Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

Bonhoeffer did not just visit there, he worshipped there regularly.

He taught Sunday school.

He instructed the children and he was deeply engaged in the life of the church.

He sat under the preaching of Adam Clayton Powell.

Here's this German theologian who's sitting in this historic black church in 1930.

Can you imagine the bravery and the humility that took?

And there, Bonhoeffer, he encountered a community suffering under the evils of racism and, y'all guessed it, segregation.

but refusing to surrender its faith in Jesus as Lord, its commitment to the authority of Scripture, the dignity of all people being made in God's image and likeness, and a prophetic voice pushing back against a government that used every instrument it had to deny them access economically, educationally,

and even to medical treatment fairly.

He witnessed a church that did not, that refused to separate the gospel from the struggle of justice.

Their preaching, worship, spirituals, and courage showed him what Christian faith looked like from the perspective of people living under oppression.

Bonhoeffer, he later described those relationships.

to be something that God used to form him in some amazing ways.

This is what he said.

He said, this personal acquaintance with Negroes was one of the most important.

Sitting under the professors at Union Theological Seminary, he said his time there was one of the most important experiences

and gratifying events of my stay in America.

That is the language of his time, but his point is unmistakable.

His relationship with the black community changed him.

When Bonhoeffer returned to Germany and witnessed

Hitler's racial ideology and how it was infecting the German church, he had already seen another kind of infection and he had witnessed the black church confront both racism and segregation with a courageous faith.

That witness helped form the theological and the moral imagination he would later carry into his resistance against Nazism.

Wow.

Amazing.

That will cost him his life.

Discipled here in a historic, traditional black church.

He had witnessed this courage in this black church.

Just like Peter's fear became contagious, the courage of Bonhoeffer also became contagious too.

Church, our response to division, it never only affects us.

It's not just a personal sin, a personal struggle, a personal issue that just affects me.

Fear can lead others towards segregation, but courage can help bring our conduct back in step with the gospel.

I think the language I use around here is remaining in Jesus.

Now, before I continue, I want to slow down and make some room.

Let's take a collective deep breath already.

Let's go.

Because I want to make some room for those who may find this difficult to hear.

Some of you are weary.

I mean, you are just overwhelmed by the ongoing cultural wars.

And you may be wondering, why do we have to talk about this at church today?

Why we just can't focus on the gospel today?

Now, others may be carrying something completely different.

You may be carrying the loneliness of being surrounded by people who don't seem to understand or worse, care about what you have seen and what you have experienced.

You may be wondering whether the church understands, your church understands how personal and how painful this really is.

Paul, the good news is that Paul speaks to both groups.

He speaks to both of us by refusing to treat segregation as merely a social or a political issue.

And that brings us to our second question.

Is the segregation just a social problem?

And so my second observation is segregation contradicts the truth of the gospel.

Heartless Paul concern is deeper than Peter's personal inconsistency.

Peter's behavior was misrepresenting the gospel itself.

It was antithetical to the good news.

He says, keep with me here.

Keep with me in verse 14.

He says, but when I saw their conduct, there was the leaders that came.

then Peter, then the rest of the Jews, and then Barnabas, right?

And so he's saying, when I saw that their conduct was not politically acceptable, is that what he says?

He says, I saw their conduct was a little impolite, but it's not that big of a deal.

We got bigger fish to fry?

No, that's not what he said.

He said, when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all,

And so Paul is letting them know, I had to stand up and push back against what was wrong.

He says, I stand before Cephas before them all.

If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?

Notice Paul's language, though.

Just a little, as we step back, he says that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel.

That gives us a picture of someone whose values are inconsistent with their actions.

Peter had not stopped preaching the gospel, and that's the thing we need to remember here.

He still believed that salvation came through faith in Jesus alone.

His doctrine had not changed, but his behavior was communicating faith.

Another gospel.

By withdrawing from the Gentile believers, Peter's actions were saying, Jesus may have saved you, but you still need to become a little bit more like us before you can sit with us.

A little bit more like us.

You're almost there.

You're doing great.

A little bit more.

Imagine for a moment that a family adopts a child.

They give the child their name.

They bring the child into their home.

They publicly declare, you are part of this family.

But then when everyone gathers for dinner, they tell the child, wait a minute, hold up, baby, we love you.

You cannot sit at the table with us just yet.

We can do certain things together, but not everything together.

First,

You need to learn how we talk.

You need to dress the way we dress.

You need to eat what we eat, how we eat it, when we eat it, and you need to become just a little bit more like us.

The adoption papers would say one thing, but the family's conduct at the table would say something else.

They have declared the child is family, but they are treating the child like an outsider.

The child bears the family name, but is still being required to earn something.

to earn, to work for, to assimilate for, to be transformed into something other for a place at the family's table.

And that's exactly Paul's accusation against Peter.

Peter knew the Gentiles had been adopted into God's family by grace, and he was making the assumption that adoption required assimilation before it becomes final.

I didn't think I would get an amen there, but I sensed when somebody wanted to say it, but they didn't know.

He knew God had welcomed him through his faith in Jesus, but when Peter withdrew the table, his conduct, it contradicted what he claimed to believe.

His mouth preached grace while he practiced segregation.

Let that not be said of you.

Let that not be said of me.

Let that not be said of Heartland.

Because the gospel says we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

Segregation says Jesus may save you, but you must become like us before you can sit with us.

The gospel says Christ has brought us near.

Segregation creates distance.

The gospel says we are one family.

There is no Jew.

There is no Gentile.

There is no male, no female, no slave or free.

But segregation sourced the family into two groups.

separate tables, the black Protestant church, the white evangelical church, the Democrats, the Republicans, the Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Dallas Cowboy fans, and everybody else.

Whenever our race, culture, politics, class, traditions, or preferences become additional requirements for belonging, our conduct is no longer in step

Paul's words in the testimony of scripture preserved for all times.

It says it is no longer in step with the truth of the gospel.

Expecting, requiring, demanding people to assimilate to belong.

Heartland goes against your value of remaining in Jesus.

Remaining in step with the truth of the gospel.

Paul confronts what the gospel rejects, but in doing so, he also protects what the gospel creates.

And that brings us to our third and final question.

And y'all can take a deep breath.

We getting through it.

What kind of community does the gospel actually create then?

And my third and final observation is the gospel creates a community, creates belonging, I'm sorry, without requiring community.

The gospel creates a community without requiring assimilation.

The gospel creates a church without requiring assimilation.

That's why Paul continues in verse 15, we ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners yet.

We know.

He's like, hey, look, let's just keep it real here.

When I was coming up, we would call it keeping a hundred.

They say something else.

Now it changes so often.

I don't even want to, I just going to say, he said, let's keep it real here.

Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law.

but through faith in Jesus Christ.

Not the works of the law, not assimilating, not fitting in, not trying to do better, not trying to be better, but through faith in Jesus.

And then he goes on and says this.

He says, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus.

in order to be justified by faith in Christ, not by works of the law, because by works of the law, no one will be justified.

Paul is reminding Peter of something Peter already knows.

Paul is reminding that church, the people he was writing to, something they already knew.

Paul is reminding us of something we already know.

We already profess to believe.

We did not earn our place at God's table either.

Jewish believers were not welcome because they had the right ethnicity, followed the right customs, or came from the right cultural background.

They were justified through faith in Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

And if Jewish believers entered through grace...

how could they turn around and require Gentile believers to enter through cultural conformity?

Just imagine that.

You received your faith by grace.

Jesus came and rescued you.

You tell your testimony stories in small group.

And yet, you, we, expect others to become more like us and not more like Jesus.

None of us came to this table because we deserve the seat.

If it's not for God's mercy, we are here for one reason, and it's because Jesus, with his body and his blood, he made room for us.

It's because of Jesus being obedient to the end.

He made room for us.

It's because of his shed blood.

And the family Jesus creates, just so we're clear, it does not erase differences between us.

The gospel makes us one without making us the same.

Amen.

That is the difference between unity and uniformity.

Unity allows different people to belong to one family, but uniformity, it requires different people to become like whoever holds the most power.

Unity recognizes and embraces difference.

Uniformity treats one group's preferences as the price that everyone else must pay to belong.

I recently heard one of the most beautiful descriptions of this from a young African-American lady who's been hanging out at our church for the past couple of years.

Now, she does not yet identify as a believer.

She wouldn't say that she has committed her life to following Jesus.

She's still working through it, still working through what she believed.

But she said something, though, that captures the beauty of the work that God has called us to do at the Bridge North County in Ferguson, Missouri.

She explained how as a black woman who was educated in predominantly white schools, she has spent much of her life

moving between different cultural spaces, yet she has rarely completely felt safe or welcomed in either one.

In predominantly white spaces where she spent much of her life, because that's where she went to school, that's where her parents worked, she often felt like the other, always reminded about her otherness.

And because of her proximity to whiteness, when she returned to the black spaces that she lived and she played and she socialized, she sometimes felt like the other there too.

One place, she was too black.

Another place, you talk like a white girl.

Boom, you preach like them white folks.

Too black for some spaces, not a black enough for others.

She knew what it was like to be present in a room without ever falling at home.

This is how she spent much of her life.

But then she said for the first time in her life, she feels seen and welcomed by both the Anglos and the African-American people at our church.

Come on, that's where we do that at.

Do you hear the beauty in that?

This young lady who is not yet even identifying as a Christian, but she's already encountered something that the gospel alone can create.

Only Jesus can do this through the work of his spirit.

Only he can do this.

Only Jesus can create a family where difference can belong.

That's why we do what we do.

That's why we preach the truth of the gospel.

Because we want to become a place where people can safely cross the cultural lines that have historically and so easily divide us.

A place where people do not have to erase part of themselves before they can be seen, welcomed, and loved.

A place where our unity cannot be explained by assimilation, but only through the shed blood of Jesus.

That's the kind of church Jesus is forming, and that's why we keep making room at his table.

Because as Paul told the church in Galatia, I stand here to tell you today, whenever we are tempted to avoid discomfort by distancing ourselves from people, the gospel calls family.

we should remind one another that the gospel, the good news of who Jesus is, the one who integrated into humanity

behalf of his people the one who broke down the walls of hostility that existed between cultural groups for generations we should remind one another that the gospel that story that good news confronts the segregation fear creates and forms a family where difference can belong and this matters because

The church should be one of the few places in a divided world where people do not have to pretend, protect, perform, or to try to be someone else in order to belong.

So how do we continue to remain in Jesus, to walk in step with the truth of the gospel?

And the question that we can ask is not just, am I sitting with people who are different from me?

Sometimes that's easier, sometimes it's not.

There's a deeper question, though, that I think that we should lean into that's, I think, more important than that one.

And that is, whose acceptance am I afraid to lose?

Not am I going out of my way to sit next to people who vote differently, come from different communities, look differently, eat differently, don't root for the cowboys, who would?

Not.

But whose acceptance am I afraid to lose?

What would they think of me on social media if I reposted this?

What will my family say at the dinner table if I push back against that?

What will my friends say if I don't lean into the racist or the sexist jokes?

Because whenever we fear rejection, we will be tempted to compromise the freedom

And the belonging Jesus has already secured for us by his body and his blood.

And like Peter, we don't need another rude telling us where to sit.

We need to remember that because of Jesus, we are already accepted.

already secure, already free, already forgiven, already loved, already redeemed, already justified, adopted in process of the ongoing sanctifying work of God's spirit in our life so that we can be more and more like him as he makes the world around us new.

And so it's not to simply try harder to become more inclusive.

It is to bring our fears, our prejudices, and our preferences under the truth of the gospel before fear determines where you sit, who you can sit with, and who's welcome.

Remember whose table.

We're all sitting there and that table belongs to the king of king and the lords of lords.

And so before fear tells you to withdraw, fam, remember your place and remember the who, the person of Christ who secured your place.

Because it's Jesus who was rejected so that we could be received.

He was pushed out, hung up on a cross so that we could be brought near.

He bore our separation so that strangers can become sons and daughters of God.

And people we once called those people,

Them, the others, they can be people.

Jesus teaches us through his word by the gospel to call family because our place in God's family is secure and we are free to stay at the table when fear tells us to leave.

We are free to speak when fear tells us to remain silent and we're free to make room without demanding other people become more like me.

that's how we bring our values back in step with the truth of the gospel no more rules just remembering who we are remembering whose we are and from that secure place we become the kind of family the kind of church the kind of people the kind of community we're different

can belong as we all submitted to the Lordship of Jesus.

Can I pray for you?

Lord, thank you for today.

Thank you for the way that you are uniquely at work in this church, the way that you are caring for the people here, Lord.

I pray that the words that they heard, the meditation of my heart, Lord, are acceptable to you for your glory.

And I hope it was good and it cares for the people that are present and all those who were here

Lord, I pray that you would bless it and sanctify it.

And on a Sunday like this, as we are about to come to his table, let us, Lord, come clear with repentance in our hearts, come rejoicing that you are so faithful and for some even to recommit to the covenant love they have found in you.

Bless us and keep us in Jesus' name.

Amen.