

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of officiating my niece's wedding. It was beautiful, sweet, fun, and a cultural experience. My niece, Ryann Andres, married Miguel Nava. Miguel is first generation American, whose family still lives, in large part, in Mexico and came in town for the wedding. Ryann is...Texan...w/ southern roots and a lineage that leads back to Western Europe. As these two very different families came together in community to celebrate this wedding, we thoroughly enjoyed each other's company, but there were also some challenges in trying to co-exist for two days. I think the DJ had it the toughest. At one point, I marveled as he played a country song, followed by a hip-hop song, followed by a song by Duran Duran for all us Gen-Xers and children of the 80's, followed by a salsa/merengue song. As the merengue song came on, all of Ryann's family moved to the edge of the dance floor and out of nowhere, Miguel's dad exploded on the dance floor and salsa danced like a professional. Miguel came up to me and said "Oh yeah, watch this. My dad is in his element." He did not disappoint. Over the course of that weekend, we got a taste of each other's culture while living in the tension of intimate community.

I don't have to tell you that the differences of people in the world can often create tension and ultimately create division. So many of the characteristics that define who we are can become points of separation, and when those are brought together in community, they often lead to discomfort, suspicion, animosity, and conflict.

That's true even in the church. If a church aspires to be a diverse, multi-cultural church there will be tensions. If you've been around Fellowship for any time, you've likely felt that. While we delight in getting a taste of variety, we can't avoid the tension of different people with different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, preferences, practices, and experiences. Said more plainly: it's tough! Homogeneity is easy. To be a gathered group of different people can be hard. It has been said that Sunday mornings are the most segregated time in our nation, and while the statistics no longer prove that out, there is an understandable pull towards that because of how hard it can be when we live in community together. We are imperfect people living in a broken world, still battling the flesh and an enemy that seeks to make our differences divisions. Will it always be this way?

That's what I want to answer this morning as we wrap up our series on Heaven called *The Best is Yet to Come*. We have spent the last eight weeks talking about Heaven and how the eternity God has planned for us is infinitely better than whatever we experience today. That is our hope, and that hope should impact the way we live today. This morning we look at who will be there and how we will relate with one another, and how we can aspire to be a taste of what's to come while wrestling with the tension that creates.

**In Heaven, our differences will no longer be a source of division.** There is coming a day when all this tension will be replaced with peace, unity, and purpose.

**[Revelation 7:9-10, 15a] <sup>9</sup> After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, <sup>10</sup> and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the**

**throne, and to the Lamb!”... <sup>15</sup> “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple.”**

The Apostle John tells us who is in Heaven, before the throne of God, and he makes it clear it's a mixed bunch. The great multitude is from every nation, tribe, people, and language. That's not just a simple observation. It's a proclamation of how different things will be in eternity. This fourfold classification occurs regularly in the Revelation, and it includes all the ways mankind is classified. It is more than a list of characteristics. **These are identifiers, the substance of who we are, and the lines by which we are so often divided on earth.** These barriers exist today but will be eradicated in eternity. What is divided on earth will be united in Heaven.

Think of the ways these operate in a divisive way. Nations, *ethnos*, where we get “ethnicity”, national identity and culture. In the past 3,400 years, the entire world has been completely at peace for only 268 of them. Consider the Olympics. I love them, there is a spirit of unity and the world pauses to come together for sport...but we still want to kick the crap out of the Russians! Tribe is a person's clan and family lineage. All you have to do is keep up with the Kardashians to see how that can get difficult. People is race. The last 18 months have been a painful reminder of the divide that exists. And language, the easiest to understand. Martha and I hosted the rehearsal dinner at our house and Miguel's grandmother, who had flown in from Mexico, attended. When she arrived, I said to her “Buenas dias, abuela. Bienvenida mi casa.” She brightened up and one of the other family members, who was bilingual, asked me “Do you speak Spanish?” I said, “No. You just got about 87% of my Spanish vocabulary right there.” The next day at the wedding, as I spoke, I saw her smiling, but she probably didn't get a thing I was saying.

But, in spite of all of that, there is coming a day where believers of all different backgrounds will peacefully come together in Heaven. We could look at this with 2021 eyes and marvel, and we should. But we really need to look at it with Genesis 11 eyes. All of these differences can create division, but we have to remember where so much of this started. Now, we know division and animosity started in the Garden. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and sin entered the world. That sin manifested in their son Cain who killed their other son Abel. But turn a few pages to Genesis 11 and see what happens when that sin is front and center in a unified people. God had told mankind to fill the earth and make him known, but in Genesis 11, they conspire to settle and build a great tower that would reach the heavens. Their motive? “Let us make a name for *ourselves*.” And God was having none of it.

**[Genesis 11:6-8] <sup>6</sup> And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.” <sup>8</sup> So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.**

They were united in disobedience, with one voice, and the purpose to make much of themselves. In his providence, God divided people through language, resulting in their disunity, their inability to cooperate with one another, and their scattering. I believe it was a gracious act. Man has been responsible for unspeakable wickedness. As God said, imagine what we could do if we remained united in sin? Does that mean we would have been homogenous without this? No. In

the beginning God created abundant variety in all of creation, he created them man and woman, and he himself lives in diversity as the Trinity. But, in a world ruled by sin, those differences became sources of division, and division is ultimately caused by us making more of ourselves than God or someone else.

So what will happen in Heaven? God will reverse this Curse. We will be united in Christ, standing before the throne of God as one people, making much of him with one voice (voice singular in this passage), and living in perfect community with one purpose, to love, serve, and worship him for all of eternity. With all that's happening in our world, it's hard to imagine, isn't it? As you struggle, grieve, and engage the brokenness of this world, let the hope of what's to come propel you, minister to you, and be part of the message we give to others.

Now, do those differences need to disappear in order for us to live in peace in eternity? No.

**In Heaven, our differences will be an eternal testimony to the redeeming and unifying work of Christ.** God will not remove our differences but will instead reconcile them by what he has done in the past and what he will do in eternity.

[Revelation 5:9-10, Revelation 7:14-17]

<sup>9</sup> And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,

for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God  
from every tribe and language and people and nation,

<sup>10</sup> and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.”...

**They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.**

<sup>15</sup> “Therefore they are before the throne of God,  
and serve him day and night in his temple;  
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

<sup>16</sup> They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;  
the sun shall not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat.

<sup>17</sup> For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of living water,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Your eternal soul has a price tag affixed to it that says, “the blood of Christ”. Jesus died on the cross for your and my sins. By it, he purchased us from the power of sin and the separation it caused between us and God to bring us into an eternal, peaceful relationship with him. But as Jesus paid for what separated us from God, he also paid for what separated us from one another. Those differences that led to division will all find a commonality in Jesus, like a song where all different voices are perfectly harmonized with one another. Jesus paid for hate, malice, injustice, prejudice, evil. Anything God could hold against us has been nailed to the cross. Anything we might hold against one another has been nailed to the cross. **If you have accepted God's forgiveness for your sins against him, can you accept God's forgiveness for others' sins**

**against you?** I do not ask that question lightly, nor do I think the answer to that question is easy. But there is coming a day when we will answer it affirmatively.

And as we live for eternity, our Good Shepherd will comfort us with his presence and his care. There will be no fear, no suspicion, no strife. We will be gathered in Christ for all eternity, and as we live in love and unity as his people, our differences will be on display as an eternal testimony to all the Lamb has overcome. We will live in unity and diversity, full of differences, but without division, and the reason is Jesus.

So what do we do until then? Spend all our time only with people just like us? I say no.

**Participate in the taste and hold fast in the tension.** Be part of the taste of who Fellowship is and experience it for yourself. A taste is a sample of the whole. I've been to a couple restaurants that have bacon flights...basically the greatest idea of all time...you get four slices of bacon cooked four different ways; a taste of each. It piques your interest and leaves you wanting more.

Be an active part of this community. Experience and grow to appreciate the differences that exist among us. Engage, get to know others, ask a lot of questions, involve yourself in each other's lives. We are the body of Christ, the family of God, and our community is supposed to be defined by intimacy. Risk vulnerability. Let yourself be known, and welcome everyone who walks through our doors and celebrate all of the uniqueness they bring with them.

And as we do, hang on when things get tense. Risk getting uncomfortable and give grace when things do. Participate in our upcoming sermon series and Life Group study called *Engaging Culture*. We want to see what the Bible has to say about how we are to engage one another and the world and how, in doing so, we can become an engaging culture of our own. And hang on when things aren't exactly how you want them to be. If I'm preaching heresy, go. If we are letting sin run rampant in our body, go. But hang in there if we don't sing all the hymns you want or more hymns than you want. I want you to know how hard Noah is working to create a cohesive sound in our worship while also reflecting the diversity of our body. He wants to give a taste while sitting in the tension. Pray for him and encourage him. We are about to do something I pray glorifies God and blesses you, but if we did it every week, you probably wouldn't like it. Hang on in the tension of how the church reacts to everything that happens in our world, especially if it's not the way you want us to. Have a difficult conversation if relationships get strained and ask for help if you need it. **Who we are together is too important for what God wants to show the world through us.**

We don't have to wait until Heaven to be a testimony of the difference Jesus makes. We can be a taste today of the peace and unity that will exist in eternity. We will do it imperfectly. But in a world split in two, they can come here and see that different doesn't mean divided. And if they get that taste, they'll want more.

And so we close this morning with a taste and tension. A taste of what it will be like in Heaven while we sit in the tension of us not yet being there yet.