

Sermon Series:

Love One Another

One New People – Ephesians 2:11-22; Colossians 3:11-15

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Think, for a moment, of the people in our church. Who is most like you? What do you share in common with them? Are you the same age? Do you have a similar background – come from the same culture or location, have a similar family? Do you have the same interests or work skills? Are your personalities similar? At the opposite end of the spectrum, who are you least like? How are they different to you? Is anything the same between the two of you? Outside of the church, would you ever come across each other or have an opportunity to become friends?

I believe God has specifically chosen each one here to be a part of this church. We are not necessarily people who would naturally be friends or do things together – yet here we are! We share some similarities – most of us are of a similar age, and we all live locally, but there are also many differences between us. And yet, last week we read:

And this is His commandment: We must believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. (1 John 3:23)

We summarised this by saying that We are people of God's Son and people of God's love. But, how do we “*love one another*” in such a diverse group? We don't have open conflicts between us, and yet we do have some significant differences in how we approach life and what we think about some issues, and this could cause discord among us. How do we love each other in spite of these differences? I think this is important to think about. To do this, we're going to look at what Paul has to say about the church in Ephesians and Colossians. These two letters were written about the same time to similar churches and so Paul addresses many similar topics, although sometimes he approaches them from slightly different perspectives.

... **united with Christ Jesus.** (Ephesians 2:11-13)

Paul says that what holds the church together is not that its members are similar people, but that they are all “*united with Christ Jesus*”. In the church at Ephesus, there were both Jews and Gentiles, but probably the majority of them were Gentiles.

As such, before they became Christians, they had had no access to a relationship with the God of Israel and the Bible. They were uncircumcised. Circumcision was an outward sign that you were a member of the Jewish community who worshipped God and benefitted from His promises. However, Paul hints that mere physical circumcision didn't mean that you actually had a real relationship with God, just that you were a part of the group of people who could have a relationship with Him. However, those who were uncircumcised "*lived in this world without God and without hope.* (v.12) Fortunately for us Gentiles, the story doesn't stop there! God has stepped in to change things. In the two halves of this chapter, we see a similar pattern used – first Paul describes a problem and then he shows us how God has fixed that problem. In the first 10 verses, the problem is death because of our sins, but God, because of His love for us, has made us alive in Christ. In verses 11-22, the problem is separation - from God and from His people. "*But now ...*" God has brought us back to God and united us into one new people. (v. 13,14)

Once again, we see that the whole Trinity is involved. We are united with Christ Jesus whose death (or His blood) cleanses us from sin and makes it possible for us to draw near to God, the Father. This is applied to our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit. Once we were excluded from a relationship with God, but now we are brought close to Him through the work of all three persons of the Trinity.

These changed individual relationships with God through Jesus Christ are the basis for our new relationship with others in the church. We are no longer separated by whether or not we are a part of the Jewish nation and follow the Law, including circumcision. Now, we all have access to the Father through the one salvation which Jesus won through His death on our behalf on the cross. God's new people, the church, is brought together around Jesus Christ. He is what draws us together. And He is the one who has "*carefully joined them together*".

... carefully joined together in him ... (Ephesians 2:14-22)

This required a change of thinking on the part of everyone. Jews felt they had a special relationship with God. They had history with Him which they felt gave them special privileges. They really looked down on anyone who was not a Jew and would never have socialised with Gentiles because that would violate the purity of their relationship with God. Gentiles, on the other hand, came out of pagan religions and a totally different perspective on life. They were just beginning to learn about the God of the Bible. Many of them would have seen the Jews as being a little weird and wouldn't have wanted to have much to do with them! If ever there were people who had little in common it was these two groups. It wasn't just that they had different ideas about some things, Paul says there was a "*wall of hostility*" between them. (v. 14)

But in Christ, God changed everything. He broke down that wall by bringing in a new way to find peace with God, and with each other. The hostility wasn't solved by making the Jews become Gentiles, or the Gentiles become Jews – God took both of them and made something new. They were united into one new people – a new kind of human. When they chose to follow Christ, their primary identity was no longer Jew

or Gentile, but Christian, the new people of God. It is not that they had to give up their ethnic identity – they were still ethnically Jew or Roman or Greek or whatever - it was just that this was no longer the most important part of their identity.

In talking about the church, Paul uses several metaphors or word pictures to illustrate this. The church is a very complex thing and throughout the New Testament, there are over 90 different metaphors used to describe the church. In this passage Paul uses at least six. We are all parts of **one body** – some are hands, some feet, some eyes, some ears. We are different and have different roles, but we all work together as a single unit. We are **fellow citizens** of God's kingdom with the same rights and responsibilities, just like all the citizens of Australia share the same benefits and must follow the same laws. We are a **holy people**, set apart to serve God. We are **God's family**, caring for each other as brothers and sisters and sharing the benefits of being children of God. We are built together into **God's house**. Many houses then were built of stone instead of uniform bricks and this required skilful placing of each stone in just the right place, just as God carefully places us in the place where we are needed and will be blessed. Together, we are a **temple of God**, a place where others can see God in action here on this earth.

This is not anything we do, it is what God, through Christ, does when we turn to Him in faith and accept His salvation. He cleanses us from sin, gives us His life, and places us in His church as members of the new people of God. Even if we never attend a physical church, this is true of us. All true Christians are a part of His universal church which stretches through the ages and around the world.

I believe that God also places us in specific, physical churches as well. God has chosen each one of you to be a part of this church at this time for a reason. He knows that we need you in order to be what He wants us to be as this local expression of the universal church. When you are not here, or when you choose to limit your involvement, then we are less than what we would be with your presence. We really do need you – and you need us!

However, there is one thing that is true – none of us is perfect. Just because God has placed us in the church and in this church in particular, it does not mean that it is always easy to get along. The spiritual reality needs to work itself out in the physical reality in which we live. To do this, we need something to hold us together and help us work together well. This is what Paul in Colossians talks about.

... love, which binds us all together ... (Colossians 3:11-15)

Jesus, John, Peter, Paul – all these say over and over again that love is the most important thing we need to focus as followers of Jesus. Jerome, writing around 400AD, told a story that had been handed down to him.

The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing, but "Little children, love one another." The brother and sisters in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, "Teacher,

why do you always say this?” He replied: “Because it is the Lord’s commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.”¹

Nothing else will make the church demonstrate the power of God’s salvation to a watching world so much as the radical realignment of our relationships around the love of God. If we begin to truly love one another, then our differences will be transformed from irritants that keep us apart into a beneficial diversity that will help us to do the job God has given us to do.

In Ephesians, Paul looks at the work of **God** in making us into a new people of God. In Colossians, he talks about what needs to happen in **our lives** in order for this spiritual reality to become a physical reality in a particular church. He mentions at least three things.

First, we must affirm what really matters. As Paul says, “*It doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilised, slave or free.*” (v. 11) Jews and Gentiles didn’t socialise. The Romans and Greeks looked down on the people from the colonies they considered uncivilised barbarians. Slaves were not even considered human beings by many owners. In Galatians, he adds male or female to this list, overcoming the cultural assumptions that women were second-class people. Yes, these classifications are part of who a person is, but they are not the most important part of his or her identity. It is Christ in us that becomes the most important thing about each of us.

This month we are focusing our prayers on Caleb and Grace in Uganda. They are very different to all of us – physically and culturally. Their church is very different to ours. In the natural course of life outside the church, we probably would never have anything to do with them. But in Christ, they are our brothers and sisters, and this has built a tie with them that is very strong. And both of us are richer for it! We shouldn’t ignore or cover up our differences, we just need to recognise that our unity in Christ is stronger than those differences. We are like the instruments in the orchestra. Each instrument is very different, and you can’t play a tuba like a violin! But when they play well together, following the same score, the result is better than anything made by just a single instrument. The differences are what bring the depth and variety of sound.

Secondly, we need to clothe ourselves with God’s love. We don’t love each other with our own love, but God’s love. Our own love will tend to gravitate to others just like us, those we find it easy to like, and around whom we feel comfortable. But love in the church requires that we go outside our comfort zone and open our lives to all kinds of people and reflect God’s love in the way that we treat others. This love will show itself in “*tender-hearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*” (v. 12) This description is remarkably similar to the fruit of the Spirit we looked at last week. As God’s love changes us, these attitudes will be evident in our relationships with each other.

¹ St. Jerome, Commentary of Galatians, Fathers of the Church Series.

This kind of love does not come easily, especially when we are with people who are very different to us. Different cultures have different expectations on how people should act. For instance, what we do when someone dies varies considerably across cultures. I remember an Australian friend telling me that they thought the American practice of embalming people and having an open casket at a funeral was bizarre – repulsive even. I've never been particularly a fan of open caskets, but just dismissing it off-hand because it was different was quite demeaning to the American side of me. There are also differences in what we are used to and enjoy – take food for instance. I remember a conference I ran in Asia where the Westerners present spent the whole time complaining about the food. It wasn't just that they didn't like it, but they made it clear that since it was different to what they were used to, it was therefore inferior. This was extremely hurtful to our hosts who were turning themselves inside out to be hospitable to us, often at great cost to themselves. In a multi-cultural congregation like our own, we need to be thoughtful in how we evaluate things that are different. And even among people we are most like, differing personalities and backgrounds can mean that we don't always approach things in the same way. We can make assumptions that the way we've always done things is the only right way to do them. Even after 30+ years of marriage, sometimes Scott and I make assumptions on the best way to do something – and they are totally different!

This kind of love takes the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lots of practice. We won't always get it right! And when we fail – and we will! – we need forgiveness freely offered, just as God forgives us. This doesn't mean that if someone sins against us that we need to just cover it up and act like it didn't happen. Sometimes, in order to offer forgiveness, we need to talk it through to help each other understand what has happened. Sometimes, changes might need to be made in how things are done. But the goal will always be work things out, in love, *“which binds us all together in perfect harmony.”* (Colossians 3:14)

Finally, we need to allow God's peace to permeate our own heart. We can't be at peace with others if our own heart is not at peace with itself and with God. Again, this isn't something which happens overnight, but it can be a growing reality as we get to know God and allow Him to fill our hearts.

In summary, the love which we share as God's people is not our love, but God's love which comes from Jesus and is poured out into our hearts by the Spirit and spreads out to influence all that happens in the church. It is love which binds us together; it is the “glue” of the church. And it is love which makes things run smoothly; it is the “lubricant” of the church. Love keeps us together, even when it is difficult, and love helps us to work together with less friction even though we are often very different. As the Psalmist says *“How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in harmony! ... There the Lord has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.”* (Psalm 133) When we live in love for one another it benefits each other and in the midst of this environment, God is able to give His blessing.

Here, we are called “brothers and sisters” which is one of the main ways that relationships in the church are described in the Bible. Next week we'll take a closer look at this and see what it teaches us about loving one another.