

The Complicated Community
Ephesians 2:14-22
A Sermon by Heather Kattan
January 30, 2011

We live in a world that is increasingly marked by division, with partisan politics, divisions between cultures, and a movement towards a more individualized society. In the current climate of crisis where the resources for comfort and financial security are thin, competition becomes the name of the game. Especially in times of upheaval, it is a difficult task to be a community. During times of feast and ease there is no real challenge to coexisting, there is so much that all have plenty and there is more left over to spare. It is these moments when times are not so good and when we struggle to make difficult choices when the real challenge to community comes out. There is an old joke that many of you have probably heard; it says that when you get ten Baptists together you get twelve opinions. We normally hold this up as an example of the soul freedom that is a distinctive mark of the Baptist tradition, but what happens when those ten Baptists have to come together to make one decision. Can we be a cohesive and loving community while still maintaining our Baptist independence?

The call of Christ has always been to rise above what we first thought possible. The base human tendency might call us to divisions because of differences of opinions, but through the love of Christ we are again united into one community. "...he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall..." The end goal is that the Christian community be an example of how to rise above divisive conflicts because of their unifying love of Christ. The truth of the matter, however, is that it has been far more difficult to enact this rising above it all. The history of Christianity has been littered with divisions, from the larger splits with Orthodoxy and the Reformation to

the divisions of churches in modern day America. On any Sunday morning there are millions of Christians worshipping around the world, but we do it in separate buildings where our identity as a particular branch is well defined.

When there are fractures, it is because the group allowed the conflict to overwhelm the call to be in community with one another. There are bound to be differences in opinion when you bring any large group of people together. Tastes and preferences are going to be varied, but the hope is that our overarching love for Christ will allow us to remain united. The challenge is how we treat one another when difficulty arises for or within the community.

There is no healthy, human relationship where compromise will not be a factor. Relationships are built upon individuals who take into consideration the other, whether it is in a marriage, siblings, parent and child, or friendship. It will always certainly be easier to always get our own way, but sometimes we might have to table our own preference for what helps someone else to flourish. It is our individuality that gives us all the wonderful colors in the picture of the community, but it is making all of those colors come together that makes the picture into a work of art. It is a delicate balance to ensure that all parts are represented while still having direction. This reason is why most organizations spend a large amount of time figuring out what the vision of the community is going to be.

The key in any community is to find a vision or the set of boundaries that defines who we are and what we hold important. In religious circles these discussions can be the source for some heated debates because our religious beliefs become a deep part of who we are. The First Baptist Church of Worcester has a vision, which we call our **MISSION STATEMENT**: We are a community of believers who seek to grow in our faith and

understanding as we live the Way of Jesus Christ. **Inclusion:** We welcome all in Christ's love. **Freedom of Faith:** Individual interpretation of God's word and freedom of expression are cornerstones of our faith. **Service:** We seek to be a Christ-like presence in the world. **Spiritual Growth:** We encourage all to seek Christian growth. It is these standards that define who are as a community.

A vision helps us to see what is important to the mission of the community. The measure of what we do as a church is the mission that we put forth. In all times we see the calling to seek towards the path that Jesus laid out for us. We seek to show all who come here that they are welcome; to reflect who Christ is to the larger community, and to always strive to get better at following Jesus in our lives. These are the elements that hold us together and are our defining factor for moving forward. In calling them a "mission statement" we hold ourselves to a more active means of living out these statements. They must be the essence of who we are and how we behave.

All churches will face both good and difficult times. The church that my family and I attended when I was younger was a wonderful, older Baptist church that sits in the center of Suffield, CT. The sanctuary and other rooms were taken care of with pride by the members. One day the pastor at the time was in his office when he heard a loud crash coming from the direction of the sanctuary. When he opened the door to see what had happened, the room was covered in dust and rubble. The entirety of the steeple had collapsed in upon the sanctuary. Luckily no one was inside at the time so there were no injuries, but it was clear that the sanctuary was going to be unusable for quite some time. If there were going to be service on Sundays, then we would have to worship in our fellowship hall. So, the next Sunday arrived and we moved the cross and a few other items

down to the hall. Instead of the lovely pews upstairs, however, we sat on metal folding chairs and worshipped in an area that was decorated more like a cafeteria than a meditative space. It was not at all what we were used to, not the beautiful space that had been cared for over the years. Yet somehow we all came on Sunday mornings and pulled together to make this space work and to make it a place of sacred worship. The church did not fall apart because an obstacle was thrown into our path, and it was not because we were somehow amazingly holy. The power of God in our lives allowed us to realize that there was something more important in that space on Sunday mornings. In a time of great mental and financial difficulty we were able to look up and see what truly mattered and what could be done without.

It is often easy to let every disagreement cause a fracture in a relationship or in the foundation of the community. As a large group of people coming together, we are not going to agree on every detail and decision. By allowing every member of a congregation a vote, Baptists ensured themselves a more difficult decision making process than more hierarchical churches. It is not by the word of some infallible, higher authority that decisions are made. In taking the voices of all members into consideration, there will be few decisions that will be supported by every last person. Conflict and disagreement will happen, but that is also a part of being in community with each other. It is not the matter that we never have disagreements, but rather the reconciling way that we behave towards each other to heal the conflict.

Perhaps one of the most inspiring examples of reconciliation comes after the end of apartheid in South Africa. The decisions made by Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with the Truth and Reconciliation commission reflect the deep ability to

heal even after massive injustice. Tutu writes of Mandela's inauguration, "A poignant moment that day came when Mandela arrived with his elder daughter as his companion, and the various heads of the security forces, the police, and the correctional services strode to his car, saluted him, and then escorted him as head of state. It was poignant because only a few years earlier he had been their prisoner. What an extraordinary turnaround!

President Mandela invited his white jailer to attend his inauguration as an honored guest, the first of many gestures he would make in his spectacular way, showing his breathtaking magnanimity and willingness to forgive. This man, who had been vilified and hunted down as a dangerous fugitive and incarcerated for nearly three decades, would soon be transformed into the embodiment of forgiveness."¹

We hear the scriptures week after week telling us to love our enemies and forgive our brother, yet we have to ask ourselves how often do we put these things into practice. How often do we forget that Jesus asked us not only to hear the words but also to change our actions? We hold up and admire people like Nelson Mandela because he was able to endure cruel captivity and still understand the importance of forgiveness and redemption. It is difficult enough to open our hearts to the person who cuts us off when we are driving or continues to fall short of our expectations or who does not act the way that we believe is appropriate. We know that not only is it possible, but we hear from scripture that it is what Jesus wants for His community. If we are to be that community, the community that calls itself Christian, then we must not only hear these words but allow them to penetrate our hearts and change who we are.

¹ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*

The heart of Christianity is a simple truth; we have accepted Jesus Christ into our lives and follow His ways. All of the complicated theology has this basic understanding at its heart. When we allow the disagreements to take prominence, then we push this unifying core to the background. Discussion, learning, and exploration of how to live out our faith is important, but when we come together it is through the power of Christ's message that we are made into a whole community. Whether Orthodox, Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, or Baptist we come together to sing songs of praise to our savior, Jesus Christ.

The Christian community should strive to bring people together and tear down the walls that divide us. Putting this ideal into practice will take work, but it is our challenge to rise above who we thought we could be. From Ephesians we can see that even the earliest Christian communities had difficulty coming together. They, as we now still must do, found unity in their common mission to follow Jesus. Yes, all of the minor things would remain, but through the love of Christ we see what is important. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord..."