

We are continuing our series titled *One Kingdom. Indivisible*. It is a series in which we are partnering with several other churches from all over the Bay Area to demonstrate the unity we hold dear as citizens of the kingdom of God.

The subject of unity is appropriate for us to discuss today. We can't have a conversation or turn on a device without seeing the damaging effects of disunity in our society. We are a nation divided. Most citizens of our country recognize there is a real problem and want to help make positive change.

We hear many ideas being floated to address this and bring about national unity. Jesus himself said these prophetic words recorded in Matthew 12:25. *"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand."* Whether it's division within a country, a city, in a family, or division within a marriage or division between races of people, the result is heartbreaking. And I think that many realize human beings are not figuring out how to heal the division within earthly kingdoms.

But Christians are called into a different kingdom: God's Kingdom. As I studied Jesus' prayer in John 17, I was reminded of how important unity is to God. I was reminded unity is something that only God can bring about. So as sad as we all feel about the present state of our earthly kingdom, we have hope because we belong to a greater kingdom. We belong to a kingdom that transcends all earthly kingdoms, a kingdom that was established after the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Christians, we need to understand that our allegiance to one another in God's kingdom should always be greater than our allegiance to earthly kingdoms. Our unity as Christians must win over the political and racial divisions in this country. Our common allegiance to God and to God's kingdom should transcend all our differences on earth.

So, let's learn about true unity. Let's learn about how God uses true unity in his kingdom to accomplish his purposes. And let's learn how each of us can rise above all the rancor and be united in God's kingdom. Even though we may disagree on all kinds of things related to earthly kingdoms, we will learn that we can disagree and have community at the same time.

Commentators call it Jesus' Priestly Prayer. It took place after Jesus' last supper with his disciples. In just a few hours, Jesus was going to be arrested. After eating, he left Jerusalem and descended down into the Kidron Valley east of the city. He and

his disciples likely walked the same path Jesus walked when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowd was waving palm fronds and shouting Hosanna to Jesus their King not that long ago.

At some point, Jesus, on his journey, stopped and prayed. There are nine total recorded prayers of Jesus' in the New Testament. The eight other prayers total less than 150 words. But the Jesus prayer here in John 17 has almost 400 words. God wants us to see how Jesus, our Savior, prayed on the night before he died on the cross. In the first four verses, Jesus prayed for himself. In the next 15 verses, he prayed for his disciples. And in the final six verses, he prayed for us.

We can learn a lot from this prayer. Jesus prayed this prayer with the shadow of the cross hanging over him. Jesus was the greatest prayer warrior that ever lived. We can learn a lot about the power and possibilities through prayer found here in John 17:20-21.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." John 17:20-21

"My prayer is not for them alone." His prayer here was not just for his disciples who were with him that night. "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message." It's interesting; his words, "who will believe," are not a future tense here. They are present tense. To Jesus, his church was so clear in his mind and heart; it's as if his future church was already in existence. He sees his future church. He sees us. He prays for his future church. He prays for us.

What is "their message"? It's the truth about Jesus. Jesus is the Son of the one true God. It's the truth of his life, death, and his resurrection. It is the truth of his love and forgiveness. It is the truth about his unimaginable suffering, sacrifice, amazing grace. It is the truth of his available mercy and power to save humanity.

To put it in first person, Jesus is saying, "I came to give you the gift of eternal life, redeem you from hell, forgive you, adopt you. I came to give you a new life, family, and identity as a child of God, and a new purpose as citizens of my kingdom. That all of them may be one." Jesus is saying, "Because you received my message, you now have a common experience, foundation of

truth, and God's love with each other. You share salvation by the same pathway, the cross. And you worship the same God. No matter what nation, tribe, or tongue, you are one, there are no to be no barriers, prejudice, or division."

You are all one. Did you catch that? I think if we apply this text to just individual churches who might be having internal conflict, we miss the bigger point. This is Jesus praying for the "Big" church to be one.

Unity is not sameness. There is very little sameness in God's amazingly creative and diverse world. In fact, creativity and diversity are to be celebrated. Men and women are different by God's design. Personalities, gifts, passions, talents, and experiences are different by God's design. Races and cultures are different by God's design.

So how do we achieve this oneness in a church made up of every nation, tribe, and tongue? And what does this oneness look like? Here is our example to follow. Jesus says, "Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you." It's the picture of oneness that the Father and the Son have together. Two distinct persons, two different roles to fill, tied together by truth, by self-giving love for each other, and a common purpose. The last part of verse 21 reveals this purpose.

"May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." So here is what he wants for us, that we lean into Jesus, that we live for Him, that together although we are distinct and diverse, we have a higher calling to be unified in truth, love, and purpose. And as a result, the world would recognize Jesus for who he is and recognize that Jesus comes from God.

It's truth that makes this unity possible. Back in verse 17-19, Jesus prays that his followers would be sanctified or set apart by the truth. God always responds to truth. There is no legitimate unity without truth.

Our Unity is Possible Because of our Shared Belief in the Truth of Jesus Christ

When you sit back and watch all the disunity in our country, and you ask, "Why in the world is all this happening?" At its root is a lack of accepting that there is an absolute truth to believe and follow. Our society has embraced the philosophy that one's own truth, one's own preferences, one's own ideology are what matters. Our society has embraced a reality that truth is in the eye of the beholder.

Read Jesus' words in verses 14. "*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world*" (John 17:14). Jesus reveals here that there is a spiritual battle taking place. Forces are at work to attempt to divide and weaken God's kingdom. And the kingdoms of this world will always clash with God's kingdom.

There is a system at work that keeps people from the truth. That system is the world and Satan's influence on the world. There are spiritual forces to keep God and truth out of the conversation. Go all the way back to Genesis, and you'll see how Satan co-opted God's Word and twisted it. In Genesis 2, Adam and Eve are united, a family, and after Satan twists God's Word in chapter 3, Adam and Eve and family is forever divided.

The root of disunity is a disregard for God's truth. We might have heard the definition of sin as breaking God's law, and that is correct. In his book, *Sickness and Death*, Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, defined sin as "Building your identity on anything but God."

In other words, if you build your identity on anything but your identity as a child of God, it's a sin. If we build our lives on moral performance, educational credentials, money, achievement, good looks, or parenting, it's a sin. When you take good things and make them ultimate things, God wants nothing to do with that. Societies can only function for so long when they are not rooted in the truths of God. God won't allow kingdoms to last if they are not built on his truth. God will not bless pride.

There is a story in Genesis 11, where people come together with this idea to do a good thing. They have this desire within themselves for unity. Their answer to achieve unity is to build a tower. It could be a good thing. It could sparking creativity with smart people working together, using the latest building technology. All good, right?

The idea was that this tower would be their center, their identity and that their proximity to the tower would keep them united. So, what happens? No matter how high it got, God still had to come down. He came down and said, "This can't happen. It won't work. You cannot build a society that will last without me. A great tower will not last. You keep trying to build a utopia on earth. You keep seeking your own truth to the world's problems. I'm telling you; it won't work. And if I have to destroy it to get your attention, I will." And God did destroy the tower. He destroyed it to keep the people from trying to build a flawed kingdom that wasn't rooted in truth. The tower of Babel tells us that you cannot have legitimate unity without God's truth at the center.

But our unity is not just based on our shared belief in the truth of Jesus Christ. "*I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity*" (John 17: 22-23a).

"I have given them the glory that you gave me." What does this mean? God's glory implies the presence of God. As I heard this week, "To see God's glory is to see God showing off." The invisible God becomes visible when he lets us see his glory.

The idea here is that Jesus gives us the same glory that the Father has given the Son. "Given them the glory" is a perfect tense. It means he has given us his glory at one point in time. That point

in time was at the moment of our salvation when we received Jesus as our personal Savior through faith. The glory of God came to us at that moment because, at that moment, we were spiritually reborn, and at that moment, the Spirit of God came to live in our hearts.

But John's use of the perfect tense implies that the effects continue on. That Jesus wants to continue to display his glory by having us continue down the road to complete unity.

His prayer is that the Big Church, which is formed by thousands and thousands of local churches coming together, is pursuing something God loves—unity. We can expect God to reveal his glory and empower us with his glory.

The Psalmist says,

“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down on the collar of his robe. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.” Psalm 133:1-3

Unity is precious, unity delights God, unity is visible, unity is to be celebrated, unity is life-giving, and, did you catch this at the end, unity brings forth a blessing. Literally, unity commands a blessing from God! Wow!

Our Unity is Visible Because our Shared Lives Display the Glory of God.

How do we grow in unity and make it more visible? Every one of us has room to grow here. As I thought about this, I looked at three metaphors that God uses to describe his church. Three ways unity can be visible and display the Glory of God.

We show our unity by how we engage as a family.

A family is about relationships. God put our spiritual family together. I had no choice who was going to be my spiritual brothers and sisters. Do I treat my brothers and sisters in a Christ like family? Do I treat those in my spiritual family differently from me? Do I treat those from a different nation, tribe or tongue, gender, or race like family? Trust me; the world is watching for this. And trust me, God wants this because he wants to display his glory through our unity as a church family. God wants his kingdom to be the absolute polar opposite of the division and hatred going on between brothers and sisters in our world.

We show our unity by how we engage as a fellowship.

Fellowship is about sharing. The word fellowship literally means sharing. We share in our fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We “share in” the blood and body of Christ. And we share out with those in our fellowship who have needs. How good are you at sharing in the common things you hold dear as a Christian? How good are you at sharing out your love sacrificially

with those in your fellowship? Trust me; the world is watching for this. And trust me, God wants to see this sharing because he wants to display his glory through our unity.

We show our unity by how we engage as a Body.

If we are a body, then each of us is an essential body part. One part cannot survive if it is separated from the whole. A church on one side of town has a responsibility to the church on the other side of town. We need each other to function as one to be a healthy body. How are we serving one another in the larger body of Christ? How good are you at kneeling and serving another body part? That body part that you are called to serve may be dirty; it may be bleeding; it may be broken, but trust me, the world is watching this. And trust me, God wants this because he wants to display his glory through our unity.

Every expression of unity in the Big Church puts God's glory on display. And every expression of disunity in the Big Church puts God's absence of glory on display.

We can't expect God's presence without a commitment to be answers to his prayer. United in truth, love, and united in God's purpose. There is something bigger happening here in Jesus' prayer. *“Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 23b).*

Our unity in truth and our unity in love bring an intensity to Jesus' words here. Jesus is saying to the degree you show unity is the degree that the world understands how much the Father loves the Son, and how much God loves the world.

Our Unity Becomes Our Priority When We Accept God's Kingdom Purpose for Unity.

And now we see it. God's kingdom purpose for church unity is not just that we avoid embarrassing food fights at the table. It's bigger than that. The Kingdom's purpose of unity is to provide a powerful witness to people in this world who have rejected God and continue to suffer under failed kingdoms, to come to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Our unity is a priority strategy to fulfill our mission as a church, “To make and mature more followers of Christ.”

One challenge at this moment in the history of the church in the United States is that right here in our family, there are huge disagreements, especially in the area of our national conscience when it comes to politics, race, and justice for all.

Shouldn't we, as a CPC family, be able to talk about our differences and have community at the same time? There are people in our church family deeply entrenched on both sides of the issues. And there are people who feel caught in the middle. And trust me, the world is watching. And trust me, God wants to display his glory through us at this time.

Can we disagree and still sit together at the same table as a family? Can we consider how we can show love to each other

and have honest conversations? Can we show each other that self-giving kind of love that the Father and the Son have for each other?

How do we have conversation as a family, a fellowship, and a body? How can we have a conversation about what is going on in the kingdoms of this world, and keep our unity to our higher kingdom?

I shared some thoughts recently with our community group leaders here at CPC. In fact, we encouraged each group to have a conversation about race with these ground rules. Maybe these can help you around your dinner table or with your small group.

Listen with open hearts to everyone's story. Dignify and value every person's personal experience. Seek to listen and understand before you speak and seek to be understood. Assume God has something to teach you so you can be more useful to bring about positive change. Assume you have blind spots and hold false assumptions that need to be revealed for you to grow. Ask God to root out any sin hidden deep in your heart. Don't denigrate a political candidate or convert anyone toward a particular political candidate. Expect something will be said that will make you angry, stick it out, stay at the table, and don't run.

I'd like to end this morning on a lighter note.

There are two kinds of people in this world: those who love cats and those who don't. My wife, Julie, and my daughter, Holly, love cats. I never wanted a cat. But I was talked into it around the family dinner table. Well, now that Holly is married and moved out, guess what? She didn't take the cat with her.

"Why didn't you take the cat, Holly?"

"Well, dad, I'm kind of allergic to cats."

"So why did we get this cat again?"

This cat sleeps all the time. It never plays. It doesn't have much of a personality. It eats, sleeps, and uses the litter box. That's about it.

Julie is back in Wisconsin, visiting our other daughter and her family. Her last words to me as I dropped her off at the airport were, "Don't forget to take care of the cat." So I do it. I resent being stuck sheltering at home, and my only companion is this cat. I can disagree with Julie about getting this cat. I can be angry as I clean out her litter box and vacuum cat hair, but at the end of the day, Julie and Holly are my family. We sit at the same table. We love each other, and we are united on so many lofty

important things, so we can be kind and respectful to one another when the subject of this cat comes up. Our love is deeper than our feelings for this cat. Well, at least mine are. I guess I shouldn't speak for them!

At the end of the day, we at CPC can disagree about cats, but we are a family who is called to love and respect each other. And we can learn to have a respectful conversation about cats. And we can learn to talk about our different points of view about cats. But when all is said and done, we also can set the cat issues aside and celebrate what we all have in common, our faith, our love, and how much we need each other and how much we enjoy being together.

But trust me. When all is said and done, the world is watching how we work through our cat issues. And trust me, if we handle our cat issues well, and if we work together with other churches to handle our cat issues together, the world will know how much God loves them and how wonderful and worthy his kingdom truly is.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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