

There's Unity in That There Church

I was recently reading an article on how children develop mentally and how we need to understand that as a Church to help children and adults grow in our faith. In this article it referenced a song from Sesame Street.

“One of these things is not like the others, one of these things just doesn't belong. Can you tell which thing is not like the others, by the time I finish my song?”

It's from a segment on Sesame Street designed to teach children how to understand the way things relate to one another -- that the one blue square is different from the three triangles. It's a necessary part of a child's development, so that they learn to sort and categorize.

“But here's the problem. We learn this lesson just a little too well, and it shapes the way we perceive every aspect of reality. All through life we tend to look at each situation with discriminating eyes: What doesn't belong here? How are we different? Some people spend their entire lives sorting everything this way -- always looking for the difference.”

“Throughout life you are constantly faced with opportunities to sort things according to difference or according to similarity. There are times when one is needed and times when the other is needed, no question about it. However, I believe that the more we learn to sort according to similarities, the more impact we will have on the world around us.”

We're in the second week of our series called “Leaving a Mark”. In this series we're going to focus on values that will allow us, as individuals and as a church, to live in such a way that we leave a mark for God in our world.

Last week we talked about how Peter had summarized the life of Jesus, that he went around doing good because God was with him. We talked about how we need to live with the same purpose: to do good at every opportunity.

Today we'll focus on a second value essential to leaving our mark: the value of finding common ground. Or, to say it another way, today we'll talk about the power of unity.

In the early days of the church, a phenomenon took place that has not been often repeated. In Acts 2 and Acts 4 we see the church living in community at a profound level, to the extent that people were selling their possessions and sharing the proceeds with others, sharing all things with one another, so that everyone would have enough.

This is not a blueprint for all churches to duplicate. We know of no other New Testament church that did what the church in Jerusalem did. Today God is not calling us all to move into a commune together. But he is calling us to follow the example set by the early Christians in their attitudes toward one another.

Acts 4:32-37 “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. ³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.” NIV

Acts 4:32 “All the believers were one in heart and mind...” NIV

In a very short period of time the early church was able to turn the city of Jerusalem upside down, and they grew by the thousands. This didn't happen because they were always bickering with one another. It didn't happen because they were always at battle with one another. It happened because they were of one heart and mind and people noticed.

When we live in unity with others, the world pays attention. An early Christian writer named Tertullian once quoted a pagan official as having said this about the Christians: “Look at how much they love each other!” This is exactly what should be said about us, because Jesus himself said ...

John 13:35 “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” NIV

Friends, there is power in unity. When we build on a foundation of common ground with each other, we are able to increase the impact that we have on the world around us.

And when you and I do this in our personal lives, when we build relationships on the basis of common and seek to live in unity with others, we will increase the impact that we have on the world around us.

#1: Leave a Mark by Focusing on Similarities rather than Differences

Now by that I don't mean that we need to pretend that differences don't exist, but instead that we begin by identifying our common ground.

John Wesley said this about unity:

“Though we cannot all think alike, may we not all love alike? May we not all be of one heart, though we are not all of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences.”

What am I saying? I'm saying not everybody needs to be like me because this would be a boring, out of balance place, but it would be equally boring and out of balance if everybody was like you.

You can also see this in the New Testament by the different approaches to evangelism. Last week, we focused on how Peter “evangelized” Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile who had done many good things to help the Jews in his community. When Peter talked to him, he pointed out the common ground: Jesus Christ Himself went around doing good, like Cornelius and we read that later Cornelius was saved.

We also see it in the Apostle Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17. The Bible says that Paul was “greatly distressed” at the presence of idols in the city, but he didn't start by attacking them. Instead, when given the opportunity to speak to them he said, “I see that you're very religious and you have built so many altars to various gods including the unknown God. So let me tell you about this ‘unknown God.’” And he told them about Jesus.

Peter and Paul were different people brought to faith in Jesus Christ in different ways and they had different approaches to reach people for Christ, but that was and is the key similarity – faith in Jesus Christ. So, in order for us to leave a mark for God in our world through unity then we need to focus on our similarities rather than our differences.

Discussion: It's easy to see our differences – they are obvious, but what about our similarities? Spend a few minutes discussing what we have in common that God can use to impact people for Jesus Christ.

#2: Leave a Mark by focusing on What We're For rather than What We're Against

Have you ever noticed how some people, some groups and even some Churches define themselves by who they aren't, rather than who they are? They define themselves by what they don't believe, rather than what they do believe. They define themselves by what they're against, rather than what they're for.

We see it during election cycles all the time including Presidential elections. Vote for me because I'm against whatever rather than vote for me because I'm for this.

Some churches are defined by what they don't do and what they don't believe. Sadly, the Church of the Nazarene went through a period of time that we were best known for what we didn't do; for not dancing, drinking and going to movies, but very few people had any idea what we were for. We're not there yet as a Denomination, but we are closer to being known for what we are for today than we were several years ago.

I'm not sure where I first read this but the statement is pretty true: “Nothing brings two people together faster than the hatred of a third person.”

But friends, we can't make a positive difference, leave a mark in the world for God if we define ourselves by what we're against. So, in order to leave a mark for God on our world and be unified we need to find and then focus on what we are for – which is impacting people for Jesus Christ.

#3: Leave a Mark by Focusing More on the Majors and Less on the Minors

This is exactly what the early church did.

Acts 4:33 **“With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.”** NIV

There are all kinds of churches, all kinds of Christians and all kinds of people out there and in here. The overwhelming majority of the differences between Christians and Churches, however, don't really add up. That's because on the most important issues, we can be in agreement, in unity: Jesus is Lord, He is risen from the dead, and through Him we have forgiveness of sins and are saved by His grace.

That's called majoring on the majors rather than on the minors.

We may disagree with the church down the street on one or two points of belief, but if we agree on what is most important: Jesus is Lord, He is alive, and through Him broken lives can be put back together than we can stand shoulder to shoulder and reach our world for Jesus Christ.

In a marriage, in a family, in a friendship, in a workplace, it's easy sometimes to lose sight of this, to shift our focus away from what really matters to what doesn't matter.

I was doing some reading about pre-marriage counseling a year or so ago and one of the authors wrote this:

“I once had a couple in my office whose marriage was unraveling and on the brink of falling apart. During our meeting, the wife said, “I can't stand to be in the same room with my husband.” “Why?” I asked. She said, “Because he clears his throat all the time. Every five seconds he clears his throat. I just want to scream.” She admitted that he was a good provider and a good father and an attentive husband, but there were some things about him that drove her up the wall. And he had similar complaints about her.”

The author then said: “Married people can understand this. You can get so focused on one little annoying thing that someone does that you don't noticed the ten thousand good things they do or all the great qualities that they have -- all you hear is the sniffing or the throat clearing or the lip-smacking at the dinner table or the belching or the snoring. If all see are these little things, you miss out on what really matters in the relationship.”

That's called majoring on the minors.

Friends, there is power in unity, and in order for you and I to leave a mark for God in our world, we need to be a united Church that spends our time and energy focusing on the major – which is to impact people for Jesus Christ.

Application: Pray at your table for God to help us to be unified as a Church. This week, spend some time praying for the people at your table.