

Reconciliation
Grace Covenant Church
October 10, 2012

Ephesians 2:11-18

Introductory Comments

I'm so glad to be here with you. It's actually a little surreal that I'm up here behind this pulpit.

Honestly, it's been a crazy few months—transitioning out of my church of 10 years, adding a new daughter to our family, and coming into Grace Covenant and calling this home. So many massive life changes at once. It's all a bit overwhelming, you know? Awesome and terrifying all at the same time.

Which is why this series Pastor Jim has been preaching on community is especially relevant to me. Because what I really need in this season of profound changes is a spiritual family—to root me and ground amidst my changing circumstances.

Really, as much as I love the worship and the incredible sermons and all that—what I'm really looking for here, now that I'm actually here—is a family.

Because that is what we're called to be right? As a church, we're now family. You are my brothers and sisters. Whether you like it or not, I NEED you as my brother and sister.

I'd venture to guess that I'm not the only one that feels this way. Perhaps you've been here a lot longer than I have—but you share that same hunger--A need for a spiritual family.

Well look around. We have plenty to work with. Amazing, gifted people who love the Lord. And so I believe we can figure this out. I believe it's even God's will that we figure this out – because it's not just my well being that depends on it.

I believe the power and witness of this church absolutely depends on our ability to become a genuine family.

Am I overstating? Consider that the Church, in the mind of Jesus, **was never a building.** It was **never a certain hour of the week.** It was never a program that involves a pulpit and a worship team. A church can have all those things—and those things are good--**but none of those things are THE church.** **Church was never something you do, or a building you enter.**

Church, **or Ekklesia,** literally means “**The called out ones.**” The very word describes a people, a community formed by the Gospel. **The church by definition is relational.**

Which is why more than anything else up here on stage, or the architecture of this building, or the songs we're singing, or any professionals like me --**CHURCH IS REALLY ABOUT THE PERSON YOU'RE SITTING NEXT TO AND IN FRONT OF AND BEHIND.** WE HAVE TO BE FAMILY. WE HAVE TO FIGURE THIS OUT—if we're going to be CHURCH as God intends.

And that's exactly why we're doing this series—to start figuring this out.

Now just as a really quick recap, over the last few weeks, **Pastor Jim** has gone to great lengths to distinguish between culture and community. The two are not the same. Culture is just the acquired habits and thoughts and practices of a society. You don't have to try that hard to learn culture. You can just absorb it, almost like **osmosis** by being in the general environment.

You live in France long enough, and eventually you'll eat baguettes and speak French.

But community, biblical community is far deeper, far more rigorous and profoundly more interactive because **it's really about LOVE.** You can **very easily have culture without community,** and Pastor Jim asked us to wrestle with that—here at Grace—**do we have merely a church culture, or do we have community.**

And then last week, Pastor Jim took us to Acts 2 to show us **what a true biblical community looks like, what they devoted themselves to, how they did life together.** We only had time to go over the broad strokes of what they did. But we saw enough to clearly realize that **when community is done right,** the way God intended--**the church becomes a supernatural place**—full

of signs, and wonders, and conversions. **Pastor Jim challenged us again—If we want to see what they saw, we have to be willing to do what they did—and they did community.**

Now for my time this week and 2 weeks later, Pastor Jim asked me to share practical application. How do we actually do community here.

Well, honestly, I don't think I can fully address that in two sermons. So I've asked Pastor Jim if we can come back to this topic in a few months and give it the time it deserves. **Because the practical outworking of community literally touches on everything we do as a church.**

So here's what I'll be doing. I want to **just focus on two words**. One word this week, and the other word 2 weeks later. These two words I believe are **absolutely critical** in any real attempt for us to be the family of God. And the word for tonight is **RECONCILIATION**.

[SLIDE 1] Turn with me to Ephesians 2:11-18. My talk will break into two halves: **1) Life Before the Church--ALIENATION and 2) The Birth of the Church --RECONCILIATION 3) and then I'll close with a few important reflections on how all this applies to us. READ PASSAGE. [SLIDE 2-3]**

I. [SLIDE 4] Life Before The Church: ALIENATION[11-12]

It starts as early as **3 years old**. My daughter Hope comes home one day from school several years ago, and she tells me **she likes Sally and dislikes Mary**. I ask why? And she tells me **one has long hair and the other has short hair. And that's all it takes—hair length. She's separating people into camps.**

Amanda, when she was 3 years old—something about the age 3 where depravity starts showing up in force---I overhear her introducing her friend Mariah to somebody else. She says ***"This is Mariah. She's Spanish. I'm human."***

We never trained our kids to do this. We never sat them down and told them to look at differences and start arranging people. ***It's wired in our nature to categorize differences, show preferences and alienate.***

Because of this instinct we all have--we are a divided humanity. We are people fractured along lines of race, nation, tribe, religion, income, education, age, attractiveness, even hair length.

Even among people we're similar to, it's so hard to build real community, **but it's nearly impossible across these vast and varied differences.** We're just so **hardwired by our sinful nature** to **LOVE WHO WE WANT TO LOVE AND HATE WHO WE WANT TO HATE.**

This is what Paul describes ***as the tragic story of human relationships before Jesus.*** Open up your ***history book and stick your finger anywhere***—and it's **this sad story of division, hostility and warfare.**

Here in this passage Paul spotlights the **deepest and greatest divide between two people groups**. And that is the **distance between Jew and Gentile**. **If you want to see where humanity has fractured, this is the grand canyon.**

So in v11-12, you have the ***"uncircumcised"*** --a **pejorative** the Jews used to describe **US--the non-Jews, the Gentiles**. It was a way of saying that we are the **UNCHOSEN, the REJECTS OF GOD**. Whereas the Jews, the **circumcised, had privileged and exclusive access to God.**

This of course was **not the way God had called the Jews to be his people. He did not choose them to then say the rest of the world are rejects.** The Jews were indeed **special, chosen by God--but chosen to be a light to the entire world**. They were supposed to ***be missionaries to us.***

But they took their election to be **exclusive**. Something to hoard. And eventually, over time, as they were **repeatedly and horribly oppressed** by their **gentile neighbors**., the Jews developed a **disgust and contempt for all things Gentile.**

One scholar writes that **[SLIDE 5-6] *"the Jews believed that Gentiles were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations he had made. It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. [SLIDE 6]Until Christ came, the Gentiles were***

an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out, for such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.

That's how bad it was. And of course, the contempt ran both ways.

Friends, this is how the apostle Paul portrays life before the church. He points to the worst possible divide to say—this represents how humanity operates. We live in **alienation** from each other.

[SLIDE 7] Let me give a clear, modern picture of what some of this alienation looks like. Imagine a round table and ***Seated is a Nazi soldier and a holocaust survivor; then a Ku Klux Klan member and next to him an African American; then a Hutu and a Tutsi; Janjaweed and an African farmer; an Al Qaeda soldier and an Israeli.*** Represented at this table are **millions upon millions of slain bodies; generations of oppression, injustice, violence and bloodshed.** What would you say if you were at this table? What alternatives would you give to their alienation? What hope would you offer?

They sit at the same table, but ***they might as well be millions of miles apart because between them are these massive, seemingly impenetrable, walls between them.***

And you might be wondering—OK? That's a problem way out there. ***I'm not genocidal.*** I submit to you that **these very lines of hatred, exclusion and alienation run through us.**

It shows up in **Monday morning traffic.** When someone cuts me off. I admit—there is this demonic moment where I wish a tire blows, and their car veers off and slam into the median. It shows up whenever I'm at the grocery store at the self check out line—and they're taking so long because they can't figure out how to properly swipe their items—I have this demonic urge to just take over—“HERE'S HOW YOU DO IT!” Or on a more serious note—just take a moment to think of the horrible things we have thought and said about people who are different from us, people we don't get along with, people who inconvenience us and bother us or insult us and wound us?

There is something **deeply selfish, prideful and vindictive** in us that compels us to push others down, to step on people, even stomp on them to make us feel better or make our lives easier. The people on the screen **might have done it physically, but we've all done it in our hearts, haven't we?**

How many of you have read the novel “LORD OF THE FLIES” by William Golding? It's about these British school children who end up getting shipwrecked on an island. And what unfolds as they try to survive is that these proper little school children, devolve, and they end **up recreating all the same dysfunctions and horrors of adult society—oppression, discrimination, stealing, violence and even murder.** Were these evil children? Were they sociopaths? No. Just normal school kids. It's a modern day parable how **the seeds of such evil are in our hearts. THERE IS SOMETHING BROKEN IN US THAT JUST MAKES GENUINE LOVING COMMUNITY SO IMPOSSIBLY HARD.**

This is not to say there aren't exceptions to this. But by and large, life before the church can be justifiably defined by ALIENATION. The Jew/Gentile divide might be the most dramatic example—but it points to a truth that governs all relationships in this world without God. WHICH IS SIMPLY: WE LOVE WHO WE WANT TO LOVE. WE HATE WHO WE WANT TO HATE. And it's an **impulse so strong** that there is no recourse to it in our own strength—as history testifies.

II. [SLIDE 8] The Birth of the Church: RECONCILIATION [13-18] [SLIDE 8]

In v13, everything begins to change. Paul says that in Jesus Christ, and specifically through his blood, we who were once far and alienated, **are now brought near.**

In v14, Paul goes even further. Not only brought near--as if we're sitting at the same table, but we are actually brought **IN**—we are **FUSED TOGETHER with the Jews to become one people.**

Now lest we just gloss over this amazing, radical truth—let me say that again. Jesus takes the worst enemies, and he doesn't just bring them close so they can **tolerate each other and play nice**. But he actually fuses them together to be one people, **one family, brother, sister—FAMILY. It's a work of supernatural, breathtaking reconciliation.**

And here **friends is the birth of the church**. The church **is fundamentally a place of miraculous reconciliation, first between God and us—and then out that—between us and everyone else—especially our worst enemies. This is God's genius---that from the very onset—the church would be a miraculous community of people who have no business being friends let alone family.**

Let's never mistake church for a building or a service. **It's fundamentally a place of crazy, radical relationships--where I, not having met you before, where we are vastly different, or even where as before I might have disliked you, or hated you, can now embrace you as my true brother or sister because of Jesus Christ.**

V14 spells this out for us. What we share here at church is not good will. It's not playing nice. It's not being cordial and polite. That stuff is not strong enough to overcome our differences so we can be family. Being cordial might keep things orderly on a subway train. But nice manners cannot overcome the sin and indifference and bitterness and all the other junk in us that creates these walls.

We need something that can crush these walls. Paul says that Jesus—THANK YOU JESUS—Jesu has **destroyed the dividing wall of hostility. How so?** Paul tells us it was **by the cross of Jesus Christ**. Jesus himself dismantles this horrible wall by his broken body—by the love expressed to us on the cross [V16].

Take a look at this video with me. It's the story of a sister named Maribel, from a church I interned at back in 2001. They showed this over a recent Easter. Rather than have me preach at you about how the cross destroys the wall of hostility, I think you'll understand it better as you hear her story. WATCH.VIDEO

“DAD, I forgive you and love you because Jesus first loved and forgave me”—the words of Maribel—motivated to forgive the unforgiveable because of how Jesus forgave her.

JESUS is the only one who can tear down walls of bitterness and hatred. Only Jesus. His cross is the only true ground of RECONCILIATION.

You see, the cross is the only real place the oppressor and the oppressed can meet and embrace. Because the cross—which is the greatest expression of God's love and mercy--is the only power that exists in this universe **that can BREAK THROUGH TO AN OPPRESSOR and have him or her repent and confess.** What other power can do that? **Change the wicked heart of an abuser like Maribel's father?**

The cross of Jesus is also the only power in this universe that can bring genuine healing TO THE OPPRESSED. Because in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is there the gospel hope that God can redeem all things—including all the pain that was inflicted upon us by others. What other power would bring Maribel to her father's doorstep?

Because the cross of Jesus is the only thing that can set an oppressor free from his or her anger and evil and abuse; and the cross is the only thing that can address the pain and scars of the oppressed---it is THE ONLY GROUND OF GENUINE RECONCILIATION. V16— THROUGH THE CROSS, JESUS PUTS TO DEATH THE HOSTILITY.

Only the cross can bring the oppressor and the oppressed to level ground—where regardless of the beef and bitterness you have between each other—in view of the cross--- we're all reduced to the same undeserving recipients of God's mercy and grace. How can we cross our arms and not embrace the other, even if he or she has wounded you, even if he or she is our enemy, when Jesus stretched out his arms wide and took nails and suffered the most humiliating death to embrace you when you were an enemy of God?

The cross reminds us that the love of God knows no boundaries. It respects no walls. It

will not be limited by our biases and bitterness. *This ridiculous love of God that was poured out on us in our wretched state compels us to do what is impossible in our own flesh—which is to repent of our sins, forgive and love our enemies.*

And what Paul is saying that at church, **this CROSS stands at the threshold of the church.** When you walk through those entrance doors---you walk through the cross. The moment you walk in through these doors, **you come into a place where every relationship here must be defined by this cross.**

We enter in not as strangers or acquaintances, and God-forbid as enemies, but as reconciled brothers and sisters. We share in something that is stronger than any difference our skin color or our backgrounds or our differences.

[SLIDE 9] III. REFLECTIONS

This brings me to a few reflections on our church here—Grace Covenant.

Paul unapologetically places a banner over the mantle of the church. And he does so knowing that even as he writes, the Jew/Gentile divide is still being worked out. That’s why he’s writing all this---there are real issues in the church, trying to pull her apart into different camps.

But Paul is really clear, and he holds it up high so everyone can see: Here, unlike any other community on earth there will be: NO MORE DIVIDING WALLS. NO MORE DIVIDING WALLS.

This is what it means to be a church. Not to orient around a building or a program or a leadership structure. All those things are important—but what makes the church, the church, **is the supernatural relationship that we have with each other through Jesus Christ. It’s FAMILY.**

The true mark of the Christian church, the way you know the Holy Spirit resides here in power—**is that there will be this radical, breathtaking, supernatural unity and reconciliation. People here will really love each other**—and this love will be the most powerful force of evangelism. Jesus himself affirms this in his prayer in **John 17: “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me...”**

We talk about being a Spirit filled church, full of signs and wonders. I want that. I want to see God flip this place upside down with his tangible presence. But do you know what will be the greatest sign of a Spirit-filled church? Do you know what the world will look at and say—WOW. GOD MUST EXIST? Our love. Our capacity to be genuinely reconciled to each other and love is THE MOST SUPERNATURAL WE CAN GET!

You’ve heard it said that a chain is only as strong as it’s weakest link. I say likewise the church is only as strong as her weakest relationship. Where there is any dissension or conflict—Satan will set up camp and start attacking from the inside out. That’s why in Philippians 4, Paul takes a paragraph to plead for the church to help 2 ladies—**Euodia and Sntyche**—to reconcile. Because our relationships matter that much. As our relationships go—so goes the church.

So, Grace Cov, I’m new here. But I’m not new to church. And I’m willing to make a safe assumption that there are some walls here that must be disarmed and dismantled if we’re going to do community.

Walls of race and ethnicity; walls between married, single// children, no children// extroverted, introverted// white collar, blue collar// low income-upper middle class// graduate degree, GED//charismatic, non-charismatic// older, younger// socially awkward, popular// pretty, plain// republican, democrat// etc.

And these are just walls concerning the visible. What about those inner walls we erect because we’re wounded by someone gossiping about us, or someone snubbing us in the fellowship hall, or someone excluding you, or wasn’t warm to you—there are all these internal walls because of wounds and injuries.

AND FOR ALL THESE REASONS—WE CAN COME IN HERE AND DO LIFE EXACTLY LIKE IT IS OUT THERE—LOVING WHO WE LOVE, HATING WHO WE HATE.

Our only point of connection being that we happen to occupy the space on a particular hour Sunday morning or Wed night. *That's church? That's the community Jesus died to establish?*

No. He wanted a family. He wanted brothers and sisters. **V18—FOR THROUGH HIM WE BOTH HAVE ACCESS TO THE FATHER BY ONE SPIRIT.** He is our Father. We are his children. We are family.

I'm going to share more on this as I cover v19-22 in 2 weeks. But for now, I'm going to ask you to bow your heads and pray. Pray a personal prayer of repentance—LORD TEAR DOWN THE WALLS IN MY LIFE.

Now I want you to get into groups of 3,4 or 5 people.

1) Introduce yourselves quickly

2) The best you can, gather in a circle. Hold hands or Place a hand on each other's shoulder. This circle represents the church. Right there in your little circle. Think this is Grace

3) Pray now for the church. Corporate repentance. Lord take down the walls of this church.

PRAY LORD RENEW THE THINGS YOU DID IN THE EARLY CHURCH.
SIGNS AND WONDERS AND CONVERSIONS. LET US BE THE
COMMUNITY THROUGH WHICH YOU RENEW THIS IN OUR DAY—HERE
IN CHANTILLY!!

Great. Please have a seat.

At this time, church, we're going to give.

As Pastor Jim would say "You know the drill." Let's give to our loving Father.