

HELPING PEOPLE CONNECT WITH JESUS

Partnering with Others

John 17:20-23

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I know this comes as no surprise to you, but our nation is fractured by disunity. Division surrounding race, gender, religion, politics and socio-economic status are evident everywhere. As I observe the current landscape in our country I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's words in Philippians chapter 2: *"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. **Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.**"* Philippians 2:14-16 If it's true that light shines brightest in the darkness then as followers of Jesus you and I have an amazing opportunity.

Jesus understood the power of love and unity as a witness to the life He promised. In one of his last teaching times with his disciples, immediately following the Last Supper and his washing of the disciples' feet He said, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* John 13:34 & 35

And just before He was arrested and taken away to be crucified, Jesus prayed. His prayer—found in John chapter 17—is far-reaching. He prayed for Himself; He prayed for his disciples; and, He prayed for all who would come to know Him. Toward the end of that prayer He prayed these words,

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. 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. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23

Jesus left no doubt that love expressing itself in unity was a central part of his message and critical to the advance of his kingdom. Sadly, the Church in America hasn't always been a model of unity. In fact, in spite of our calling to shine Jesus' light brightly we've been at least as guilty of disunity and division as the world around us. Several minutes ago I identified race,

gender, religion, politics and socio-economic status as points of division in our country. Even today each of these areas continues to stir conflict within Christ's body.

- Race—Our churches are typically very ethnically homogeneous. Someone has said that Sunday morning at 10 o'clock is the most segregated hour of the week in America.
- Gender—Our nation has made great strides in equality for women, but large pockets of the Church continue to limit leadership opportunities for women.
- Religion—Over the last 500 years Christianity has splintered into hundreds of denominations and the relationship between these groups of Jesus followers is often contentious.
- Politics—The quarreling and bickering between “red” and “blue” in the church often mirrors what's happening across our nation.
- Socio-economic status—The Church in America is guilty at times of giving special status to the wealthy and famous, while marginalizing the poor—a practice the Apostles Paul and James both sought to correct in their New Testament letters to churches

Race, gender, religion, politics and socio-economic status are volatile issues and I'm not naïve enough to think that we can solve them during our hour together this morning, but Jesus' call to unity cuts across every one of these. Listen again to the words of his prayer in John chapter 17:

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. 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. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23

My hope in this series called, “Helping People Connect with Jesus,” is to encourage, inspire and equip each of us to partner with God in doing his work in our world by viewing the places where we live, go to school, work and play as our mission field—places where our Heavenly Father wants us to shine his light brightly. Unity—our partnership with others in the Body of Christ—is absolutely central to God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. I want to look at two facets of unity in the Body of Christ today that are separate, but also linked—unity among churches and unity among individual followers of Christ.

Many of you have heard me share my excitement about what God is doing among churches in our community—specifically in the Borough of Mechanicsburg and in Upper Allen Township. Twenty-five years ago when I was new to ministry and serving as a youth pastor at McBIC, I'd go once a month with Pastor Ken Hepner to a gathering of pastors at Christ Community Church for a time of sharing and prayer. Psalm 133 was a scripture I heard referred to often.

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

When God's people live in unity, He pours out his blessing.

The group of pastors who met at Christ Community Church under Pastor Dave Hess's leadership came from a 50 mile or so radius across the mid-state area. As I met with those pastors God began to stir in my heart a desire to see pastors and churches in our Mechanicsburg area partner together and collaborate. Toward the end of the 1990's I sent a letter and two books on the subject of prayer for communities to 18 pastors who pastored churches in the Borough of Mechanicsburg. In the letter I explained the desire I had to see pastors come together and pray for our community and I invited them to respond to me if they were interested in pursuing this. Pastor Bob Malick from the 1st Church of God was the only one to respond and in the interest of full-disclosure he told me that if his wife, Joan, hadn't been a work colleague of my wife's at Messiah College, he probably wouldn't have responded either.

Through the years I prayed intermittently for unity among pastors and churches and McBIC's influence in our community continued to grow as intentionally built bridges to our community, but there seemed to be little traction around pastors and churches partnering together. Then about two years ago I initiated some 1x1 lunch meetings with several pastors who were new to the community and I noticed that they seemed very receptive to meeting. Around that same time Broad Street School contacted McBIC to see if we'd have interest in partnering with them to supply food for a community dinner they wanted to host. After meeting with several Broad Street teachers and agreeing to have McBIC supply food for the event, it occurred to me that this could be a good opportunity to partner with several churches.

The Broad Street staff loved that idea and they encouraged me to invite 4 community churches to join us. Three of those churches accepted and the event went extremely well.

The receptivity churches expressed toward partnering at Broad Street and the openness I sensed from pastors in our 1x1 meetings led me to invite pastors in Mechanicsburg Borough and Upper Allen Township to attend a luncheon at McBIC in November of 2017 to talk about how we might strengthen our partnership. I was thrilled when nineteen pastors from eleven denominations joined us for that luncheon. We now have twenty-three churches from fourteen denominations connected in what we've come to call the Mechanicsburg and Upper Allen Pastors Network. Those denominations are: Assembly of God, Baptist, Brethren in Christ, Catholic, Church of the Brethren, Church of God, Episcopal, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, Missionary Alliance, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ and United Methodist.

In the past eighteen months our churches have partnered together in: hosting 4 community dinners at Broad Street; leading a ceremony on September 11th in our town square to honor First Responders; teaming up with our local borough council to hold a Community Day for families that was attended by over 1,000 people; organizing community prayer walks on Good Friday and at ten local schools on the Sunday prior to the start of school; and, we've met twice with our school superintendent, our high school principal and our Director of Student Services, to discuss how we might partner together in meeting the needs of children and families in our community.

There is so much I could say here, but what I'm most excited about is the effect I believe unity among pastors and churches has on a community. I've heard a number of comments from people along the lines of, *"It's great that churches are working together. We're not used to seeing that."* A common cliché in the sports world, which I believe applies to what churches in our community are experiencing is, *"We're not here to compete with each other; we're here to complete each other."* I'm also encouraged by the unity I see growing among pastors and churches, because I believe the message of Psalm 133—that where brothers and sisters walk in unity, God pours out his blessing.

Unity among Followers of Jesus—

It's encouraging to see what God is doing among pastors and churches in our community, but Jesus' call to unity also has significant implications for you and me in our lives as we look to shine his light and share his truth in the mission field where God has placed us. Jesus said, *"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."* Matthew 18:19 & 20 There is strength in numbers and where there is unity, God is in our midst, doing what only He can do.

I know this is obvious, but I'm stating the obvious to make a point... Unity requires more than one person. It's not unity if we're by ourselves. One of the major challenges followers of Jesus face when they focus on doing his work in the world is isolation and loneliness—the sense that we're out there by ourselves with no one to support or encourage or partner with us. Immersed in a culture that embraces different values than the values of our faith and surrounded by messages from the media and our peers that often conflict with our values, it's easy to lose sight of reality and feel isolated. I'm reminded of the prophet Elijah in I Kings chapter 19. Elijah had just witnessed one of the greatest outpourings of God's power ever seen. In answer to his prayer, God sent fire from heaven and consumed a sacrifice that Elijah had laid out in a showdown with four hundred pagan prophets of the god, Baal. Then God answered Elijah's prayer for rain, breaking a 3 & ½ year drought. After all of that Elijah hit rock bottom after being threatened by Queen Jezebel. He was depleted of energy and depressed and he pleaded with God to take his life because though he was faithful to God, he was the only true worshipper of God left in Israel. God fed him, encouraged him to sleep and then told him that there were actually 7,000 people in Israel who were worshippers of God. When we're seeking to be faithful to God and swimming upstream against the culture it can feel like we're all alone.

I'm guessing many of you have felt alone at times at your places of work, in your schools or in the neighborhoods where you live. It's hard to be salt and light when we feel like it's just us against the world. I'm going to preach on the role of prayer in helping people connect with Jesus next week, but I want to encourage you if you feel alone, to pray and ask God to open your eyes to people around you who also love and worship Him. In most cases, they are there, you just haven't identified them. And for those of you who are aware of people you live near,

go to school with, work with or who know Christ where you recreate (even if they attend other churches), reach out to them and ask them to partner with you in praying and in looking for opportunities to shine Jesus' light and to share his truth. There is power in numbers and where unity exists God is present and He pours out his blessing. You and I aren't called to make a difference alone. We're called to partner with others who know and love Jesus so that "*his kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.*"

I invite you to join me in reading Jesus' prayer from John 17 aloud...

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. 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. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:20-23

As we move to our response time, I encourage you to consider these two questions:

Our Response:

- **What is the Holy Spirit speaking to me about unity in his Church?**
- **What steps is He asking me to take in partnering with others to help people connect with Jesus?**