

Evangelism in Community

Loving the Lost
Pastor Jordan Green
January 26, 2020

How many of you have seen a youth football game—ten- to twelve-year-olds playing football? What would you say is the main difference between a youth football team and the Kansas City Chiefs? Come on, yell out what you think? Mahomes!? Nope.

When I compare these two teams, the main difference I see is unity. When the Chiefs play it's like a well-oiled machine. Each part working perfectly. On the other hand, when I watch a youth football game I wonder why that kid is running the wrong direction. Isn't it true that what often makes a team so successful isn't simply the athleticism of one or two players, but the unity of the whole team to work together. As good as Mahomes is, he won't win the Super Bowl without the rest of the team.

And of course the negative side of this is even more apparent. For while unity gives a greater chance for success, disunity most certainly spells disaster. The same is true in evangelism. Evangelism is a task that requires unity within the whole community. A true community is going to have unity. You can't spell community without unity. Without this sort of community, our evangelism will suffer.

The fact is Jesus knew this and he prayed for it, and it's his prayer we are going to look at today as we consider the significance of the community for evangelism. Open your Bibles to John 17.

Over the past four weeks we've been taking time to examine our call of evangelism. We've even got a class going on downstairs walking through evangelism more in-depth, and many of our community groups have been working to make evangelism a reality in their lives.

We've discussed what evangelism is and what conversion is. Last week we discussed how to evangelize through conversation and hospitality. And today we consider the significance of community to the task of evangelism.

Listen to the prayer of Jesus from John 17:20-23.

John 17:20–23¹

²⁰I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

This is the word of the Lord.

This is a remarkable passage of Scripture. It brings us into the very heart of the Trinity. And what Jesus has to say about our evangelism is essential for us to hear.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

In chapter 17 of John's gospel, we have part of Jesus' last words to his disciples. Jesus knew he was going to die. And since he was about to die he was saying what was most essential, what they most needed to hear. He got right to the heart of what he wanted to pray for them.

But notice the shift in this section of Jesus' prayer. Look at verse 20: "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word."

Jesus is praying for future believers. Those who will believe in Jesus through the disciples' words. Believers like you and me. This is Jesus' prayer for us.

When Jesus prays for us he prays for unity; he's praying for our community here. That we would be united as one people together. And the reason (Jesus says it twice so we won't miss it) is so that the world may believe that Jesus was sent by the Father.

Isn't that remarkable? Jesus desires for the world to believe that he has come from the Father. He desires for the world to know who he is. And so he prays that his believers would be united in community. He seems to think that our unity, our oneness, has the potential to change the world. This is the prayer Jesus has for us today.

I think this is one of the most significant claims about evangelism. The goal of evangelism is for others to come to belief in Jesus. And Jesus knows that our community is essential to this evangelistic mission.

How is this possible? What does Jesus mean here? How can the oneness of our community lead to the world believing in the person of Jesus? This morning we are going to explore this passage and this question by looking at two ways community influences our evangelistic mission, and then how we can find this unity.

THE GOSPEL GOES FURTHER IN COMMUNITY.

It's a bit cliché, but it's true: We can do more together than we can apart. Or maybe you've heard the old proverb: If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

The gospel goes further in community. Jesus was sending his people far. In the verses right before our section Jesus sends them just as he was sent. And Jesus is going to send them to the ends of the earth, to every tribe and nation—to all peoples. So if they are going, they are going to go together.

In Acts 13, we find that it's the church in Antioch that sends Paul and Barnabus in mission. In Romans 15:24 Paul appeals to the Roman church for help in sending him to Spain. It might seem like an overly practical point, but if we are going to take the gospel far, to all peoples, it's going to take a unified community effort.

You know, this sermon is hopefully a call for greater unity within our body for the sake of evangelism, but it's also a great opportunity to brag on all of you. As many of you know, missions is an important part of life at First Free. We invest nearly one quarter of our annual budget to taking the gospel to all peoples. Last year that involved \$710,599 invested in sixty-eight different missions partners. Forty-one of those partners are specifically focused on unreached people groups. The other twenty-seven partners reach local areas or are focused on other development ministries. This is tremendous.

You might think, oh, that's great for those missionaries. But it is only possible because of your generosity and unity to the mission to reach all people with the good news of Jesus Christ. We could not have this sort of impact trying to accomplish this on our own. Ok, that's enough bragging.

The gospel goes further in community to all peoples. But the gospel also goes further in community because evangelism is a task so big that only a community can carry it to completion.

In Randy Newman's book on evangelism, that we referenced in last week's blog post, Randy summarizes his interviews with people saying that for most, "coming to faith was a communal experience." What he means is that, "conversion came after interactions with a whole lot of people."²

So, if conversion is a communal experience, then similarly evangelism is a communal task.

It's kind of like this: If I were to buy a plane (which, you know, I never will) it's one moment. But there are numerous steps to get there, numerous people involved, and it takes a large unified community to get it done. Hundreds of engineers and designers spend years developing the design of the aircraft and design for how it will be manufactured. Then hundreds of thousands of parts have to be built, shipped, and then assembled by hundreds more people. Many of you take part in this process, and each process is needed to get the plane built. It's not just one of you, but each of you working in unity where each person is needed to accomplish the goal.

Paul put it like this in 1 Corinthians 3:6: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

Paul is wanting to highlight the centrality of God's work in conversion, but another implication is the work of many in the task of evangelism. So take a moment and look at the person on your left, then look at the person on your right. They are your partners—your teammates in evangelism.

But also consider your own role. You are not just a consumer here on Sunday morning. You are a member of this communal evangelism effort to communicate Jesus to our friends and our city. How do we work as a team at evangelism? Well, it means that evangelism permeates everything we do.

Our worship time has an eye to evangelism, what it means to the non-believer, and also to our hospitality to engage others we might not know. We've got to be a place where Sunday morning is a time to meet others we don't know. To welcome one another.

Our adult, student, and children's classes train us in evangelism, in knowing the gospel. But also, they seek to be hospitable to others that might be newer to the faith.

Our community groups encourage and challenge each other in evangelism, and at times are a place for skeptics to join in, but also they help us to be practiced in the gospel. Ed Stetzer, the Billy Graham Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College, has an interesting statistic. He claims, "those who are in groups... shared their faith more and at a much higher rate than those not involved in a group." Why do you think that is? The reason, in part, is because people in groups are practiced at having a spiritual conversation. Practiced at talking about Jesus, particularly in talking about how Jesus matters to all of life.

² Randy Newman, *Unlikely Converts*

Now our teamwork in evangelism is more organic than this too. It's bringing your non-Christian friends to meet others in the church. It's them hearing not just from you, but from your friends here, and from others who care deeply that they might come to know and believe in Jesus.

If it takes multiple interactions, then what better place to engage other believers than in the church? The gospel goes further in community because evangelism is a communal task.

THE GOSPEL MAKES SENSE IN COMMUNITY.

The next implication community has on evangelism is that the gospel makes sense in community. This really gets at the heart of Jesus' prayer in John 17. What Jesus has to say is simply astounding. Unity is not simply a community of coworkers in evangelism. More than just linking arms for a task. Evangelism is not something that just happens through a bunch of individual agents.

Jesus is saying that unless the world sees an incomprehensibly compelling community, something the world just doesn't have categories for; unless it sees this sort of a loving and unified community, the world won't be able to believe in the truth of who Jesus is. The gospel just won't make sense.

Now, don't misunderstand me. For three weeks we've been talking about the necessity of proclamation in evangelism. And we need to speak. It's absolutely essential. We need to communicate winsomely and persuasively. But if those words aren't backed up by a loving community then our message isn't plausible.

One of the big questions for historians is how the early church grew from a small group of people to the dominant religion. And while many scholars highlight different pieces, one thing they almost all agree on is the attractiveness of the community of believers. A place where rich and poor, slave and free, various ethnicities, were all united as one. While elsewhere in the culture the rich and the poor were deeply divided. Lots of status divides. A place where living in harmony was promoted though disunity and division characterized the rest of society as a whole: in politics, armies, and families.³ And you thought we only had these problems in our time.

The third-century early Christian leader, Tertullian, wrote to the Roman government to give a defense for the Christian faith. In it Tertullian said, we are "one mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us but our wives." Good clarification.

And the world noticed this love, this unity. And the church grew. The Lord added to their number. No matter the ethnicity or language, they were one people. This Christian community was counter-cultural, a unique unity, an alternative community that drew people toward Jesus. They made the gospel make sense. Their life together made the gospel message plausible to those who've never heard it.

We should still have that sort of impact today.

While unity draws people, disunity repels. Have you experienced a divisive church? Have you seen a church full of anger and division? Gossiping about one another? Jealous of one another? Individuals

³ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

with no regard for one another? Have you witnessed one Christian betray another, treating one another unfairly in business? Not living up to the words they profess.

What does this do to the witness of the gospel? One pastor said this sort of church just makes Jesus ugly to people. It undermines the credibility of the gospel. How many have walked away from the faith because the church doesn't live what it preaches? You could give the clearest gospel message, but if there isn't a loving community to back up your words, your evangelism is a wounded message.

How can a message of reconciliation come from a group of divisive people? How can you tell someone that Jesus loves them if they don't see that love in the people of Jesus. The gospel makes sense in community. But the gospel also loses plausibility in disunity. The gospel won't make sense to people if the church looks just like the rest of the world.

So why does this community make the gospel make sense? It's found right here in verse 21. Jesus prays that they will be one; then he moves to the significance. Jesus talks about his unity with the Father, and the believer's unity in the Father and the Son. It can sound a little confusing, but it's extremely illuminating.

Jesus is saying they are united to one another, precisely because they are united in the Trinitarian God. It's not a unity just between me and you. It's a unity with one another that only exists through our unity with the triune God.

Can you see how this is such a powerful witness to the gospel? Our unity reflects our union with God. It reflects the truth about Jesus, the truth of the gospel. This is why Jesus can say, "so that the world may believe in me."

The truth of the gospel only makes sense in community. Anyone who says the community, the church, doesn't matter to discipleship or evangelism... they haven't taken Jesus' word seriously. Our life together is a demonstration of the gospel every day.

Look, there are lots of things that unify people. There is a group of guys that play board games; that hobby unifies them. You might have young kids, or be single, or be older, and you feel unified to others who are in the same stage of life. Many of us here are Americans and we are united through that commonality. Or Republicans. Or Democrats.

But Jesus is saying that there is a union above any line you might draw. Above race, class, or politics. You are first and foremost united to your fellow believer because you are both united with Christ. The gospel joins together those who would otherwise be apart, and even at odds.

And to our divisive world that has no categories for understanding the gospel message, this sort of community gives plausibility to our words. And when we realize that unity and live into it, we make the gospel make sense for a watching world.

Now, if you want to live out this unity at First Free, my first response is to join a community group. Look, I know, because of my job I'm the person that cares more about groups than anyone else, but they exist to knit the body together for gospel growth. They are the place we put intention and commitment behind this community thing. It's one way we demonstrate that the gospel joins together those who would otherwise be apart.

But groups are just a part of the whole First Free community. There are so many ways we express this unity and thus display the gospel. But as we think about unity in our church, it brings up an important misconception.

Unity doesn't mean uniformity. Or that people are to lose all distinctness or culture. True Christian unity doesn't mean we have to give up all our diversity and become just like one another. Unity does not mean uniformity.

The truth is our unity is more vibrant or real if it involves diversity. Diversity is different than division. The best way to describe this is with music. Uniformity would be if each of us sounded like one note. Just a C note. But of course, it's not much better if we're all just singing separate unrelated notes. Sometimes Avery will sing a song, while another song is playing, while Ally is screaming. It's a cacophony. Instead, unity calls us to harmony with one another, to create something singularly beautiful. Like beautiful music is composed of many notes and many instruments.

At times, we can miss this unity if we act like everyone should care about the same things, and be able to do all the same things. We can also err on the other side if our other distinctions become more important than the unity of the community. Rather the goal is to create something singularly beautiful with the uniqueness and contribution of each individual. That's our desire for unity here at First Free.

HOW CAN WE FIND THIS UNITY?

If unity is the goal, how do we get there? And what does it look like? Well, it's not easy is it? We want this, but we don't usually behave this way.

Over Christmas our family got Disney+. Along with watching *Moana* twelve times, I also watched *Remember the Titans* again. It's such a moving movie. It's based on a true story about a high school football team in 1971 during the time of school desegregation. It tells the story about how this remarkable football team showed a town what it was like to have unity in the face of racial diversity.

There is this scene at the end of the movie that always makes me tear up. Gerry Bertier, the All-American linebacker becomes paralyzed right before the state championship. Just after the car accident that paralyzes him, his now good friend, Julius Campbell, comes to the hospital to see him.

Julius approaches the bed. In tears, Gerry says, "I was afraid of you Julius, I only saw what I was afraid of, but now I know I was only hating my brother."

My telling doesn't do it justice. Isn't it true that one of the main things that keeps us from unity with one another is our fear of one another? Now you might say, Jordan I'm not afraid of the person next to me; I don't think they're going to cause me physical harm. But let me ask you this: Have you ever compared yourself to someone else? Have you thought I'm not as good as them? Or, I don't want anything to do with them. Are you a self-reliant, mind-your-own-business sort of person, afraid of looking weak? Are you afraid of opening up and being vulnerable with others because of what it might cost you? Are you afraid of being taken advantage of by someone else? Afraid no one will accept you or love you?

This fear only makes you self-righteous *and* self-reliant—thinking you are better than others, that you don't need anyone, that you're good enough. But there is also a self-righteousness that says, Woe is me, why doesn't anyone like me?

This keeps us from authentic community with one another. Jesus gives the solution to this in verse 22: “The glory that you have given me I have given to them.” This glory refers to the manifestation of God’s person and character. Jesus is saying that he has given them what the Father has given him for their unity. Then he goes on to describe it. Look at the end of verse 23: “so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

Friends, listen to this. Jesus says that the love the Father has for him, he has given to these believers, to us. If you are a Christian, God the Father loves you “just as” he loves Jesus. Do you really believe that? Have you taken this into your heart? It is one of the most remarkable statements in the whole gospel. That the Father loves you to the same measure that he loves the Son.

We look for ultimate love in all the wrong places. But that love just brings more fear. Fear of rejection and loss. It never satisfies. It doesn’t draw us closer to others; it just drives us away.

But this love, this perfect love that John reiterates in his first letter (1 Jn 4:18), is the only thing that can drive out fear. It’s the only thing that can overcome your self-righteous heart.

This love found at the heart of the Trinity, between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, is extended to us that we might have union with the triune God. This love is displayed for us, by the Father sending the Son to die on our behalf so that we might have union with God, and the giving of the Spirit who brings new life, regeneration for sinners, empowering us each and every day. This love of the triune God is the only thing that can make us into a loving community. It’s the only thing that can lead a watching world into belief in Jesus, the Son of God.

And Jesus wants them to know that if they know this love, it will heal every other human relationship. That communion with God leads to true communion with others. And to the degree that you know this love, that you receive this love, you will have a whole new way of relating to others.

But notice that community is something we receive. The way to get this community that can change the world, starts by receiving the love of God.

We are one in the shared love of God.

When we ask what this community looks like it starts with this: We are one in the shared love of God. Everything else flows from this. As John said earlier in 13:34, this love as shared with one another is the main mark of a disciple.

But this unity that we receive through God’s love is not only something we passively receive, but it is also something we maintain, we pursue, and thus display for all to see. Every characteristic of our community together flows from our shared love of God.

We are one in our shared gifts.

The love of God radically shapes how we view our gifts. We each have different gifts—different strengths, abilities, and skills. We each have different resources and capacities. And our unity is maintained and displayed in the way we use them for others in our community.

Over and over in the book of Acts believers were using their possessions for the good of others. If we want unity in the body we each have to know our part, our ways of contributing. And you each

have some way to serve your neighbor. Maybe through a Sunday morning service opportunity, or maybe through an opportunity to serve a specific individual.

We are one in our shared burdens.

You know how when you are in a conversation with someone, and maybe you are expressing to them a tragedy in your life, or some other significant life circumstance like just having a baby. One of the first things the other person will say is, “Do you have family around?”

Why? Because the expectation is that family will share in your burdens. They will help you carry your burdens. The thing is, the church is your family, and called to carry one another’s burdens. So the next time someone asks you if you have family in town to help, you can say, “Yes, my church family is here.”

It’s the meal trains, driving one another to the doctor’s office, helping around the house. It’s like last April, when Sarah Beth’s father passed away, and Serenity Seaman took our daughter Avery with her so Sarah Beth and I could have a couple hours to cry and mourn. And Jarvis came and mowed our lawn while we were out of town. We are a family that shares one another’s burdens.

Of course the main obstacle is that people generally don’t want to share their burdens or problems. They just want to handle them on their own. But in the same way that the gospel changes our attitude toward what we have, it also changes our attitude toward what we lack. The love of God removes the fear of asking for help.

We are one in our shared truth.

This means we have a shared mind, a common belief. More specifically it means we share the truth with each other regularly. Ephesians 4:15–16 says, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

This is really a core part of authentic Christian living, and core to maintaining unity in the body. Now, it takes a lot of courage to tell someone the truth. It takes a lot of love and patience for the other person. But it is vital if we are to be the sort of community that displays the gospel.

Now, we generally think about this as confronting someone about their sin, which is what Paul is talking about, but this sort of exhortation means reminding each other of the gospel and encouraging one another in their gifts. As Hebrews says, “spurring one another on to love and good deeds.”

So sharing the truth is both challenge and encouragement toward faithful Christian living.

We are one in our shared life.

Lastly, we are one in shared life. This is my catch-all. We maintain the unity by eating meals together, spending time together, having fun and playing games together... along with so many other ordinary parts of life.

So, what do you think? When people see us, do they see the love of God? Does our life together make the gospel make sense? Imagine if our church community fully took this to heart. We can

always grow in this area. Imagine if we displayed the love of God through our shared life together. What would the result be?

Would it change how you live? What you care about? What you talk about? Would it change the lives of non-believers in your workplace, neighborhood, and in this city? Would people take notice? That something inexplicable is going on with that church on north Woodlawn? They care for one another, they sacrifice their own good for one another, and they find joy in one another's presence. They love one another. Why is that?

Maybe this gospel thing is true.

Maybe it actually makes a difference.

Maybe there is a God who loves me and gave himself for me that I might be known and loved.

Resources used in this sermon:

D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary

Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Randy Newman, *Unlikely Converts*

Mack Stiles, *Evangelism*

Various sermons on John 17 by James Boice

Various sermons on John 17 by Tim Keller