

“Love Each Other”

Oct 11, 2009 Pastor Matthew Hardin

If any of you have had the pleasure of living in or even visiting the Southeast US, you already know that it is a little different than the rest of the country. For example, Southerners tend to speak a little differently...they have a strange accent and have more than a few strange words in their vocabulary.

In fact, during my 7 years in what Americans call “The South” I discovered some English words I didn’t know existed. Without a doubt my favorite Southern word is: ya’ll. It was strange to say at first, but in time, it grows on you. It’s a great, fun word...and I really think we should try it together, shall we...

Some of you are probably wondering what you just said here in the middle of church.

Well “ya’ll” simply means you, plural. You see, unlike most languages, including Japanese (from what I am told) English does not have a separate word for the plural of “you.” At least not a grammatically correct one. “You” could represent 1 person or 1000.

So when it comes to reading things in English, such as the Bible, it is possible to not get the full meaning because we read the word “you” and can easily assume it is simply referring to the singular, and not the plural.

I looked it up once and learned that in the Greek NT the word for “you” plural—in other words, ya’ll—is used nearly 300 times.

For example, when Jesus says “you are the salt of the Earth” (Matt. 5:13) and “you are the light of the world” (Matt. 5: 14) he means ya’ll. He is referring to the community of Christians. Even when Jesus talks about heaven, he talks in the plural, not the singular: “I’m going ahead to prepare a place for ya’ll, so that where I am ya’ll may be also.” (John 14:3)

I mention all of this to reinforce the truth that God interacts with us and nurtures our faith not just individually, but corporately. He blessed the Jewish people as a whole. Through the prophets he spoke to them as a people. He delivered them from slavery in Egypt as a nation. God sent Jesus to this world to teach and preach and organize believers into one body. Jesus proclaimed that wherever 2 or 3 are gathered in his name he is there.

Yes, having a personal faith and a personal relationship with God is fundamental to being a Christian. However, it cannot be denied that God intends for us to be Christians together, and that we miss something by not actively being so.

To quote from Pastor Barry’s sermon from last week on WCS, “We need each other. We need the talents and the gifts and the ideas and the faith and the love of all of us in order to be the body of Christ that our Lord wants us to be. Our focus is not on ‘I’ and ‘me,’ but rather on ‘Us’ and ‘We.’”

Indeed, God speaks to us in terms of “ya’ll” for very good reasons.

But of course, having said all this, being the body of Christ is not always an easy calling to fulfill. It isn’t all sunshine and roses.

From the Israelites in the wilderness, to the church in Corinth and every Christian community since, there have been differences and disagreements and yes, conflict.

We are one in Christ, but we don’t always know what it means to function as one.

Paul addresses this very issue in his letter to the Colossians. As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, he says we are to bear with one another. Even if there are complaints, even if there are actions which have led to conflict and resentment within the body of Christ, we are still to do our best bear with one another.

In other words, to the best of our ability and by the grace of God, we are to hold one another up. We are to equip one another. We are to support the weight or strain of one another.

All of this requires patience and understanding. It requires perseverance and endurance and prayer. And sometimes it feels like it requires nothing less than divine intervention. To bear with one another, through the faults and weaknesses. Through the diverse spectrum of political opinions and theological leanings. Through anything and everything that makes us different.

Needless to say, bearing with one another is not an easy task. It is true for relationships within the church, and those outside it as well. In marriage, in friendships, in the workplace, everywhere.

Which is why we need love. Throughout scripture, love is described as the fuel which enables us to do this. It is God’s resource to us that we are to draw upon for the motivation, the energy to help maintain healthy relationships. As Paul writes in I Corinthians, love bears all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things.

Now contrary to what some might think, Paul didn’t write this just to sound poetic. Or to provide all future generations with the perfect sweet and sappy Bible reading to use at weddings.

Instead, Paul was providing God’s people with valuable wisdom. Specifically, wisdom on how to be a community and how to approach relationships. Yes, we are united as one into Christ, but it takes works to co-exist. And not just to co-exist, but to grow, to flourish, to mature in the faith.

Within the church, within friendships, within marriages, within any meaningful and worthwhile relationship there are people and events and circumstances that test us. And so it takes love if we are going to bear them and to endure them.

At this point I don’t want to get into a full-blown exposition on love, but suffice it to say that the Bible does not describe love merely as an emotion. It is an act. It

involves effort and time and listening. It requires wanting what is best for the other person, and it requires giving of ourselves to make that happen.

As we see in Jesus Christ, there is an element to love that is sacrificial. Through his example, we are called to love others at some cost to our interests.

One way to put such love into practice is what some call bracketing.

Bracketing is essentially the act of temporarily giving up one's self—putting one's self aside, in brackets, so to speak—in order to experience, as much as possible, the world of the other person from inside their shoes.

In his book, *To a Dancing God*, theologian Sam Keen describes bracketing like this...He says, full “awareness of what presents itself to me involves a double movement of attention: silencing the familiar and welcoming the strange. Each time I approach a strange object, [a strange] person, or [a strange] event, I have a tendency to let my present needs, [my] past experiences, or [my] future expectations determine what I will see. If I am to appreciate [anything]...” I must bracket my preconceived ideas “long enough to welcome strangeness and novelty into my perceptual world.”

He continues by saying, “This discipline of bracketing, compensating, or silencing requires sophisticated self-knowledge and courageous honesty. Yet, without this discipline each present moment is only the repetition of something already seen or experienced. In order for genuine novelty to emerge, for the unique presence of things, persons, or events to take root in me, I must undergo a decentralization of the ego.”

What Sam Keen is describing here as bracketing is a practical application of what Paul describes as bearing with one another. It is, in a sense, a spiritual discipline. When we set aside our own selves, our own prejudices and desires—if only momentarily—to see the world from the perspective of another, we truly take the first step in bearing with one another in love.

However, bracketing and the practice of bearing with one another, is about more than just supporting someone. It is about more than just doing the good Christian thing.

This discipline often results in something new taking root in us. In fact, as Keen says, unless we at times welcome the strange, the different, the unknown, into our own little world, then life is nothing but a repetition of something we have already learned or seen or experienced. If we are to grow and learn and to truly experience something new and novel in life...If we are to receive God's blessings to us that come through other people, then we have to be willing to set aside our own selves.

Bearing with one another is not only God's way of having his community remain together in midst of differences and disagreements...it is also his way of showing us something new, teaching us something new. It is God's way of doing a new thing in our lives.

I'm willing to bet that all of us have learned some of our most valuable lessons from an experience or exercise which at first seemed utterly pointless to us. And I'm also willing to bet that whether we realize it or not (or want to admit it or not) some of the most profound truths about God and life and faith have come from people who are quite different than we are, people we would even call strange.

This practice of bearing with one another brings to mind a fascinating article I read once about the Giant Sequoia National Forest over in California. I've never been to see it with my own eyes, but just reading about those massive trees is awe-inspiring. Giant Sequoias can easily grow to be 300 ft. (91 m) tall and 100 ft. (30 m) around. Some of the oldest ones are nearly 3,500 years old.

The largest tree in the Giant Sequoia National Forest is known as the General Sherman. In terms of volume, the General Sherman is the largest living organism in the world. It's 275 ft. (84 m) tall with a girth of 109 ft (33 m). It is over 2000 years old and has enough lumber to build 50 houses with 6 rooms each.

Now, what is even more amazing is the root system of a Giant Sequoia. Contrary to what you might think by their measurements, they have no taproot. Estimates are that 95% of Giant Sequoias have no roots that go deeper than 4-6 feet. That's less than 2 meters!!!

These huge, 300 foot trees withstand 2000/3000 years of wind and rain, major storms and droughts all without a single root that goes deeper than 6 feet.

How is it possible?

Well, the roots they do have grow near the surface, and they spread out 200/300 feet in all directions. And what happens is that these roots connect with the roots of other giant sequoias around them.

You see, Giant Sequoias only grow in groves where their roots can intertwine and their limbs can interconnect with each other.

So, when storms rage and the strong winds blow they hold each other up. In other words, they bear with one another. And as a result they not only survive, and endure the harsh elements of life over thousands of years, but they grow...they flourish...they reach incredible heights.

All because they reach out in support of one another.

And so it is for us. We do need each other. When we join together as God's people—when we think in terms of ya'll and not just you—we can withstand so much more. We can accomplish so much more. We can grow and flourish and help others do the same.

But it requires us to bear with one another in love. It requires us to courageously set our selves aside and welcome in and incorporate the strange... Amen.