

Finding Love in Our Differences
Pastor Joe Oakley – GFC – 12/18/22

We are preaching a sermon series called Rediscover Christmas – Good News in Troubling Times. So far we’ve preached on Finding Hope in our Uncertainties, Finding Peace in our Struggles and Finding Joy in our Pain and Discouragement. Today I’m preaching on Finding Love in our Differences.

Jesus came to earth to bring hope, peace and joy to everyone – even with our differences. John 3:16 says:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life.

And because God loves everyone on earth – excluding no one - we can love each other on earth – excluding no one! Jesus said in John 13:34-35

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.

If Jesus commands us to love, that means we can choose to love or not. Most people think that love is just a feeling they fall in and out of, but love is a choice! A choice to put others before yourself and to do what’s best for them.

Unfortunately – this God-kind of love is very rare today! God’s love is an unconditional, no matter what kind of love. But most people’s love today is very conditional and very fragile.

We are living in a time and a culture when people break off relationships because other people see certain things differently than them. People use ethnic differences, political and religious differences and almost any kind of differences as a reason to hate and cancel others out. This is so sad because people are even writing off their families because of differing political views.

I read an article recently that compared how two different actresses handled having different political views than their families. First is Jennifer Lawrence, who is the star of the Hunger Games series. She grew up in a very conservative family in Kentucky. When she was young, she adopted her parents’ conservative beliefs.

Jennifer says that she has evolved since then and has gradually moved away from conservative beliefs to a liberal, progressive mindset. That’s okay – that’s her prerogative. But her family still has conservative views and that has caused her to fracture her relationship with her family. She said, “I’ve tried to forgive them and I’ve tried to get over it, but I can’t.”

Contrast that with an actress named Sydney Sweeney, who stars in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her mother had a 60th birthday party with the theme, "Make 60 Great Again." Seems okay to me - but photos were posted on life showing guests wearing red baseball hats with the phrase Make 60 Great Again. Those photos went viral and people on-line accused her family of being Trump loving Republicans. This got people very upset and they began to question Sydney's politics and try to get her to disown her family like Jennifer Lawrence did.

Sydney's response was, "An innocent celebration for my mom's milestone 60th birthday has turned into an absurd political statement, which was not the intention. Please stop making assumptions." Sydney doesn't necessarily agree with her family, but she believes we should agree to disagree because relationships are more important than politics.

I had this exact situation with my brother. We were so different you wouldn't think we were from the same family. I'm conservative - he was liberal. I'm spirit-filled - he was in very liturgical structured churches. He liked classical music and I liked classic rock. I'm a Cowboys fan and he was a Vikings fan.

Needless to say, there were many things for us to argue about when we went home for Christmas - and we did for a while. Finally, it got to a point where I said, "Let's call a truce. Let's agree to disagree. You know my beliefs and I know yours. We are very different, but you are my brother and I love you. Our relationship is more important to me than our differences." And we never fought over anything gain - we just loved each other.

So - I know from the Bible and I know from personal experience that we can love each other in spite of our differences. And the church should be the one place where people love each other despite their differences!

The Church hasn't always done so great a job of this. But each of us can find opportunities in this Christmas season and in our current cultural climate to allow God's love to flow through us to others. We can find love even in our differences!

That's one of the messages we receive from the Christmas story. I had never really thought about it until preparing this message - but the birth of Christ brought together a wide variety of people with many differences.

It starts with Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary - the old and the young. We don't know exactly how old any of these people were - but the Bible says that Zechariah and Elizabeth were very old. Most scholars believe that Mary was probably around 16 years old. There was a huge difference in age - but they loved each other deeply. This shows us that we can love each other despite generational differences.

There's a lot of friction these days between boomers and millennials. Boomers' top frustrations with Millennials include: Smartphone use, Sense of entitlement, Laziness, Coming in late and leaving early, "Know it all" personalities

Millennials are most annoyed by: "Know it all" personalities, Sense of entitlement Egos, taking credit for others' work

There's clearly a lot that both generations can do to lessen the generational friction at work. Communicating with clarity, extending kindness, and viewing things from the other person's perspective can help us all do better at work together—no matter what generation we're from.

You might think – well, that's in the workplace, not the church. Not true! I remember talking to a young man I was trying to recruit to help us build our young adult ministry. He was not interested at all. When I asked him why, he said, "Most people my age do not want to go to church with older people. We want a church of young people." I was flabbergasted!

I said, "That's not even biblical. The Bible says that in churches we need the older people to teach the younger. How will you do that if you only attend church with young people?" He had no answer, but he just kind of blew me off like it was not important!

It is very important! The church needs the life and energy of the young people and the wisdom and stability of the older members! We can choose to love each other in spite of our differences!

Not only were there generational differences in the Christmas story; there are also class differences. The wise men were noble and wealthy men – the polar opposites of the shepherds, who were among the lowest in that ancient social structure.

The wise men also a different race from the others in the Christmas story. They were Gentiles, not Jews, and their inclusion in Jesus's birth story echoes the radical idea that Christ the Messiah brings salvation and restoration to all people, not just the Jews.

The Christmas story included people with generational differences, income and class differences, ethnic and religious differences. That brought them together? The birth of Christ! What overcame their differences? The birth of Christ!

Could Jesus have united any more divisions simply by being born? Hardly. He pretty much covered them all. And in so doing, God revealed several things about His love that I'd like for us to explore today.

1. Jesus loves all different kinds of people

God is love and the Bible is His love story for all humanity. From Creation, God made people and spent time with them in the garden. When sin entered the world, bringing death, brokenness and separation from a close companionship with God, He continued to love people.

Through generations, He worked His plans and promised a Messiah to make a way to restore relationship with humanity. That way is Jesus! And Jesus loves all kinds of people without exception!

2. That love should define and motivate us.

John the apostle eloquently describes the love of God in 1 John 4:7-11.

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

John tells us that God is love. Love is His nature, and He has shown it to us by sending Jesus. We can count on God's love; it won't let us down. It fills us and fuels us. It calls us and enables us to love each other.

3. Love empowers us to cross borders

By borders I mean divisions between people. And wow, these are divided times. It seems our culture has multiplied the ways to divide us.

I remember in my lifetime when schools were segregated. Many people fought, bled and died for civil rights – including the right to be included at school, at work, at the lunch counter.

I was saddened to learn that many major universities are not having just one graduation. Instead, they are offering separate segregated graduation ceremonies. This includes segregated ceremonies for African Americans, Asians, American Indians, LGBTQ graduates, first-generation immigrants, women and low-income students. To me, it is sad that Martin Luther King and so many others gave their lives to end segregation, and now people are willingly choosing it.

That's why the church has to be different! Our major identity is not in ethnicity, gender or economic status! Our identity is "in Christ." Galatians 3:26-29 says:

You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. For you are all

one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Paul is not saying there is no longer any Jews, Gentiles men or women. Obviously, there are! But he is saying that in Christ, those differences do not matter!

In Christ, it doesn't matter about your ethnic identity, your gender, or your station in life. If you are in Christ, you are one of God's chosen people and you stand to inherit all that God has promised. While there may still be ethnic, gender, and social distinctions in other contexts, those distinctions do not affect one's standing as a child of God by faith in Christ.

This is why Jesus's teaching was so radical. It's why God's love is so radical. And that's why he calls us to also love radically. You see, God did not command us to love people we like and agree with. He said to even love your enemies! Jesus said in Matthew 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For He gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

We are commanded by God to love everyone – even our enemies! I heard about a man who went to his pastor to tell him he wanted to divorce his wife. The pastor asked him why and the man answered, “I don't love her anymore.” The pastor said, “Don't you know the Bible commands husbands to love their wives?” The man answered, “I just don't feel close to her like a wife.”

The pastor responded, “Oh, she's more like a sister? You know, the Bible commands us to love our families, so if you can't love her like a wife, love her like a sister.” To which the man responded, “Well, she's not really close as a sister.” So the pastor said, “Oh she's more like a neighbor, not family? You know, the Bible commands us to love our neighbors.”

The man said, “Actually, she's not really like a neighbor. We don't get along, we fight all the time.” And the pastor said, “Oh, so she's more like an enemy? You know, the Bible commands us to love our enemies.”

Needless to say, this man did not get any easy out from his pastor on his lack of love. That's because if God commands us to love – then He will provide the ability to love – in fact, He will love through us.

Jesus didn't only tear down the walls of division at His birth, He intentionally crossed borders in His life to show love. He befriended hated tax collectors, and even invited one, Matthew, to follow as one of His twelve disciples. He spoke with the Samaritan woman at the well, which broke a couple societal taboos at once. (Jews did not associate with Samaritans, and Jewish men especially did not talk with women like this in public.)

Jesus was crossing the divide. He reached across the cultural, spiritual, political, and racial divisions - and the love of Christ calls us and enables us to cross the borders and tear down the barriers of disagreement. Maybe reaching across the divide begins in your family. Maybe in your home or neighborhood or workplace or community.

Jesus at Christmas and all the time calls us love others whether we feel they deserve it or not! Sometimes love means taking the simple step of building that bridge as a gesture and an invitation. Sometimes it's being willing to listen and not defend.

It is always being willing to choose to see someone else as equally loved by God, equally welcomed into His presence, equally drawn into His miraculous, divine, all-consuming love. This is God's love. This is the heart of Christmas.

Friends, as we rapidly approach Christmas Day, I invite and challenge us all to rediscover Christmas by rediscovering the overwhelming, all-encompassing, all-welcoming love of God and then to love others!

In a world where people unfriend each other very easily - people need to see us love one another enough to work through our differences.

In a world full of racial strife - people need to see different ethnicities in the church loving each other.

In a world full of political hatred - people need to see Christians of all political persuasions loving each other.

Jesus gave the world His best and they killed Him - yet He loved them anyway. God is calling us to do the same and He gives us the power of the Spirit to enable us to obey the new commandment to love as He loves.

People are sinful. *Love them anyway.*

People will fail you. *Love them anyway.*

People are unreasonable and self-centered. *Love them anyway.*

People can be everything from inconsiderate to outright mean and cruel.

Love them anyway.

People will hurt you, use you and abuse you. *Love them anyway.*

People will take advantage of you. *Love them anyway.*

People you're counting on will let you down. *Love them anyway.*
 People won't always love you unconditionally. *Love them anyway!*
 People won't always meet your needs. *Love them anyway!*

Love people regardless of their condition or their worthiness.
 Love them in good times and bad.
 Love your family, love your friends and love your enemies!

You see, Jesus did not say, "Love people when they're loveable. Love them when you feel like it. Love them when it's convenient. Love them as long as they are meeting your needs." NO! Jesus allows no excuses.

He says, "Whatever they do to you, you love them anyway!"
 That's the radical way He loved.
 Think of the day He was crucified.
 He was beaten, mocked, a crown of thorns was pressed into His head and He was nailed to a cross.
 He did nothing to deserve any of this.
 Yet He chose to love those who crucified Him anyway.
 He chose to forgive them anyway.
 That's the radical way Jesus loves. He loves anyway.

Aren't you glad He loves you anyway - In spite of yourself?
 We have all sinned, but Jesus loves us anyway!
 We have all failed, but Jesus loves us anyway!
 We have all made mistakes, but Jesus loves us anyway!
 We all are less than perfect, but Jesus loves us anyway!
 We are all unlovable at times, but Jesus loves us anyway!

This is totally opposite of how the world loves.
 But this is how we are loved by God and this is how He wants us to love others.
 We all fall short in loving others, but we can no longer excuse it. We all need to grow in loving people who are different from us and we can no longer delay it!

We cannot do this in our own strength!
 So, we need to cry out to God to change our hearts and ask for God to love the unlovable through us and forgive the unforgivable through us!