

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Reformed and Always Reforming: Being of One Mind
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Jeremiah 29:10-14; Philippians 2:1-13

In 2015 the book, The Purpose Driven Church was, according to a poll of pastors, second only to the Bible in popularity. Initially written as a Doctor of Ministry Project by Rev. Rick Warren of Saddleback Church in California, it influenced and continues to influence thousands of church leaders and church planters. It contains nuggets of wisdom on how to focus a church's life and work so that a church can develop active and faithful members. This morning though I want to focus on one chapter and that is the chapter on recruitment. At the heart of that chapter is the advice, backed up by years of research, that a growing, successful church can only be built upon a homogenous community. In other words, a growing church requires recruiting people who look alike, think alike, live alike, and share a common view of the world. Any attempt to create a church that is heterogeneous, meaning where not everyone looks, thinks, and acts alike is bound for failure. The reason being that people only like being around people like themselves.

I have to say that this chapter and the research on which it was based was in the back of my mind as the session (the board of ruling elders of this church) adopted our moniker of Everybody's Church. When we adopted Everybody's Church as our statement of identity, we tried to be clear as to what it meant. It meant that our doors were open to everyone as our inclusion statement makes clear. *"As Everybody's Church we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the full participation of all people of any ability, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance."* We also knew what being Everybody's Church didn't mean. It didn't mean that we believed anything and everything, or that everybody would want to come to our church because not everyone would approve of or appreciate our inclusion, our worship, or our witness. And that was fine. But we adopted this statement of our identity because we believed that a church ought to reflect the entirety of the kingdom of God, rather than one small slice of it. We believed that it was possible to bring together people who didn't think, look, or act alike and create a dynamic Jesus community. What none of us could have foreseen, however, was 2020.

Each of us carries within us our own particular impact of this past year. It was the year that put this nation in a pressure cooker that had the potential to break down our political, economic, relational, and religious connections. The Covid-19 pandemic with its deaths and lockdowns, continuing racial strife in our streets, a political campaign and aftermath unlike any I have ever experienced, have stretched the bonds that have held families, communities and churches together to the breaking point. We carry around within us fear, anger, frustration, depression, loneliness, and foreboding. And these events have taken a toll on teachers, students, peace officers, pastors, doctors, nurses, first responders, communities of color, small businesses, and on this church. The question before us is, has the pressure cooker of 2020 proved the research right and that we cannot be a heterogeneous church? Or is it still possible for us to be Everybody's Church? I would answer the latter because we are of "the same mind." Let me explain.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, he was writing to a church in which there were divisions. Unlike the church in Corinth where Paul made us aware of the causes of that church's division, we are not sure what was tearing the Philippian church apart. What we do know is that there were people dividing the church and Paul took great pains to urge the church to remain united. In his efforts to do so he wrote, "Be of the same mind...being in full accord and of one mind." What is interesting about this phrase, having the same mind, is that over the centuries since Paul wrote, this phrase has come to mean that all people are to believe the same thing and that same thing is dictated by either the church or a pastor. In other words, to have the same mind means to be a homogeneous church, without dissent or discussion. Everyone does the same line and believes the same things. While this understanding may still be true for many churches today, it is not true for us Reformed folks. First, it is not true theologically because we believe three things about anyone dictating to us what we must believe. First, we believe that God alone is Lord of the conscience...meaning that no one can dictate what we believe. Second, we believe that councils do err...meaning that sessions, denominations, and church leadership can be mistaken. Third, we believe that Christians can disagree and still be faithful...meaning that there is often no one, right answer and so we embrace those with whom we disagree as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second place where this belief in being of the same mind meaning everyone agreeing on some set of doctrinal principles falls apart, is in the passage itself. I say this because in the passage Paul told us that the same mind we are to have is the mind of Christ; a mind of humility and sacrificial service. As I have noted before when speaking on this passage in Philippians, the passage is not intended as a statement about Christ's divinity, but about the mind of Christ as an example of where our minds ought to be and where unity can be found. Our minds are first to be found in humility. Paul writes, "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*" What this means is that we are to approach everyone we meet as an equal worthy of our attention, our love, and our compassion. One way to think about humility is that it calls us to be willing to engage in active non-judgmental listening, even when we disagree with someone. And we engage in these active non-judgmental relationships because they reflect the humility of Jesus Christ, who "*being found in human form, humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross.*" In other words, to have the mind of Christ is to humbly sacrifice ourselves for those around us, even though they, like we, are less than perfect people...even though they may be people with whom we may disagree.

And my friends I know we are of one mind because over the past twelve years I have watched us have a mind of humility and sacrificial service. I have watched people who fundamentally disagreed on issues, listen, and love one another. I have watched people who fundamentally disagreed sacrificially serve each other and serve others together. And so there are several things that I passionately believe. I believe passionately in what we are doing here at Everybody's Church. I believe passionately that the world needs to see that it is possible to be a church in which there is loving disagreement lived out in Christ-like humility. I believe passionately that the world needs to see that there can be a church with people from all walks of life, all political and theological viewpoints, all genders, all races, all sexual orientations and all abilities and disabilities that exhibits Christ's mind of humility. I believe passionately that we are fully capable of humility, sacrifice, and service, because I witness it week after week here in our church. My friends, we are a gift to the world.

My challenge for you this week is this, to ask yourselves, "How am I living with the mind of Christ, both inside of and outside of Everybody's Church?" And allow this question to continue to make you and us a gift to the world.