

Sunday 22nd February 2026 - One Body, One Church: Connection Through Difference

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0:00] Well, good morning, everyone. Well, as Linda said, we're continuing in our One Body, One Church series this morning. So Dave started us off exploring what it means to belong to the body in all its wonderful diversity.

And then last week, Laura looked at the importance of love, holding all that together. And in particular, agape love and what that looks like in our shared life. So this morning, what I'd like to do is explore how we stay connected, given all our differences, even when, and maybe especially when, we disagree with one another.

So there you go. A nice, easy topic for us to dive into this morning. To kick us off then, I want you to think about the last time you got into a disagreement with someone else.

Maybe an argument is too strong a word. You know, a difference of opinion, shall we say. And it can be about absolutely anything. So toilet seats, up or down?

You spent how much? On what? Or I have to do everything around here? Or even as mundane as whether or not putting pineapple on a pizza is an acceptable practice.

[1:24] They're everyday niggles, aren't they? Just a normal part of what it means to live alongside each other. My family and other animals, as Gerald Durrell put it.

So here's my niggle. You wouldn't think, would you, that it's that difficult to load a dishwasher? No? Well, certain members of my family, no names, have very different ideas about this.

I mean, it's just not right, is it? You know, full disclosure, I should say this isn't our dishwasher. I'm just, you know, I'm just trying to make the point here.

And the thing is, as annoying as all this chaos is, and it's not quite as bad as this, when the machine finally finishes its cycle, somehow all the dishes come out more or less clean.

I mean, how is that even possible? You know, I suspect a lot of the things we disagree or argue over, we kind of convince ourselves that there's only one right way of doing it or seeing things, you know, our way.

[2:35] And anyone doing it differently, well, you know, not to put too fine a point on it, they're wrong, aren't they? But what if there are multiple ways of seeing and doing things?

And maybe, just maybe, the way we see or do things says more about us than it does about, well, in this case, the dishwasher.

Hold that thought. You know, the early church was not without its fair share of differences and disagreements about how they were meant to live together as the body of Christ.

I wonder if sometimes we idolize those communities as some sort of harmonious and serene places, you know, where everyone shared everything and got along wonderfully.

Well, I'm not so sure. These were fledgling Christian communities, often made up of wildly different people and new believers. And yeah, the spirit was moving amongst them, but they were still very much trying to figure out this faith, this movement towards Jesus.

[3:49] And so even things like food became big issues and a source of tension. You know, whether or not you should sit down and share a meal with Gentiles, you know, because they're non-kosher.

Paul had quite a big falling out about this in Antioch with Cephas. You can check it out in Galatians chapter 2 from verse 11. Cephas was eating with Gentiles until other converts arrived from

Jerusalem who disapproved.

And so frightened, Cephas kind of pulled back and Paul calls him out on it. He says to his face, you're a hypocrite. And then there was the whole issue of whether or not it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Or the whole question of circumcision. And yes, that is a picture of what you probably think it is. Again, in Paul's letter to the Galatians, it's a pretty furious argument against this position. You know, thank goodness. With that memorable line in chapter 5, verse 12 of Galatians, where Paul says that those insisting on circumcision for new Gentile believers should go the whole way and apokoto themselves.

[5:21] And that's the Greek word that Paul uses here. And it literally means to cut off. You know, he's not mincing his words here. And then, of course, there was the whole question of women in leadership.

It's interesting that in his letter to Romans, Paul greets our sister, Phoebe, as a deacon, a minister in the church in Chancrea.

And that was a church near Rome. It's at the start of chapter 16. And your Bible probably says, or may say, the word servant.

But the Greek word is unambiguous. Deacon or minister. She was one of the key leaders of the church there. And then Priscilla, together with her husband, Aquila, recognized by Paul as church leaders in Corinth.

Interestingly, Priscilla is almost always named first in Paul's letters, which was very unusual in the ancient world, where the husband's name would almost always precede the wife's.

[6:34] And it suggests that she was a more prominent figure, certainly in ministry terms. And then, of course, Lydia, who effectively led the Philippian house church.

Now, unfortunately, the cultural and social power dynamics of a patriarchal society meant that the church ending up holding these contradictions about women in leadership in tension rather than resolving them.

And so it took another 2,000 years, more or less, for the church to recognize and affirm the role of women in ordained ministry.

And thank goodness we got there in the end. The General Synod of the Church of England voted to allow female priests in 1992, with the first 32 being ordained in March of 1994.

So really, not that long ago. And, of course, another step forward this January, Bishop Sarah Mullally, the first woman to be appointed as spiritual leader of the Church of England in her role as the Archbishop of Canterbury.

[7:56] The gospel is timeless, but how we share it and live it out must always adapt and change. And back again to the early church, even the apostles had their disagreements.

In Acts chapter 15, Paul and Barnabas had a paroxymus, which is Greek for a sharp, angry falling out over whether or not to bring John Mark on their missionary journey.

They couldn't agree. They couldn't agree. So they separated. Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas and went off to Syria. Well, the good news is that Paul later reconciles himself with Mark, and probably by extension with Barnabas.

But I don't think, then, that it's about us as the body of Christ trying to avoid disagreement or to pretend that our differences don't matter.

We are human. We're not a group of people who all believe exactly the same things. We're a group of people caught up in the same story with Jesus at the center.

[9:10] And just like the early church, we have to learn to engage each other in ways that honor the body, that respect the mystery we're all navigating through, and reflect the love that we claim to follow.

Now, of course, there are many references in the Bible to the importance of unity in the body. But let me just share one with you from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church.

It's only one verse, and so the context, and to get that right, is really important here. This is a community that was spectacularly dysfunctional.

Corinth was a wealthy trading capital that was preoccupied with privilege, excess, greed, corruption, and pleasure. Now, you'll have to use your imagination because, of course, we don't

have any modern-day equivalents, do we?

So, reading from 1 Corinthians 1, verse 10. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

[10:33] Now, on the surface, this might sound like Paul is calling for complete uniformity here. Everyone thinking the same thing.

But I don't think that's what's happening here. Paul is writing to a church divided by class, divided by spiritual one-upmanship, divided by loyalty to different teachers.

You can go on and read about it later on in this chapter. The Greek word he uses here for divisions is schismata. And the root of the word is like a tear in fabric.

It's a rupture, a wound. So he's not asking them to stop debating, to stop thinking or questioning.

He's asking them to stop tearing each other apart and splitting off into factions.

And I think, sadly, I suppose the whole history of the creation of different denominational churches is one of schismata.

[11:40] And then this word united that's used. Here, the word in Greek is katarizo. It's actually a medical term, and it means the mending of a broken bone, the knitting back together of what's been torn.

It's not about erasing differences. It's about restoration, healing the wounds that division creates.

The late writer and theologian Rachel Held Evans, and this is one of her books, said that the church should be a safe place where we can bring our questions, our doubts, and tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable, and still stay in relationship with one another.

I think for her, the church was a community defined by its shared practices and shared commitment to God and to each other, where everyone is safe, but no one is comfortable.

And she reflects what I think Paul was reaching for, a place of community, of unity, of restoration, drawn together through the Spirit, with Jesus at the head of the body, the church, and defined by its shared practice, and those being revealed through the fruits of the Spirit.

So in Galatians, and in other parts of the Bible, but it talks about these fruits of the Spirit, you know, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

[13:27] Against such things, says Paul, there is no law. And it's unity of a shared purpose. Not conformity, but community.

Not simply bound through statements of faith, but thriving through a living spiritual connection that we have to each other through the body of Christ.

So I thought it would be helpful for us to look at some practices that might help us to be more purposeful in how we connect with one another through our differences.

But before we get to that, I want to just widen our lens, our view a little bit for a moment, beyond our own Christian tradition. Now, in the Jewish faith, the Talmud is a written compilation of Jewish oral law, consisting of rabbinic teachings, debates, and interpretations.

Essentially, it's a record of rabbis arguing and putting different interpretations of the Torah to each other across the centuries. They preserve the minority opinions.

[14:40] They honor the dissent. Because they understand that truth is big enough to hold multiple perspectives. And that sometimes we need disagreement to get closer to understanding.

And they even have a word for this. So I am going to need a bit of a run-up to this. So bear with me. So, this is I think I got that right.

And simply put, it means this. Disagreement for the sake of heaven. That's a lovely thing, isn't it?

So that when we disagree, when we argue about sacred things with the right spirit, with humility, with a genuine desire for truth and a respect for the other person, then our disagreements become holy.

And just like this picture of a new cop and a protester at a demonstration over the death of George Floyd back in 2020, that can be a beautiful thing when we connect in a spirit of love and respect for one another.

[16:02] I think it's what we're called as the body of Christ to move towards, to abide with each other, to stay in relationship, even when we disagree, even when it's hard.

So that there is space for us to grow and to change as our understanding of our faith develops. Okay then, so let's take a look at some practices, or maybe a better word would be postures, that we can adopt that might help us to connect well and to hear and to honour each other's differences. So first off, you know, sometimes the most spiritual thing we can do is just shut up and listen, yeah? Often people just need to be heard. I think James understood the importance of intentionality and intentionally listening before saying anything.

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

[17:20] Now, biblical scholars put James' letter closer to Jewish wisdom literature than the kind of more theological letters of Paul. Because it's full of these sort of short, punchy, practical moral guidance rather than, you know, a sustained theological argument.

And you've got these three imperatives, you know, quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. And we maybe don't hear this, but it's kind of in its time, it would have been totally counter-cultural.

This was a Greek-speaking world, and rhetoric was probably prized over almost anything else. You know, the ability to speak persuasively was one of the most important things in that society.

So what James is saying here is quite radical. And of course, slow to speak is not a counsel of silence, but of measured deliberation.

You know, I guess we would say probably now something like, you know, engage brain before opening mouth. So listening to other people's stories, seeing the world through their eyes, being present and genuinely interested and authentic.

[18:44] You know, showing some real humility and vulnerability. That is what connects us to one another. But, you know, we know that in our heads, don't we?

And we mostly know it in our hearts. You know, but sometimes the power of situations and the emotions that kind of charge up inside us just overtake us.

You know, and we react before even fully hearing someone. Because it is such an emotional thing. And we get very defensive.

And more often than not, anger follows in the wake of that. And so I think James is trying to offer some wisdom here about how to break, how to interrupt that pattern.

And if you like, sort of how to head it off at the pass. Most people just need to be heard, not fixed or judged.

[19:46] And so when we do respond, why not ask things like, you know, where they're coming from? You know, help me to understand how you got there.

What experiences have shaped that in your life? The Quakers have a tradition, you might be familiar with it, that's called holding space.

Creating room for another person's truth without immediately needing to correct, to fix or debate it. And it doesn't mean you necessarily agree.

It means you honour their humanity enough to really hear them. I think that's a good practice. And then secondly, we need to distinguish between those things that are load-bearing beams in our faith and those things that are important but secondary supporting joints.

Or joists, sorry. What do I mean? Well, when Jesus is asked in Matthew 22, which commandment is the greatest?

[21:00] He quotes back to the Pharisees, the Shema. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it. Love your neighbour as yourself. And then Jesus says something striking. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

And this image of everything resting on and flowing from these two commandments, it's almost architectural. Which implies that not everything has equal structural weight in our faith.

That some things are more load-bearing than others. For me, and just to name a few, the reality of God, the life and teaching and resurrection of Jesus, the call to love, the call to forgiveness and to live in peace, these are not optional for me in my faith.

The writer and speaker, Rob Bell, uses two powerful contrasting images of how we might understand our faith, which I think can be helpful.

[22:23] The first of these is of a brick wall. With each brick representing one of the many different Christian doctrines that we have, such as the inerrancy of scripture, or the doctrine of marriage between one man and one woman, or the doctrine of penal substitution, if you know what that is, or even, not a doctrine, but even the pronoun for God.

But the problem with the image of the wall is that if you remove one brick, the whole thing becomes structurally unsound.

Pull out the wrong doctrine and the wall might collapse. And that creates a kind of theological anxiety, where every question potentially feels existentially dangerous, because everything is load-bearing.

So any hint of doubt becomes a threat to the entire structure, rather than a natural part of a living, growing faith. So compare that to the second image he offers of a trampoline.

The springs are now the doctrines and beliefs, but they exist to create the bounce, to generate movement, to make the trampoline work. And so the springs are not the point.

[23:48] Jumping is the point. And what is it that Jesus said in John's gospel? I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

Life in Jesus is the point. And more critically, even if you remove or reposition one of the springs, the trampoline doesn't collapse.

Yeah, it might bounce differently. The experience might change a little. But you keep bouncing. You don't fall. The springs support the life of the body.

Must be a big trampoline. But when they become the point themselves, something has gone wrong. And then thirdly, Paul writes in Ephesians about speaking the truth in love.

So in all things, we grow up into Christ. This chapter in Ephesians has all been about unity in the body of Christ.

[24:54] It's interesting that Paul is patterning how Jesus spoke truth in love to the vulnerable. Like the woman caught in adultery in John's gospel with the religious authorities, dragging her before Jesus into a public space, humiliated, terrified, awaiting death by stoning, weaponizing her as a trap.

And Jesus only shows compassion. There's no lecture here about sexual morality. There's no shaming. He turns the table on those holding the stones and then simply says to the woman, neither do I condemn you.

Go and sin no more. She's a human being, not a theological problem. And yes, sometimes difficult truths need to be said.

But not if we emphasize the truth part and forget the love part. Interestingly, with the Pharisees in Matthew 23, Jesus says this, you snakes, you brood of vipers, you strain out a gnat, but swallow a camel.

Now that's not exactly speaking truth with kindness, is it? But these are the people oppressing the poor, abusing their power, and propping up a corrupt system of injustice.

[26:26] And he calls it out for what it is, speaking truth to power. And I guess, you know, we need to do the same, don't we?

We need to be willing to speak both of these truths. You know, and to have the discernment to know if that is necessary, if it's the right time and place, and whether we are the right people to say it.

And when it's appropriate that our words are genuinely clothed in kindness. And so finally, for this morning.

It's all too easy when things get difficult, when disagreements become very uncomfortable. Our instinct is often to walk away, to cut people off, to find a new community where people are more like us.

And we need to be honest, sometimes that is necessary. There are relationships that are really toxic or abusive, and there are communities that cause harm.

[27:37] And a healthy response is to remove ourselves from that harm. But most of the time, most of the time, the work of love is to stay at the

table, to keep showing up, to keep engaging.

In Colossians 3, verses 13 to 14, it says this, to bear with each other and forgive one another. If any of you has a grievance against someone, forgive, as the Lord forgave you.

And over all these virtues, put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. To bear with. It means putting up with, tolerating, sometimes even enduring one another.

Again, that doesn't mean we don't have boundaries around the behaviour of others and that there aren't consequences to actions. There are. But forgiveness is a non-negotiable.

And it's more than passive tolerance. This is love in action. Addressing issues early on so they don't escalate. Not allowing minor disagreements to become big divisions.

[28:55] And no one is saying it's easy. But we just keep showing up.

Because living within community requires intentionality and a whole lot of grace.

Amen.