

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Despite Our Differences

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The year was 1926; the city Washington DC was a historian and a prolific writer by the name of Dr. Carter G. Woodson who pioneered Negro History Week, we now know it as Black History month. Doctor Woodson was the second black man to earn a PhD from Harvard University; W. E. B. Du Bois was the first. But it was said that that Doctor Woodson could be seen actually not too far from here in the Shaw neighborhood 1538 9th St NW in his three story row home collecting black history, writing proficiently, hour after hour, collecting all of this information. And Dr Woodson committed himself to this work because he believed that the narratives and the stories of black people and other minorities in this country was virtually being lost, ignored, or misrepresented. And he hoped that by elevating these narratives and these stories that he could somehow help black and white people come together. He hoped that he could help race relations. Now it's interesting that this was launched by Dr. Woodson in 1926 because this was also the beginning of what's known as the great migration in our history, so that would have been from 1920 to 1970 and that's when you had black people from the south moving north, Midwest and to the west. And it's almost as if a Dr. Woodson was peeking into the future of our America, seeing the landscape of our America changing, seeing how a culture's were going to cross and intersect and him elevating these narratives he hoped would help with that. You would have the proximity of difference during those times come in closer and closer together and being less and less restricted during this time. You had black people who were systematically excluded in a lot of ways in society now are fervently pursuing, inclusion and basic civil rights.

This was no doubt a major sociological shift in our culture and a pivotal moment in American history. It was a time of discomfort at best and it was a time of violence at worst. And some fought still to pursue integration even though they knew that tensions were high and they knew what was at stake. They said, we are all God's children and even if you didn't believe in God, you at least said, well, we're all human so we should be able to get along with one another. But then you had those who said, no, actually I think our differences are better segregated, they're better separate from each other and maybe we should only cross paths when it's absolutely necessary. And then you had those who are maybe indifferent and weren't bothered one way or the other. They just wanted to make sure that they weren't inconvenience or they're at least somehow benefited from whatever the system was.

Now, I don't want to belabor the point, but I think all of us could agree that we are still trying to figure out how to live with difference. We were still trying to figure out how to connect with people different than us. Now, you know, sometimes it's not all that serious, it's a matter of annoyance more than anything. You know, maybe you're in the office and you've got that coworker who has decided to leave their broccoli salad in the refrigerator for three weeks, not cool, not cool. Or maybe they thought that you were invited to their conference call or the entire office for that matter because they're talking so loud. Then there are other matters that maybe you live with Pastor Joel and Nina talked about in the first week, they talked about marriage and difference in marriage and my wife and I have been married for 15 years and we still have some

of those similar challenges where I'm a morning person and she's a night person. And we're still trying to figure out when does the light actually go off at night cause I'm trying to get to sleep usually earlier than her. Then, hey, maybe you know, there are other things that kind of bother you a little bit, but maybe they're not a huge deal you know, like you've got that friend who roots for the wrong team, you know, I won't call the team. Or maybe for me personally, you have dear brothers that you love, you know, I won't say any names like Pastor Marion or my brother Joshua Dubois who somehow or another joined the wrong fraternity. It's a side joke between us. But as we look at where we are in our culture, particularly here in the nation's capital, I mean we can see that there are clear lines of difference. There are clear lines that we have drawn and we're clearly on certain sides of certain issues and, and they're very personal to us. Maybe we're on the side of a black lives matter or blue lives matter or pro choice or pro life or same sex marriage or should women preach or should they not and the list goes on and on and on.

So as we are in this third week of our series Better Together, I was giving a lot of thought about what was stirring in me and what I wanted to share. And one of the thoughts that I had was all of these things that I mentioned, I mean, they're not new. We've had cultural clashes since the beginning of time. We've had tensions throughout history that have been a chronicled and so we understand that these things have continued to be. But I also want to elevate that we've even had these tensions in the church. You know, the early church was trying to figure out, okay, so how do we live among people who are different than us, come from different cultures, backgrounds, who pursue life very differently and that was both an internal clash within the church and then there was an external class outside of the church with the culture. See, the early church was primarily made up of Jews, the people who were following Jesus we're said to be of The Way they were the early Christians. And this guy, Jesus comes on the scene and completely disrupts the religious order, he completely disrupts the systems and the way things are set up and it was an absolute problem because Jesus came on the scene and brought this gospel that he said, listen, I am about everybody, I'm for everybody and it was a gospel of redemption and reconciliation for everybody, not just Jews who were the chosen people of God, but also the Gentiles who were not Jewish. And it was a big problem, a big tension that was caused as a result.

So, we see in the book of Acts the beginning of the formation of the church. And if you have a Bible, I want you to meet me in Acts chapter 15 in just a second. But the early church as a result of these clashes had to answer the Gentile question. So, what do we do about these people who are not Jews, but they love Jesus and they want to follow him? I mean, it seems kind of crazy, you know, to think about it now in this context, but this was a serious thing because culturally there were certain lines that were drawn and there were just certain things that you didn't do as certain people didn't mix and certainly anyone who was not Jewish wouldn't be following a Jewish rabbi without being Jewish. Is there a way for us to be in relationship with people who are not Jews and still also be in relationship with Jesus at the same time? In other words, are our differences better together?

So, the leaders of the church got together the OGs and you know, the leaders and whatever you want to call them they got together and we zoom in on Acts chapter 15, to eaves drop on some of the conversation and discourse that was happening at the Jerusalem Council. So if you can, would you stand as we honor the reading of God's word in Acts 15 starting at verse one? We'll

go verse one and two and then we'll hop over to verse five and go to verse 12; we've got the words on the screen so we won't leave you hanging. Let's go.

15:1 Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ² This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

Skip over to verse five it says,

⁶ The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷ After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." ¹² The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for this opportunity, open up our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to be able to receive what you are saying to us today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. You may be seated.

We're in a series called Better Together and so, hey, maybe I thought I would just tag this message this weekend a Better Together Despite Our Differences. Now, we just read some of the discourse that happened in Acts 15, at the Jerusalem council and actually, I won't get into the details at all in terms of the conclusion, in terms of what they decided to do with the Gentiles. But, I'll just tell you that they decided the bottom line was, okay, we're not going to ask Gentiles to be circumcised, which was the custom, but we will ask them to abstain from three things; meat sacrificed to idols, from blood and all sexual immorality. So, that became the bottom line and the result of the council. But, I actually want to zoom in on Peter, Paul and Barnabas and what they shared with the council and the significance of what they shared. And so I actually want to back up a little bit and give us a little bit more context because we see that Peter, Paul and Barnabas spoke so eloquently in favor of the Gentiles, but I want us to understand why and how they were able to do so. So, let me just give you this a little bit of context. If you back up a little bit in the same book of Acts, you see that Paul and Barnabas, Paul had previously been converted he actually used to persecute Jews who follow Jesus and then he has a radical conversion and now he's pursuing people and he's telling them about Jesus. And, he's had this radical transformation and then he gets Barnabas with him and so they're going all over the place telling people about Jesus. So, they go to Cyprus, then they go to a Iconium, Lysta, and Derbe; those would have been in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. And they're engaging with Jews in the synagogues until the Jews put them out. And then they were engaging with mainly Gentiles, people who were not Jews and the Gentiles loved them, they received them. And Paul and Barnabas spent a lot of time

teaching with them, hanging with them, doing life with them, eating with them, because you know, you weren't taking flights, you know, like you go and stay with people for days, weeks and sometimes months at a time. So, they spent a significant amount of time with these Gentiles.

Then you had a significant story that happened in Acts chapter 10 with Peter. So this guy named Cornelius who was a Gentile and he was a centurion, meaning he was a part of the Roman army. And if you were Jewish, you didn't necessarily love the Roman army because they were occupying the territory. But Cornelius is praying and he's a faithful man and he has a reputation of being faithful and he's praying, he's in the city 40 miles away from Peter. But God reveals to him, he says, go find this man Peter; he's staying with a man named Simon in Joppa, so send somebody to go get him. So, they go get Peter. Peter at the same time it's praying. So while Peter is praying, he has a vision and God is showing him all of these meats and telling him to eat them, but these meats would have been prohibited as a Jew. So he responds to the vision saying, no God, I will not do that, I've never eaten anything unclean. And God says to him, Peter, do not call anything impure that I have made clean. And by the way, there's going to be a knock at the door, a guy named Cornelius is looking for you, he sent some men, go with them, it's all good and boom or not comes at the door (snapped his fingers) like that. I mean, don't you wish God will answer our prayers like that sometimes? But just like that, you know, he hears the knock Peter knows what he's supposed to do. He goes with these men and they show up at Cornelius's house and when they get there, there's basically a party waiting for Peter. And so Peter engages with Cornelius and Cornelius is so excited for him to be there, the people are excited and they begin this discourse and the first thing that Peter says is, now, you know, it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile, even visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not discriminate. God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure, that he has made clean.

Peter has a personal revelation in prayer and then he has a major experience at Cornelius's house, it's a personal experience and while he is in conversation with them, a Holy Spirit moment happens. They have a Holy Spirit encounter and this is a critical sign because Peter understood what Acts 1:8 says that you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, that's what Jesus said. So, he knew what that looked like, he understood what that was like and he had experienced it. So to see it amongst Gentiles was a major sign for him. And this was his response. He says, I now realize that God does not show favoritism. It was a complete game changer. It was a game changer because he also knows now that being an ally and an advocate for Gentiles has serious implications. It has serious implications for his reputation, it has serious implications for his life, it has serious implications for his safety. What else is there? This is a big deal. As a matter of fact, two chapters later in Acts 12 it says that King Herod seized Peter and threw him in jail because he knew that it would please the Jews who were upset that Peter has now crossed the line that you do not cross.

Then in Acts 14 it says that Paul is stoned and dragged out of the city and left for dead because of his preaching to the Gentiles and trying to convert them and being with them. But I love how it says that he was left for dead, the disciples go to him, tried to get him up. He stands to the feet and he goes back into the city. Now, if ever there was a reason to go home, that was one of them. But it shows you how personal it had become to Paul. It shows you that it meant something to him and that he was ultimately willing to die for it.

Here is the crux of this message this weekend and just a couple more minutes and I'm actually going to be done, but I need to say this. I'm not going to give you anything prescriptive this weekend because my prayer is that we would have the same kind of Holy Spirit moments that Paul and Barnabas and Peter had, that the Spirit would guide us in the direction that we need to go. Sometimes we're looking for a formula when we need to be plugged into the Holy Spirit and what he has for us. So, don't be disappointed because I'm not going to give you ABC one, two, three but I'm gonna leave you with a little something here.

Here's ultimately what I want you to know. Paul, Barnabas and Peter's experiences tell me that it was almost impossible for them to respond to the Council the way they responded. It was almost impossible for them to be an ally and an advocate for people who are different than them without being in relationship with them or having significant experiences with them. Now listen, I'm not saying you can't be an advocate, but I'm saying that it changes the game when you have experience and relationship, right? Because the moment they start stoning me, I'm thinking about that. But you see the significance of the interaction and how they saw God move.

I know that we're, we're all really smart and, and the research shows in this area that we got a lot of educated people, a lot of PhDs in this area, but listen, I want you to know, if you don't know, and I want to remind you, if you do that our decisions in life are ultimately a byproduct of our education, our experiences, and our exposure. So, if in Myers Briggs, you are an S, all right? That means you like concrete facts and data. If you are an N that means intuition. You know, you're a little bit more theoretical and you know, you move on intuition and hunches. But it doesn't matter it, all of it is still connected to our education, our experiences and our exposures.

So, Paul, Barnabas and Peter, they all know what Jesus said, they know they have the head knowledge. They know it, they know what he said in Acts 1:8 that the word's going to go to Jerusalem then it's going to go to all these other places, which would the people that live there are not Jewish. Like theoretically they notice and they had knowledge of it, but it didn't become real to them until they had experiences. Until they had relationships and their input at the Jerusalem Council was a reflection of that experience. They literally saw God at work in people different than them.

Now, here's the thing. Here's why I think we need to notice and why this is important. The reason this is so critical for us to understand is that one, I mean, we were all created in the image of God, I think we know that all or we call it the [inaudible]. And I love the way Nina said it in week one of the series is she said, 'the gift in differences is that it leads to things that are beautiful, it leads to... Doesn't necessarily mean is that way in the beginning but it leads to.

But, the second thing that we need to understand the Gospel is both a picture and a blueprint of how we are to live reconciled to God and one another. It's the blueprint. So that means that Christ followers should be leading the way in how to do this and how to build relationships with one another. And this is so critical; Paul spent so much time in the rest of the Gospels, writing letters to the churches, letting them know this is how you need to do this. That lets you know how critical it is. It's a major theme in the entire New Testament.

So, all right, I hear what you're saying Pastor Joshua, it's good, I feel you, you're right on, So, what do I do? Well, that's the prescriptive question, right? But I'm gonna give you something, it's simple. We, if we're Christ followers, if we're interested, if we're exploring, like to be a Christ follower, to be a Christian is to do what Jesus did. I know it sounds simple, but listen, Peter stepped across the threshold of Cornelius's house because he saw what Jesus did. Let me just remind you that Jesus is a threshold crosser, a barrier crosser. This is what he does. They were always asking, why is he hanging with those people? Why is he eating with them? Doesn't he know that person's a sinner? Doesn't he know that this person has done this? Doesn't he know this person's reputation? But it reminds me of just several instances throughout scripture. One of some of my favorites, Zacchaeus who is a tax collector. Man, you just did like tax collectors back then, oh you might not like tax assessors now. But they were hated because they stole from people and they lied and they charged whatever they wanted to and people did not like them. But Zacchaeus was pursuing Jesus and Jesus saw him and he turned and he says Zacchaeus salvation has come to your house today. Jesus basically invited himself to the enemy's house and said, we're going to eat. And people had a problem with it. They didn't understand it.

Another story, Luke five, one of my favorites, and it's a very, very simple miracle, but as a leper who falls on his knees and he says, Jesus, are you willing to heal me? And he has leprosy and you'd have to understand the language that he's using, he said, are you willing? Because he's an outcast, he knows he's not even supposed to be talking to people like that. He knows he's only supposed to be hanging with lepers, he knows that he's an outcast and Jesus not only says, I'm willing, he touches him and the man is healed. He can heal him without touching him but Jesus understood the power of touch and he wasn't afraid, he crossed barriers.

Then as the Samaritan woman, she got two strikes against her in the culture, she's a woman and she's Samaritan because nobody would - you didn't hang with the Samaritans and you weren't supposed to engage, men and women weren't supposed to engage that way, Jesus not only engages her, but then he defends her and Pastor Mark talked about it last week. Yeah, anybody going to throw that stone? Let me see you, where you at?

Jesus [inaudible] cross, I can just continue to go on and on. No, see, here's the thing though, when I say we need to do what Jesus did, the problem with that is doing what Jesus did ain't comfortable and that's what we pursue, we pursue comfort. We build monuments to comfort. We celebrate comfort. You have arrived if you can show a certain level of comfort. So its counter, what Jesus is saying and following Jesus is counter to what we celebrate and it's a problem and it's a struggle and it's hard and it doesn't make sense. And you get tired of explaining certain things and you don't want to explain.

Let me just give you a practical step then let me give you a practical warning. The practical step is this; I think that we can work harder to genuinely seek out relationship with difference, not information gathering, that's not the same thing. Genuine relationship, genuine experiences where people who are different than us, that means spending time, that means making a commitment not fact gathering so that we can say we know a little bit. The practical warning is as you begin that process, don't get too excited in the beginning because you never arrive; it is the beginning of a journey. Don't start getting all weird man; you read a couple of books and you

know you think you know something that you showed the world with the dashiki on. Don't do that, don't do that.

Alright, let me keep moving. This is why we need to do it. See the implications of not doing what Jesus did, is then we are reflecting a false Gospel. We are reflecting a Gospel that is just comfortable to what we like. We're perpetuating the Gospel for just the friends and the crew and the issues that we like or that are important to us. But here's what you need to understand and I stole this from my brothers to meeting who pastors down the road here. He says, theological agreement is not necessary for social unity. And that's where I think we get tripped up a little bit as Christians because you know, we're trying to size each other up on certain issues, but hey, at the end of the day, we might not agree on some of those things, but it's not necessary for social unity. And, we can reflect that better than anybody else as Christ followers.

Let me give you this, and I'm done. The Pharisees at the Jerusalem Council said, if the Gentiles want to be with us, they gotta be circumcised. In other words, they got to acquiesce, you want to be with us, you want to worship like us, you want to follow Jesus like us? Well, you got to do what we do, you got to be circumcised, end of story.

Here's the challenge today. The way of Jesus laid out for us is not for us to make others assimilate to our ways, but is for us to imitate his way. I'm gonna say that again. The way of Jesus laid out for us is not for us to make others assimilate to our ways because we would do that to make us comfortable. We know that routine. We know that process. We know what that feels like, but it's not that. It's to imitate his way, which is harder and messier and unpredictable and unsafe, but that's what Jesus did. So you can't say you following him and you ain't down with it. So maybe we need a reevaluation here because it's not easy. It requires sacrifice, humility, perseverance, long suffering, always love, sometimes joy, fruits of the Spirit. That's why they the fruits of the Spirit. But here's the thing. If there is anyone who can model what it means to be better together despite differences, it should be Jesus followers.

And then, here's the last thing Paul says, he has given us, meaning the Jesus followers, the ministry of reconciliation. He's given it to us. So that says to me, I need to be on my job. I ain't gotta love it all the time, it might not be, you know there's going to be some ups because you say where the spirit of the Lord is and we carry the Spirit of the Lord, there's liberty, there, freedom, so we carry that with us. So, there will be some fruits of that, but it won't always be easy or comfortable. But it's our ministry. It belongs to us because Jesus gave it to us and he modeled it for us.

Let's pray. God, we thank you so much for who you are. Thank you for how you've called us to embrace differences. You've called us to live in a way are sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes not safe, sometimes frustrating, but you model for us how to do it. And then on top of that, you went before us and guaranteed us victory. So that means no matter what we're feeling, what we're facing, what the score is, any of those things, we're guaranteed victory if we submit ourselves to you. So, help us to remove the distractions. And God, I pray that you would allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us where we need to start. Where do we need to start? What step do we need to take? And then help us to continue to take steps even when it gets frustrating or we're not seeing the progress that we would like because it is a journey but you said you will be on the

journey with us. You said you've given us your Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us in all truth. And that's what we need. And we thank you for it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.