

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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State of the Church

Dr. Mark Batterson

Oh, come on, we gotta praise God for that. Every number has a name every name has a story every story matters to God. You are a sight for sore eyes. Wow, virtual hugs virtual hugs to everyone in the house and everyone online welcome to National Community Church.

In 2008, a professor at Syracuse University executed a rather unique experiment. He created a multi fruit tree by grafting together branches from different trees. You take a fruiting branch from one tree, you transplant it into another tree, hard to believe, but he wrapped it with electrical tape. And voila, the new branch, check this out, would begin to feed off of the vascular system of the mother tree. His most recent effort produced a 40 fruit tree. That tree produces 40 varieties of fruit, everything from plums and peaches to apricots and nectarines. Now, the tree looks absolutely ordinary until it fruits, then it looks unlike any tree you've ever seen. It is this rainbow of colors. I'll even show you an artist's rendering. Now, take a good look and I want you to juxtapose that with this Ephesians chapter three, verse 10. "*His intent.*" Whose intent? God's intent. Was it now? When? Right here, right now for such a time as this, for such a place as this. "*His intent was that now, through the church...*" Through who? That's you and me. That... "*The manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm.*"

I want to put that word manifold under a microscope, and then we'll look at it through a telescope. It's the Greek word polupoikilos and it means multi colored. It means multi-cultural. It means many diverse manifestations. You can even say multi- fruit. Together, we make up this multi-fruit tree, called the church. Together, we display the manifold wisdom of God, the powers and principalities in the heavenly realm. "*I am the vine,*" Jesus said, "*you are the branches. If you remain in me and I remain in you, you will,*" What? "*You will bear much fruit*" Now, listen make no mistake about it, faithfulness is fruitfulness. Discipleship is growing fruit on someone else's tree and so each one of us gets grafted in. Each one of us draws nourishment, and each one of us bears fruit to the glory of God. Romans 11:17 says it this way, "*You Gentiles*", that's most of us I'm guessing. "*You Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree have been grafted in so now you receive the blessing God has promised to Abraham and his children sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God special olive tree.*" Well, welcome to National Community Church.

Once a year we do something called state of the church, this is that weekend. Love that video we watched a couple of moments ago, amazing fly over of 2020 - look what the Lord has done. Let me say this you can download a digital version of that annual report NCC.re/2020. Please hear me it's not just an annual report it is a praise report. And I want to say thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for the time, talent and treasure that you have invested in this thing called National Community Church. 2020 was a hard year. Am I in the right room? But it was a banner

year in many ways. We served 54,619 meals through the DC Dream Center. You gave \$717,469 to a relief fund that helps 7,639 people, come on. We had 289 small groups. 29 of those groups focused on racial unity. 458 decisions to follow Jesus at our online campus. We recorded the Jesus Way album - more than half a million downloads on Spotify. We launched an online campus, an NCC app, something called upper zoom and the NCC daily. Yeah, I would say it was a banner year. Now, I'm not saying we want to go back. We want to move forward. Okay. But it was a banner year.

Now, let me say this, we can't wait until we can gather again, across all of our campuses on the weekends but a little newsflash that there are a few people here. On Thursday nights we will open up for in person gatherings, we are working with the mayor's office. I want you to listen closely to everything I'm about to say. There won't be a quiz but... We've got our protocols in place okay. It will be socially distance, masks required, no touch entry, sanitation station, limited seating and reservation only. Did you get all of that? We're doing everything within our power to create the safest environment possible. We've even upgraded the Turnaround to the new MERV 13 filter, its hospital grade filter. Our air is cycled and filtered every six minutes. And so if you can hold your breath for six minutes, that would be amazing. Now we know that many of you will continue to worship virtually, maybe until you get a vaccination but for those who are ready, you can pre register for limited seating. That registration opens every Monday and we will keep you updated [NCC.re/COVID](https://ncc.re/COVID).

One more thing; can we continue to pray for those who have been impacted in so many different ways by this COVID crisis? Listen, many people have gotten the virus. Some of you have lost friends, loved ones, others experiencing the very real side effects of quarantine, loneliness, depression, broken marriages. Listen, we're praying across the board. We're gonna get through this we're gonna get to the other side and we're gonna get there together with God's help.

All right, state of the church could go in so many different directions. We could talk logistics, What? When? Where? But I want to talk about who. Who we are and who we are becoming as National Community Church. We are moving from me to we, we I just, some of you are guessing so I just might as well do that. Okay. We are moving from diversity to unity to this beloved community. That is our multicultural vision. That is the manifold wisdom of God. That is what I want to talk about this weekend, three things, diversity, unity, and beloved community. Ready or not, here we go.

Who are we? Well, we are National Community Church, we're one church multiple locations - during COVID 1000s of locations, right? Let me break it down demographically, we are brown, black and white. Politically we are Republican, Democrat, Independent. Geographically we're all over the map. Right? We're city, we're suburban, and with our online campus, we're all across the country and all around the world. Ethnically, we're at least 70 nationalities. So technically, that makes us International Community Church.

In terms of personality, every number on the enneagram, every combination of letter Myers Briggs, every combination on the Strengths Finder, in terms of socio economic status. What I love about this {inaudible}, we are all we are rich and poor, we are mainstream, we are marginalized, all of that to say we, we are as different as different can be and we wouldn't want it any other way.

Sociologically speaking, when you walk into a church gathering, there is a question, especially if you're walking in for the first time, there's a question that you automatically asked. Is there anyone here like me? And there's nothing wrong with that? That's the way that we're wired. But let me flip the script. Maybe we ought to be asking the opposite question. Is there anyone here that's not like me? Why? Because our diversity, hear me, is an expression of God's creativity. Its evidence of a God who made us absolutely unique. Its evidence that something is happening here that goes beyond political ideology, beyond ethnic identity, beyond cultural affinity. There's something bigger happening.

Now we have a couple of core convictions. Church ought to be the most creative place on the planet. And the church ought to be the most diverse place on the planet. And those two things are not related. In fact, you can't have one without the other. They are two sides of the same coin.

Fascinating study done a few years ago, Richard Freeman, an economics professor at Harvard, found that in scientific circles, birds of a feather flock together. Now, this should not be shocking. We tend to affiliate with those who look like us, think like us, vote like us. Scientists are no different than churches, you know, they tend to work in ethnic clusters. But there are some exceptions to this and this is where it gets really interesting. The measure of scientific influence, a few of your work up at NIH, you'll get it, the measure of scientific influence when it comes to scientific papers is the number of citations. The more citations the more influence. Now, Freeman found that when a scientific paper had diverse representation scientists from different ethnicities it had more citations. The collaboration by a diversity of ethnicities led to more creativity which led to more influence. Stick with me.

Social scientist named Adam Galinsky has documented the fact that people who are dating someone of a different ethnicity are more adept at divergent thinking, which is one measure of creativity. Now, there's an exercise known as the remote associates test. You give people three words and then you ask them for one word that connects those three words together. And so, do you won't have a little bit of fun? Okay. I'll give you three words and I'll give you a few seconds to see if you can think of a word that connects all three and if you're at our online campus, you can put it in the chat. Now listen, if you've heard this example, don't cheat. Don't cheat. Alright, here are the three words manner round tennis. What is the one word that connects those three things?

{humming the Jeopardy theme song} Mm hmm.

I heard it. Table - table manners, round table, table tennis. All right, good job. Now according to Galinsky dating someone of a different ethnicity will increase your ability to make remote associations

just as working with someone of a different ethnicity will get you more citations. Listen, worshiping with, being in a small group with, going on a mission trip with, serving with someone who doesn't think like you, look like you, vote like you, maybe, just maybe it would increase our creativity and the manifold wisdom that God wants to express through us as a church. Maybe it would turn us into this multi-fruit tree that God destined us to be

Now, you know, I love fun facts. Can I share one fun fact? Fun fact, United States represents 5% of the world population but we account for 60% of all Nobel prizes. Why? Well, there are a few theories. But one of them is that we are a nation of immigrants. We attracted the kind of person who would sail across the ocean to a place they'd never been and learn a language they did not know. I'm going to add one thing to that theory. Millions of slaves who survived the Middle Passage they didn't come of their own volition, but they survived against all odds. And so I think of people like Benjamin Banneker, Rebecca Lee Crumpler, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, Rosa Parks, Jackie Robinson, what did they do? They broke barriers, they broke rules, and they broke through some glass ceilings' we would not be who we are without them. It is our diversity as a nation that has led to our creativity in the arts in the sciences. And I would even argue, in politics. Democracy allows for diversity, which nets creativity. Now, if we could just get along.

So why don't we talk about unity, okay, diversity to unity. We are as different as different can be but we're one body, we're one spirit. We have one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is overall and in all and through all and that makes us family. Oh, come on we need another virtual hug, virtual hugs. We are family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Now unity does not mean uniformity. Unity is corporate humility. Maturity does not equal conformity. Maturity is unity and diversity. Now, in case you haven't noticed, there are some dividing walls in culture, political, racial, cultural. Guess what Jesus destroyed those dividing walls of hostility. Ephesians 2:14 it says, "*He himself is our peace.*"

I really want you to track with me right now because some of you need this, what I'm about to say. We think of peace as emotional. Oh and it is. There's a peace that passes understanding and it will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. There is nothing like it. Listen, peace that passes understanding or joy unspeakable I'm not sure which one I love more but I'm grateful for both. But it's not just emotional, it's relational. Please hear this piece is a person and his name is Jesus. He is the Prince of Peace. It says, "¹⁴ *For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one...*" What two groups? Jews and Gentiles.... "*And has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.*"

All right now I want to go to work, we're going to kind of dig down right here. There is a split decision amongst scholars as it relates to this verse. Some believe that the dividing wall of hostility referred to by the Apostle Paul was an actual physical wall in the Jewish temple. Gentiles were allowed inside the temple, but only the outer courts. It was called the Court of the Gentiles. This is where the money

changers set up their tables. This was as far as the Gentiles were allowed to go. That dividing wall doubled as a do not enter sign. It put the Gentiles in their place as outsiders.

Now second opinion among scholars is this dividing wall, referred to the curtain that separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies. Only one person, the high priest, was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. And he could only do it one time a year on the Day of Atonement.

Now, let me connect the dots. When Jesus is hanging on the cross, there's a moment where he gives up his spirit. It says, "*At that moment,*" Matthew 27:51, "*the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*" That curtain was 60 feet long, 30 feet wide, and according to rabbinic tradition, the thickness of a man's hand. It was comprised of 72 squares; it was woven with 72 chords and each of those chords at 24 strands. It was so heavy that according to the Talmud, it took 300 priests to carry that curtain. What I'm saying is this is not a shower curtain. This thing doesn't just rip in two. This is an act of God. This is God destroying the dividing wall that separates us from him, so that we can experience atonement at-one-ment with God and with each other.

Well, Pastor Mark so which is it? Is it this actual physical wall that that made the Gentiles outsiders or is it the curtain that kept us out of the Holy of Holies? Maybe it's not either/or maybe it's both/and. Either way, Jesus is our High Priest. Jesus is our Prince of Peace. Jesus is the Way Maker. His purpose, listen to this, his purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death, their hostility. Now, I know I'm casting vision for who we are, but you cannot separate who we are from who's we are Our vision for unity in diversity, our vision to become this beloved community it's only possible in Christ. And in Christ, all things are possible.

So let me close with beloved community. Now next week, we kick off a Lenten series cannot wait, Pastor Joshua will be in the house. It's a series called Beloved or is it Beloved? You say potato, I say potato. Either way, it's two words, it's letting yourself be loved by God.

Henri Nouwen and the professor, the priests, the author of 39 books, he wrote a little book later in his life, called the Life of the Beloved. I highly recommend it. Nouwen wrote it for a friend who was a skeptic. His goal was to summarize the gospel in a single word, and he chose this word, beloved. This is what he said, "Becoming the beloved means letting the truth of our belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, and say, and do."

Would you say these three words out loud? I am beloved. Would you say it again? And would you keep saying it until you believe it? Would you keep saying it until you own it until it owns you? You, beloved by God. If we had better hearing, we would hear the Heavenly Father speaking over our lives what he spoke over Jesus when he came up out of the water at his baptism, "*This is my beloved Son, this is my*

beloved daughter in whom I am well pleased." Can you hear his voice? He's speaking those words, over your life.

Nouwen said this, "When our deepest truth is that we are the beloved. And when our greatest joy and peace come from fully claiming this truth, it follows that this has to become visible, and tangible in the ways we eat, and drink, talk and love, play and work." Now, everything about us becomes an expression of our belovedness. Now we stop cursing and start blessing. Now we stop canceling and start forgiving. Now we stop hating and start loving everybody, always. Belovedness, it begins as an individual identity, but it doesn't end there.

The goal is something that theologian Josiah Royce, called the beloved community. In 1913, Royce founded a community that he called Fellowship of Reconciliation. It was a reaction to the extreme individualism of his day. Royce said this, "My life means nothing, either theoretically, or practically, unless I am part of a community and more specifically, a beloved community." I mean, honestly, that that's one reason why it's so special when we gather together whether it's in a small group, or even in a corporate worship gathering, because it reminds us, we're part of something that's bigger and better and longer and stronger. We're part of this beloved community.

A little reminder right here it is our middle name, National Community Church. Now the Fellowship of Reconciliation, was a movement that would accept into its membership none other than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And Dr. King would champion this idea of beloved community, and cast a vision for it. Can I let you in on a little secret? The goal of the Civil Rights Movement wasn't just civil rights, not according to Dr. King. The end goal was becoming this beloved community where people weren't judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. The end goal was reconciliation. The end goal was the creation of this beloved community whose love is so strong, that it transforms opponents into friends. "It is this love," said Dr. King, "which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men and women." The beloved community, its lots of things but it's marked by dignity, by diversity, by quality, by mutual respect, liberty and justice for all. That is our witness to the world. Is it not? If not us, who? If not now, when?

John 17 records the last prayer and the longest prayer of Jesus. What did he pray for? He prayed for unity. He prayed that we would be one as he and the Father are one. This is - we're almost done. This is a profound theological truth. Unity in diversity this beloved community is embodied by the Trinity - Father Son, and Holy Spirit, - one God, three persons. Well, that doesn't make sense. If it made sense, he wouldn't be God. He doesn't fit into the logical constraints of your left brain. He exists outside of the four dimensions of space - time that he created; one God person, three part harmony, showing us what unity in diversity looks like.

I'll give Dr. King the last word. Our goal is to create a beloved community. This will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives. We've got to be reconciled

to God vertically. Then, and only then can we be reconciled with each other horizontally. And that happens at the cross of Christ. This is where we get right with God. This is where we get right with each other. This is where the dividing wall of hostility is destroyed. This is where we experience redemption and reconciliation. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.

I've said it before. I'll say it again. If we are humble enough to repent, and lament our racism and bold enough to believe for reconciliation. God will destroy the dividing wall of hostility. God will forgive generational sin. God will break generational curse, and he'll do it in Jesus name. I know it's hard. I know it's hard not to retreat to your comfort zone. I know it's hard not to retreat to the echo chamber. I know it's hard not to retreat to the place or space where everybody is like you. That's just not who we are. We're gonna stand in the gap as peacemakers, grace givers and tone setters. We're gonna go after diversity and unity and become this beloved community.

Father, I pray in Jesus name give us ears to hear, and heart to receive. God, there's just what if all of us, what if each one of us was part of the solution not just not part of the problem but part of the solution. Lord, may you demonstrate your manifold wisdom in and through this church? May we be a multi-fruit church, a multi-fruit tree to the glory of God in Jesus name. Amen.