

Using the Church to Make Enemies

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[0 : 0 0] Hello, Table Church. Hello, friends. I'm Anthony, and I get to serve as the lead pastor here. And like John Paul and Mira said, it's been a week. We were joking right before we recorded of, you know, who knows what's going to happen between the Thursday that we're recording and the Sunday when you all are watching this at the earliest, and what wild new different thing that no one you could have predicted happened. And so we would just have to scrap what we do tonight and start over. And, you know, if that's the case, so be it. Hopefully, we're meeting you in a place where you are open and attentive to God's presence at work in your life right now and coming with a place of vulnerability and trust, knowing that we're all a little bit more fragile than how we started this month or this year. We're all a little bit more anxious and all a little bit more wondering what tomorrow brings. And so that's why we gather. And we're gathering in a way that, you know, I don't think any of us absolutely adore, but we gather anyway because we have this sense of family and camaraderie and comradeship in the gathered church and in broken bread and wine and God's Word.

and a sense of togetherness. These past few weeks, and this was on purpose, these past few weeks, we've been talking about the enemy making a machine, the church of us versus them, and how we get caught up in these antagonisms of us and them. And of course, we just got, at least partially through, election week, election universe, where those antagonisms and those us's and those them's are on full display. We can map them and we can slice and dice all of the different statistics of how radically opposed to each other it seems that we are. We talked about banners, the phrases and the ideas that we hang kind of above ourselves and on ourselves and how banners can often turn into beliefs minus practice into dogma and ideology and just performative words that we say that don't actually have anything to do with how we live our lives. We've talked about reverse definition about knowing what we're for only by knowing what we're against and people only knowing who we are by what we're against. And we've talked about perverse enjoyment of getting pleasure from someone else, losing, failing, experiencing defeat and pain. We talked about this in terms of scripture. Do you take this scripture seriously or not? Is it inerrant or infallible or not? Is it authoritative or not?

We talked about it in terms of conversion and being saved and born again. Have you made a decision or not? Can you put that date on a calendar or not? All these us's and them's. And now we've got one more for today and that's the church itself. The church often becomes a banner of are you part of the right church or the wrong church? The church that believes and says the right things or are you part of one of those, you know, weird churches that they say and believe all the wrong things? The church of us versus them. And there's a history to this and we could back our all the way up to the first century and the antagonisms and the fights and the conflicts that they had. But we don't need to do that. We don't have time.

But let's start in the 1800s in America where the majority of churches and the majority of the established wealthy landowning churches were pro-slavery and against abolition actively worked against the ending of slavery. But then there were these revivals that would happen and in these revivals people began to believe that maybe what we see in scripture, maybe what we see about Jesus should actually affect about how we set up our society and live our lives. And that movement became the abolitionist movement. And those Christians that began to become convinced of this during their revivals began to get a title called Evangelicals. It was the Evangelicals, the revivalists, who were the front lines of the abolitionist movement. And it stayed that way for a while after the Civil War and after the emancipation, after the ending of at least legal slavery. The Evangelicals continued to work to make society a better place, to make America a better place. And the mainliners eventually kind of fell into a little bit of disarray and confusion. But then, the early 1900s, church historians call this the great reversal. And all of a sudden it was the mainliners, the wealthy established churches that had been here forever, that they began to take on the mantle of social justice and the social gospel.

And they downplayed like personal salvation and all of that. But they wanted to see society become a better place and they wanted to work for it and strive for it. And the Evangelicals began to back down and they focused on the so-called fundamentals of the faith, of personal conversion and sin and heaven and hell. But then there was another reversal in the 50s and the 60s, where the Evangelicals realized that they were losing their century-long influence on society. And so then began the moral majority movement. And the other political organizations focused on keeping Christian, usually white, family values at the center of American politics and life. And the mainliners thought that the mingling of religion and politics was inappropriate. So they stayed out of it. And they eventually began to dwindle. But then, as the Evangelicals began to lose their influence over the past 10 to 15, 20 years or so, progressive Christians began to make their moves to influence society and politics. And so once more, their gospel of inclusion and food and health care and creation care began to become voted for in politics. And around and around and around we go where these labels, evangelical and mainline and fundamentalist and all these switch definitions, it's all about what camp you belong to. And so we keep playing out these same antagonisms over and over again. We keep repeating the same us's versus them's, though we occasionally switch sides or occasionally end up with more power or influence than the other.

[6 : 44] And we keep getting the wounds and the battle scars as well. I'm well aware that the Table Church, we are a church that's made up of a lot of people who have been hurt and wounded by churches. And so our defensiveness and our defensiveness and our cynicisms and our wounds are real and earned. And if we're not careful, they can shape us into the kinds of people who repeat the same exact mistakes of our spiritual fathers and mothers, where we were made into them. And so we got out. Now we're all together.

And now we're in us. And in a generation, we'll be in us. And we'll start theming someone else. And out of their hurt and pain, they'll go start a new group of us. The whole thing will just happen over and over again. So what do we do? So I've got four scriptures for us to ponder tonight. I am not going to pretend like this is a well-organized sermon. And for the preaching cohort that is watching right now, I have thrown basically everything I've taught you out the window for the moment in terms of like how to create a well-organized sermon. Because how do you do that in a week like this? But I think I've got some things worthwhile to say. And I do this occasionally where I write outward for word what I want to say so I don't mess it up. So if I look like I'm glancing down more often than usual, I am. The first scripture for tonight is Ephesians chapter 3 verse 10.

And it says this, God's intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms.

It's my belief that the church has a calling and a mission. God has a mission to bring healing to the sickness of this world. And that healing is never coercive. It's also never instant.

It's never top down. Rather, it's through the church, through ordinary people like you and me, that that healing comes. And we are to declare and enact that wisdom according to Ephesians 3 10, to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms. Now, if you read the heavenly realms and think, well, that just means like angels and demons and stuff, then what that means is that you're applying a 21st century materialist worldview onto a first century spiritual worldview. The heavenly realm wasn't separate from the material world. In fact, the spiritual world, the heavenly realm is what animated the material world. Caesar wasn't Caesar. The Roman generals weren't in charge. The imperial army wasn't always threatening to keep you in line. That was because the heavenly realms put them there.

[9 : 45] So when Ephesians 3 10 says that the church is supposed to declare the wisdom of God, declare and enact and proclaim and live out the kingdom and the wisdom of God to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms, it means to Caesar and to the army and to the generals and to the governor and to the captains of the guard. It means that the church is meant to have real and practical effects on society and confront and challenge the powers that be so that justice can flow like a river.

And so the old us versus them of the social gospel versus the personal gospel is an unknown fight in the New Testament. Jesus and his disciples and that church went around bringing healing and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins. Both. Jesus fed the masses and confronted individuals of their brokenness.

Jesus decried systems of religious oppression and asked individuals to make things right that they themselves had broken. And so the church today is meant to do the same thing. We proclaim the wisdom of God to the rulers and to the authorities so that society can be organized to be more just. So that we can invite every individual into following Jesus, which I believe is the best possible way to live. We can and we must do both.

So, do we proclaim this wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities so that we can become rulers and authorities?

Let's go to our next scripture. Mark chapter 4 verse 31, which Meredith read earlier. What shall we say the kingdom of God is like or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all the garden plants with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.

[11 : 50] Yes, the church has a calling and a mission and power is not that calling. Rather, it's the mustard seed kingdom.

It's slow and it's secret and it requires faith that whatever is happening under the ground is worthwhile and worth waiting for. Now, the last thing the world needs today is another straight, white, Protestant, cis male saying, hey, just be patient. Because last I checked, my rights have never been questioned.

The Supreme Court has never made a decision on whether or not I get the same rights as someone else. When questioned like, who's allowed to get married and why are black citizens arrested and murdered and imprisoned at a higher rate than anyone else, when those kinds of questions are up in the air, I am sure as hell don't get the right to tell you all to be patient.

Let the whole make the world a slightly better just place. When I look at the New Testament, I see a few things. First, where Jesus' followers showed up, poor people and sick people and slaves and children and women, aka all the marginalized people, they were filled with joy.

We see this again and again and again in the book of Acts. Why? Because the church was the place and the community and the people that would take care of and protect and create community for them.

[13 : 17] The church was a place where you know that you could be cared for if you were sick, or if you were disabled, or divorced, or widowed, or orphaned, or a runaway slave, or a marginalized ethnicity, or sexual identity.

Of course the city was filled with joy when the church showed up, because that was what the church was up to. But you know what else happened when Christians showed up in the city? The empire and the powers that be that actively opposed all the people I just listed through the Christians in jail, and through literal riots in the streets, because the Christians had gone and actively disrupted the systems of oppression.

So when I say the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, I certainly don't mean be patient, shut up, slow down. The first and second and third generation of Christians, and many more beyond, many of which were killed for believing what they believed, and acting in the anti-empire, anti-oppression ways that they acted, would shout me off the stage if I meant be patient, shut down, slow down.

What I do mean is that a mustard seed kingdom is subversive, and underground, and foundation cracking. It is grassroots, not top down.

It is bottom up. It is God coming down in the flesh as a human, and refusing to coerce or govern anyone into submission and obedience.

[14 : 51] I think part of the disorientation that I'm feeling this week, I won't speak for you, but for me, is that I had this hope that things were about to get better, that we could look forward to things being made set right, if not all at once, at least pretty darn quickly, that all those times I would read on Instagram or Twitter, come on, we're better than this, would come true.

I had hoped not for a mustard seed, but for a tsunami. And then I realized, oh wait, we're not better than this. And we never have been.

It's a lie that my ancestors passed on to me to make me feel better about my nation's history. And the fact is, we're as divided as we've ever been. We still have a thousand disagreements, a thousand us's, and them's, and banners, and perverse enjoyments, all certain on what we disagree on, all hoping for the pleasure of someone else losing.

I know I often, too often, put my hope in the top-down, power-hungry approach. I want to be the ruler and authority, not to have to speak truth to it.

This mustard seed kingdom is slow, kind of hard to see. It's not very sexy or cool. It won't go viral. But to desperately mix my metaphors, it's the tortoise that is going to ultimately put the hare to shame.

[16 : 30] So the church has a mission to proclaim the wisdom of God. It does this in an upside-down, inside-out, mustard-seed kind of way.

Next, Matthew chapter 10. Jesus' word says, Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, Jesus says, but a sword.

And to make this clear, the sword is not about violence, but listen, I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against his mother. A man's enemies will be the members of his very own household.

So God has a mission, and he uses the church to accomplish that mission. And the church does it in surprising and slow and underground, foundation-shaking kind of ways. And it will bring division.

Following the way of Jesus as consequences, when you believe in the goodness of creation and the depth of its brokenness and the mission that God has to bring reconciliation and justice and righteousness to all things and all people, to all corners of the cosmos, guess what?

[17 : 37] You will get pushed back. You will find out that you have enemies who are against and opposed to that kind of way of life. When you believe that creation is not disposable, that systems of racism and sexism and patriarchy and heteronormativity and ableism and colonialism are all real and need to be demolished like the idols that they are, when you believe that sin is real and must be dealt with on both a personal and societal level, when you believe those things, you will have enemies.

And as I've said, and has kind of become the theme of this series, we are going to live in such a way that doesn't make enemies, but reveals them. We don't have to make enemies.

We don't need to spend our energy or waste our time going and picking fights. When we live in a way that brings God's justice to earth as it is in heaven, the fight will come to us.

So, where do we go from here? Our fourth and final passage, Matthew 18. Peter asks, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?

And Peter, thinking he's being super duper generous, says, up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times, which is another way of saying, don't keep count.

[19 : 01] Now listen, there is a ton of bad teaching on forgiveness. And I am certain a large portion of you want to turn the sermon off right now.

How can we talk about forgiveness when we've been hurt so badly, when there are those who are actively fighting to take away our rights and erase our stories and don't mind if we die in higher numbers at younger ages?

Go back to the division part, Anthony. We liked that one better. So, let's set the record straight on forgiveness. Loving your enemies does not equal pretend like you don't have enemies.

Jesus never said, don't have enemies. He didn't say it. Jesus didn't say, pretend like no one has ever harmed you. That's bull.

There's two false narratives that can often get tossed around. False narrative number one is, hey, let's just all get along. We're not enemies. Let's just set our differences aside. Unity is the most important thing.

[20 : 06] That's erasure. That's denial. That's actually the opposite of forgiveness. It's doing the opposite of what Jesus asks us to do. Forgiveness is not, is not, is not about ignoring the hurt and acting like it didn't happen.

Forgiveness names the pain. It names the hurt. Narrative number two is this. Forgiveness is for chumps. In the least, we can never be friends.

I want nothing to do with you. In fact, for some of you, I will hurt you and harm you and get vengeance on you for what you have done. Now what this narrative does is it takes the hurt and the pain and the offense and it makes it superhuman.

It means that what you've done, how you've treated me, how you voted, what you post on Facebook, it's more important than the fact that you are a human being created by God.

And instead of my self-determination, my identity being driven by God's spirit, about what God says is true of me as a beloved child of God created in the divine image, instead of that truth being determinative of what is true about me, I've instead decided to let how you act and how you speak define the kind of person I'm going to become.

[21 : 26] But forgiveness is a whole other thing. It's not a middle path between narrative one, but just I'll be friends. And narrative two, let's bomb the heck out of them.

Forgiveness is not a middle path and it's not compromise. It's a third dimension in a two-dimensional world. I've got two really long quotes, but I think they are both crucial to what we're getting at.

N.T. Wright says this, the point we desperately need to grasp is that forgiveness is not the same as tolerance. It's not the same as indifference, whether personal or moral.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that we don't take evil seriously. It means that we do. In fact, it means that we take it doubly seriously. To begin with, it means a settled determination to name evil and to shame it.

Without that, there is, after all, nothing to forgive. To follow that, forgiveness means that we are equally determined to do everything in our power to resume a, listen, appropriate relationship with the offender after evil has been dealt with.

[22 : 37] And finally, forgiveness means that we have settled it in our minds that we shall not allow this evil to determine the sort of people that we are going to become. N.T. Wright continues, forgiveness doesn't mean I didn't really mind or it doesn't really matter.

I do mind and it does matter. Otherwise, there wouldn't be anything to forgive at all. Merely something to adjust my attitudes about and we don't need to adjust our attitude about what is wrong.

Nor is forgiveness the same as saying, oh, let's pretend it didn't really happen. And this is the trickier part and T. Wright continues because the point of forgiveness is that I am committing myself to the work, to work to the point where I can behave as if it didn't happen.

But it did happen. And forgiveness isn't pretending that it didn't. Forgiveness is looking hard at the fact that it did and making a conscious choice, a choice of the moral will to set it aside so it doesn't become a barrier between one human and another.

In other words, forgiveness presupposes that the thing which happened was indeed wrong and cannot simply be set aside as irrelevant. Along that route lies suppressed anger and a steady distancing of people who listen no longer trust one another.

[23 : 56] Much better plan is to put the thing out on the table as indeed the New Testament commands us and deal with it. Second really long quote from Latasha Morrison in her book Be the Bridge.

She writes, when we've been hurt, when we've been battered, sometimes anger and bitterness give us a sense of control. Have you been on Twitter recently? The truth is our bitterness and our anger often control us.

They keep our perpetrators close at hand and they keep the wrongs that they've done to us in the front of our minds. In choosing bitterness and anger we hand a power back to those who have harmed us.

And that's true whether we're discussing family pains, church pains, or the pains wrought by racism and classism and sexism. So how do we get free of that power? With the practice of forgiveness.

Practicing forgiveness doesn't mean simply ignoring or glossing over the evil or the injustice we've experienced. It also doesn't mean that we deny or spiritualize away feelings of our anger or our grief.

[25 : 06] The normal emotions of a wounded heart. In fact, Paul's teaching to the Ephesians seems to show the opposite. He wrote, get rid of all the bitterness and the rage and the anger and the harsh words and the slander as well as the other types of evil behavior.

Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Latasha Morrison continues, take a close look at that passage and consider these questions.

How can you get rid of the rage until you finally have taken the time to feel it? How can you get rid of the anger unless you've made the space to recognize it?

How can you forgive without first understanding the wrong and the hurtful actions you're releasing the perpetrator from? See, she writes, only when we've made space for our emotions, when we've honestly evaluated them, can we move into true Christ-like forgiveness.

Listen, bridge builders, she says, do not deny hurt. They experience hurt. They sit in it and they feel it, but they do not stay in it.

[26 : 17] They don't allow those who've wounded them to control them or constantly drive them back to anger and resentment. And instead, they allow that pain to continually push them into forgiveness.

Did you catch that? Not pain that we deny, not pain that pushes to division and enemy making, pain that pushes us to forgiveness.

Friends, I'll admit, I have not been part of this church for a long time. In the time that I've been here, there's been a pandemic, so I'll admit my perceptions could be a little off. Could be way off.

But I will say that my perception of the table church is that we may have had a history where we were more sure about what we were not and what we were against than what we were for.

Oh, we're not like those other churches. We're different. But friends, we don't have to do that. We can be a church for the good news that Jesus is setting up a kingdom where we all get to play.

[27 : 21] Where we will make known the wisdom of God to the rulers and the authorities and the powers and the cities and the systems. But we are not going to do that through seeking power for power's sake.

We are going to be like mustard seeds, fomenting Christ-like, cross-shaped, justice-for-others-oriented, revolution from the ground up. Friends, we are going to discover that we've got enemies.

That there are those who are opposed through the divine forces of righteousness and justice that rolls down like a river. That there are those who would rather side with oppression and hunger and chains and violence and vengeance than freedom and love and kindness and peace and a cross-shaped determination to love those enemies.

And we are going to be forged in the fires of forgiveness. Our pain and our hurt and our heartache will not drive us to bitterness and divisiveness and nursing wounds until they fester and kill us from the inside out.

Rather, we will let our pain push us towards forgiveness. us, naming the evil that has been done against us and against our loved ones and against our navels and declaring that is wrong.

[28 : 48] I don't have to let you do it again and I also don't have to let your wrong to define who I am. Friends, let us refuse to be the church of us versus them.

Let us be the church of us for the world. let us be left on our host us

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