

Welcome

Good morning. My name is Sue Sweeney and I'm part of the preaching team here at Catalyst. So who likes arguing with their neighbors on the Next Door app on your phone? Anyone? It's like a social media for just people who live in your neighborhood or community.

Recently, a local parent posed a question about a report sent home from their son's school called the "School Report Card." Their concern was the report showing percentages of students in their son's school broken down by race or ethnic group. Their question was, and I quote, "What is about that?"

It's a reasonable question. I'm very familiar with these types of reports because of my job. I know that the "School Report Card" is put out by the Texas Education Agency, or TEA, which is an organization that oversees legislation regarding schools across the state. Schools are required, by Texas state law, to distribute this report to parents.

A lot of people responded to this person's post, noting their disbelief that a school would even publish this information, as if pointing out that there were differences in academic achievement among ethnic groups was somehow making issues of racism in our society worse.

I gave, what I thought, based on my 14 year career working in public schools in Texas, a reasonable response to this person's post. I didn't type this exactly, but in part, I explained this reporting is necessary because achievement gaps still exist between white and non-white groups of students. White students consistently outperform non-white students across the state on achievement tests. That is a fact. That is what we mean by the phrase "achievement gap."

Does this fact make you uncomfortable? Good, it should. Just because it makes you uncomfortable, doesn't make the fact any less true.

Talking about racial injustice is awkward, but it is essential to understanding and spreading the Good News of Jesus. It is central to the truth of the Gospel. We're going to take a look at a story in the book of Galatians today of an incident between Peter and Paul, two stalwarts of the early Christian church, who had a public discussion about what we would consider today to be ethnic and cultural differences. This conversation surely made everyone involved very uncomfortable...even a little awkward. But, even though talking about it made people uncomfortable, it was a conversation that was necessary.

So, I know that sounds intense, but don't worry! We're still going to have fun this morning looking at the early Christian church in the Bible and talking about how awkwardness isn't always so bad. Actually, it can help us become the people God intended us to be. Thank you for being here this morning and thank you for allowing the Holy Spirit to work within us. It might be a little awkward at first, but as our pastor JR talked about before. This is our "growing edge." This is the process of becoming more like the people God intended us to be.

Message

We're in the season of Lent, a season the Church reserves for self-examination and repentance. Lent is a time we confess we are sinners and ask for God's help to heal us. But Lent presses us deeper than that because Lent invites us to ask God, along with the Psalmist, to search us and point out anything in us that is displeasing to God.

In other words, during Lent, we assume there are sins in our life we're not even aware of. That's one big reason we need God's help- to point out what is otherwise hidden from us.

In that spirit, our series this year is called CRINGEWORTHY: A Theory of Awkwardness. According to journalist Melissa Dahl, we feel awkward when we see ourselves through someone else's eyes and we realize that the way they see us and the way we see ourselves don't line up.

We spent the first couple of weeks exploring how awkwardness can be a spiritual tool. We saw that, like the first man and woman, our natural tendency is to hide when we're confronted with that gap between how we see ourselves and how God sees us. But if we're willing to stay in the awkwardness, we find our growing edge. Next, we explored how both compassion and humility are essential to our journey toward wholeness.

This morning, we're talking about awkwardness that occurs when you confront someone or someone confronts you, especially when it comes to how you are including or excluding others. We're going to talk about what divides us and according to God, what shouldn't divide us.

Is there anything more awkward than talking about race? Not very many things. Maybe you're wondering why I'm even bringing it up!? This is church. I get talking about people feeling included or excluded, but do we really need to extend that all the way out to talking about race? Why would a CHURCH even talking about this?

Every week here at Catalyst, we look to scripture to help us know God and understand how we

can become the people God intended us to be. Scripture shows us over and over again how God intends our relationships to be both vertical and horizontal. Developing into the people God intended us to be requires us to examine our spiritual connection to our Creator, God AND it requires us to examine how our choices impact others in God's creation.

The Bible has a word for what it looks like when our horizontal relationships are whole and holy. That word is 'just'. Justice is a concern that our relationships with each other are good and holy, aligned with God's call on the individual and communal levels. God calls us to a life lived in the pursuit of justice. The Bible defines justice as righteousness. Fun Fact: they're actually the same word in two of the original languages in which the Bible was written: Hebrew and Greek. When we are connected spiritually to God, the Holy Spirit leads us in righteousness. This righteousness overflows in us and works its way into everything we do, moving us to champion fairness, generosity, and equity in our broken world. In other words, to pursue justice where there is injustice. Injustice means our relationships aren't right. Something in them has gotten turned around. Injustice is sin.

So, this is why talking about racial inequality is an issue of Biblical justice. It's an issue of Biblical righteousness. It means doing the difficult, often awkward work, of examining ourselves, rooting out sin, and living a righteous life. We're here on our "growing edge." We are meant to grow into the image of God.

This morning, we're going to make a connection between talking about racial and ethnic injustice in our world today to the early Christian church in the New Testament of the Bible. The early Christians also struggled with including others in their lives who were a culturally or ethnically different. As you can imagine, some awkward, but necessary conversations were required in order to root out the injustice.

We're going to dig into Paul's letter to the Galatians where he recalls an incident he had with Peter, one of Jesus' disciples and one of the leaders of the early Christian church in Antioch, a city in ancient Syria. Paul saw injustice, and he talked about it openly and publicly. Things got a little cringey. This was a cringeworthy incident.

Before their encounter with the Good News of Jesus, both Paul and Peter were traditionally Jewish. We know that Jesus was Jewish and Jesus spent a lot of time with his Jewish community while he was here on earth. As we read about Jesus in scripture, we see clearly that the Good News was not just for Jews. It was for everyone in the world, including non-Jews, which at that time, were called Gentiles.

So the early Christian church expanded from just those who were ethnically and culturally Jewish to include those who were not. This was quite controversial. Ethnic and cultural Jews observed circumcision and considered certain kinds of meat to be “unclean” so they didn’t eat them. Some continued their Jewish traditions after they converted to Christianity. Many felt that Christianity kind of belonged to the Jews, so if you were a Gentile and you wanted to do this Christian thing right, you would essentially need to convert to Judaism, then convert to Christianity and observe Jewish traditions like circumcision and abstaining from eating “unclean” foods.

Both Paul and Peter were staunch opponents to this idea, but they didn’t always feel that way. Last week, Josh Mounce reminded us of Paul’s profound spiritual experience on the road to Damascus. Paul went from being a huge enemy of the Christians to one of their biggest supporters. Peter also experienced God in a profound way. These experiences helped them both understand how the Good News of Jesus was not just for Jews, but for Gentiles too- for everyone in the world and that churches should be radically inclusive of cultural differences so that all could come together in a community and learn to be the people God intended them to be, both despite of and also because of their differences.

Peter was born a Jew and one of the first disciples of Jesus. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, Peter continued to travel and proclaim the Good News. We can read in chapter 10 in Acts where Peter had a vision before visiting the home of a Gentile and witnessed how the Holy Spirit called both Jews and non-Jews alike to hear and believe the Good News of Jesus.

Like Paul, for Peter, his experience affirmed that Jesus came to unite all people under God, not just Peter’s own people, the Jews, but Gentiles too. You didn’t have to be Jewish or become Jewish to be a part of a community who lives out the Good News of Jesus.

[**Scripture Slide**] Now, we’re going to look at **Galatians 2: 11-14**. If you don’t have a Bible, you can borrow one from the back table. It’s on page _____. If you don’t have a Bible of your own, you’re welcome to keep that one. Here we’re going to read about how Paul had to call Peter out on some nonsense. Both Paul and Peter held an important, but minority position in the early church. They were under an immense amount of social pressure because many wanted the early Christian church to be exclusively Jewish. Paul was able to stand his ground, openly and adamantly proclaiming that Gentiles should be included. However, Peter allowed himself to care more about what other people think instead of what God thinks. He started to cave into the social pressure. He began to behave in ways that made Gentiles feel like they were NOT part of the Christian community.

As we read, I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of a member of the early church watching this incident go down in front of the congregation. Maybe you're ethnically Jewish, maybe you're a Gentile, either way you're sure to feel pretty uncomfortable. I don't know anyone that likes being "called out" in public. I don't think many of us feel very good when someone tells us to our face that we're wrong, especially in front of people we care about. You can imagine, After Paul gets going, the other people in the room turning to each other with wide eyes, whispering, "is this actually happening right now?" Imagine yourself in a full-body cringe after Paul is finished tearing into Peter here.

But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong. When he first arrived, he ate with the Gentile believers, who were not circumcised. But afterward, when some friends of James came, Peter wouldn't eat with the Gentiles anymore. He was afraid of criticism from these people who insisted on the necessity of circumcision. As a result, other Jewish believers followed Peter's hypocrisy, and even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

When I saw that they were not following the truth of the gospel message, I said to Peter in front of all the others, "Since you, a Jew by birth, have discarded the Jewish laws and are living like a Gentile, why are you now trying to make these Gentiles follow the Jewish traditions?" (Galatians 2:14-15.)

I like to imagine this incident going down like one of those movies about kids in high school where you see the nuances of the popularity food chain happen in the lunchroom. Peter is the kid who is afraid of being made fun of by the friends of James, who are like the Jewish Christian popular kids who are mean to the Gentile Christians. Peter has lots of Gentile friends. He even acts like a Gentile sometimes even though he has a Jewish background. But, Peter thinks maybe a bad idea? He's not so sure anymore. It's like he's carrying his lunch tray into the cafeteria and he locks eyes with his Gentile friends, but decides to turn away with his tray to sit at the table with the friends of James. He thinks, "if you can't beat 'em. Join them."

And then Paul, who is sitting with the Gentiles, jumps up and marches over to the table with Peter and the friends of James and points his finger right in Peter's face. Everyone in the lunchroom is watching. Paul tells Peter, right there, that he's not following the truth of the Gospel message

Engage full-body cringe.

Why would Paul make such a big deal out of it in front of everyone?

Why the public tongue-lashing?

Because he says that Peter was being a hypocrite.

Paul *knew* that Peter *knew* he was in a leadership position in the church and had a responsibility to make sure Gentiles felt included - that their own cultural background would be equally as welcome because the Good News of Jesus was bigger than traditions like circumcision and not eating unclean food.

But some friends of James, with some racist ideas about what people who were different from them should and shouldn't do, came to visit the church and they got people stirred up. They were able to bend Peter's ear, get inside his head, and intimidate him. Peter became afraid of the criticism he would get for not living like a Jewish person anymore - for living more like a Gentile because of his exposure to Gentiles. At best he was just trying to keep the peace- to keep things copacetic among everyone. At worst, he was being a coward.

It's tempting to criticize Paul for publicly addressing this issue of injustice. Why bring it up? If Paul would have just ignored it, what would have been the result? The friends of James and those who also believed like they did would feel fine. They would feel affirmed. But what about the Gentiles? If one of their important leaders like Peter wasn't going to stand up for them against those who thought they weren't doing things the right way, what chance do they have of staying in the congregation? Slowly but surely, Gentiles would feel more and more like outsiders and the Good News of Jesus would seem like something that really was just meant for Jewish people and not for them.

But, this is not the truth of the Gospel, as Paul said, and that's awesome for us because I'm looking out at a room here full of Gentiles here who came to hear the Good News of Jesus this morning.

The Good News is that all who call on Jesus are welcome, even if we're different. We're welcome to be in a faith community together in the same place at the same time. That our faith community does not just include a certain type of cultural and traditional preferences, but it includes others too, even though they are different from what we might be used to or comfortable with. Even though it's different from how we grew up.

Going back to the responses to my neighbor's post on the NextDoor App, just like pointing out the achievement gap in public education, just because Paul pointed out the problem of anti-

inclusive talk and behavior by Peter, it's not as if it made the problem worse. It's not like Paul created a problem where there wasn't one. He was shining a bright light onto the darkness of the sinful decisions being made by church leadership, not to embarrass or shame Peter, but to root out sin in Peter, which had become a sin of the faith community.

We have sin in our faith community today and it's racial and ethnic injustice. It's not just that, but that's what I'm talking about today. Of course there is sin in our church community. We're all broken people on a journey to being the people God intended us to be - on a journey of putting ourselves and each other back together.

This is all Paul wanted to do, to help Peter root out his sinfulness, to help his faith community root out this injustice, for the sake of the truth of the Gospel.

So, this morning, what do you do if you're Peter? What if you let some people have your ear when you should have told them to stop talking? What if you started doing things or behaving in ways you know keep you from being who God intended you to be? How will you handle it if someone calls you out on it? Then you need to be open to listening. You need to have compassion for those who are being excluded...and you need to exercise humility. Like Peter, you need to be a person who takes feedback well from the people who speak the truth of the Gospel. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal those people in your life. Researcher and author Brene Brown has this suggestion. "Take a 1-inch x 1-inch square of paper and make a list of people whose opinions matter to you – those people who love you, not in spite of, but *because* of your vulnerabilities and imperfections. Brown says, "If you need more paper, you need to edit."

What if you're Paul? It's hard to speak up when you witness injustice happening. It feels awkward. We are all in situations where we are privileged and underprivileged. In situations where you are privileged, and for many of us sitting in this room today, we are, it's recognizing we have a responsibility to uphold the truth of the Gospel - that the Holy Spirit is constantly at work in our community and our world, crossing cultural and traditional barriers. We can not prioritize our own comfort over others. You know you're in a place of privilege when you know that people will listen and follow your lead on what you say and do. It's a lot of responsibility and we rarely have asked for it, but God is with us and will help us.

In my life, I've had more situations as a Peter than a Paul. As a high school teacher for many years, I held a position of privilege. I had the authority to make my students listen to me and do what I asked. Most of the time, I'm proud of what I said and did while students were listening and watching. There were lots of times where I wasn't. A lot of those, I was able to apologize for because I was either called out or I was lucky to be self-aware enough to realize I

had messed up. There are things now that I'm learning - ways that I made some students who were different feel left out or like I didn't care about them, which I didn't realize at the time, but now know are things I wished I would have done differently. Those times where I made mistakes and didn't realize it and no one said anything. I wish someone would have spoken up even though it would have been awkward.

There are times, now, with the help of my coworkers, where I'm Paul. Whenever someone says that the families of non-white students don't value education, so we shouldn't worry about their academic achievement, we call them out. That's a racist thing to say, and it's just not true. It's a gross misunderstanding of all the hurdles those who don't have a privileged understanding of how the school system works have to jump through just to access the same opportunities most white families do.

It's so easy for white people to be blind to all these challenges. I know this because I'm a white person. It doesn't affect us, so it's easy to believe it must not affect anyone. When schools with diverse student bodies are run by leadership who only make space and time for expectations, activities, behaviors, and traditions that are typical and comfortable for white Americans and white people culture, I know I have to call them out on it.

The truth is, we don't have control over how people will respond when we say or do something. But, when we do know something we say is not the truth of the gospel, then we need to stop or be prepared to listen and be contrite if we're called out by someone who we know is protecting the truth of the Gospel.

This includes racial injustice. When it comes to issues of race, we know there are just some things we shouldn't do because it's likely to make others in our faith community feel like they don't belong here with us. When someone tells a racist joke, we need to stop them and tell them that's not ok. If you're a white person, don't use the "N" word. It feels different when you say it then when someone who is not white says it. When someone insists that we only do our worship music a certain way, or dress a certain way, or speak to one another in only English, we need to say "No, it's ok for us to make space for other customs, languages, and ways of doing things."

This is not some kind of multicultural - diversity - let's all hold hands - we are the world - mumbo jumbo. This is the truth of the Gospel.

Now, some of you are feeling really awkward right now. You may be feeling so awkward, you might be feeling a flight or flee response. This is your Growing Edge! You gotta keep your butt

in the chair! If you feel like you're ready to get out of here this morning, or you have one foot out the door already, remember Paul said, "what Peter was doing" was denying the truth of the Gospel. As much as we want to get away from holding others accountable or being contemptuous of other people's cultures or ways of doing things, it's essential to the truth of the Gospel.

Catalyst, we must ask ourselves, "who are the Gentiles today?" and "How can I make sure I'm living the truth of the Gospel?"

Here at Catalyst, we offer C-Groups as a way to connect more meaningfully with other people in our faith community. Our C -Groups meet weekly for 6-8 week sessions and our next session is starting off after Easter here in a few weeks. Also, another way to connect is through our Life Transformation Groups. This is an accountability group of about 2 other people from your faith community. You can meet regularly for the purpose of developing meaningful and vulnerable friendships with a person or two who will hold your thoughts and discussions with confidentiality and care. You can meet once a week or a couple times a month and work through a series of questions that may help you shine a light on some areas of your life that are experiencing darkness. Having friends who are accountability partners are a powerful way to help you grow to become more like the person God intended you to be.

The important thing is that you are willing to try. If you're a Peter, then allow yourself to be open to the feedback.

If you're Paul, and you see someone doing something unjust. Be courageous and call it out. Do it with sincerity and kindness. At first, it's going to make people feel awkward, but we can only figure things out if we are open and honest. We need the Peters to be willing to be called out and we need the Pauls to have the courage to speak up for the truth of the Gospel.

COMMUNION

Jesus calls us all to the communion table together. We don't receive communion as individuals, but as a community made up of people from all backgrounds, experiences, races and cultures. At this table, we find unity with God, through Jesus' sacrifice. But we also find unity with each other. The communion meal makes us one family, the family of the Church.

During the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before he was killed, Jesus broke bread and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Eat it and remember me." After the meal was finished, he gave them a cup of wine, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it all."

We come to Jesus' table today together. We receive a meal, eat together, and are called to be one body, one family, one community. You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion with us. If you're willing to be drawn into the family of God, along with us here, then you're welcome to come to the table.

Before we come to the table, I'm going to lead you in a Prayer of Examine. I'll ask you four questions and give you some time to answer them in prayer with God. Then I'll pray for all of us, and as you're ready, you're welcome to come to the table.

1. When in the last week have I spoken up like Paul?
2. When in the last week have I remained silent like Peter?
3. When in the next week might I need to be humble and hear correction?
4. When in the next week might I need to be bold and speak up?

God of peace,

You have called us together today to show us that you call us not just to peace with you, but peace with each other. We have heard the story of your servants Peter and Paul, two men you called to a bigger vision of who you call children than they had been raised with. We saw them struggle with this vision, and we saw them enter into that awkward space of speaking up for the sake of justice. Now we come to your table as a people painfully aware of the injustices in our world. We come with hands open to receive your grace. Make us humble like Peter. Make us bold like Paul.

As we receive these wafers and juice, may they become a spiritual food. Give us your grace that we might be a people united in the work of justice, because it is your work. We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

BLESSING

Catalyst, let's be a people of justice and good news