

### Welcome

I was in choir in high school. I loved it, but I was never quite sure where I fit. I wasn't the strongest singer in the world, so I fell somewhere between baritone and second tenor. If you have never been in choir, you probably don't have a clue what those terms mean.

In a basic, mixed-gender choir, there are four major voice parts - the women who sing higher are called sopranos, while the women who sing lower are Altos. The higher men are tenors and the lower men are called Basses. But all those parts can be split - lower basses, higher baritones. Lower second tenors and higher second tenors. Same for women's parts (and the gender categories aren't *that* firm. I know a few men who can sing alto parts and a few female tenors as well.

All that matters because choral music is designed to be sung in parts. The goal of good choral music is perfect harmony, where all the different parts are blending and mixing to create something much more beautiful than a single voice singing, or even all those voices in the choir singing in unison.

What we do in here when we sign together is mostly sing in unison. Our platform singers will do harmony together, but we all sing the melody.

Melody works great for worship, and for most of our pop songs. But there's something really beautiful and powerful about killer harmonies. They elevate the song. They illustrate that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

It would be essentially unthinkable for one part of a chorus to sing their part alone. It sounds weird. Because the song wasn't designed to be heard that way. You join a choir knowing that you need all the parts to sound good.

I want to suggest today that our relationships are harmonies, not unison. We were created to live in harmony, not unison with each other. Which means accepting that you and I are different, and we're going to continue to be different.

The goal of faith, the goal of life, the goal of relationships, isn't uniformity, but a beautiful harmony of voices. That can only happen when we accept each other as we are, and commit to harmony.

So let's begin by worshipping together. We're going to sing. And hey, if you want to practice a little harmony, feel free!

### Message

We just celebrated Jesus' resurrection on Easter. We celebrated the resurrection as proof that God is faithful to us. So for the next several weeks, we're going to consider how God's faithfulness to us changes our relationships. After all, relationships are the heart of faith. Jesus calls us into a relationship with him *and* with each other.

The bad news, unfortunately, is that there aren't any shortcuts to healthy relationships. I wish there were some secret book of the Bible they give preachers, for us to keep behind glass -- break only in case of emergency, and we pull out 1 and 2 Relations and BOOM everything's magically better.

But unfortunately that's not how relationships work. It takes effort on our parts to get good at healthy relationships.

The good news is that God created us to be in relationships. Relating with other people is in our DNA. And by raising Jesus from the dead, God has invited us to rediscover who we were created to be.

We began on Easter Sunday with a commitment to faithfulness. The resurrection proved God is faithful to us. And God's continuing faithfulness to us enables us to be faithful to each other - to be together through thick and thin. And then last week we looked at a practice that flows from faithfulness - the practice of making space for quality time with the people God calls us to be in relationship with.

Today, we're going to explore another commitment. This is a principle we have to pledge ourselves to, a prerequisite for genuine, life-giving relationships. If we want to have healthy relationships, we have to commit to accept the other person as they are, not as we wish they were.

We know, intellectually, that people are different from us. But when we're confronted with the fact that someone has a very different way of seeing the world from us, it's actually pretty hard to love them.

There's a reason, after all, they say not to bring up religion or politics in polite company. Why 'small talk' means talk about the weather or jobs.

Here at Catalyst, we've used M. Scott Peck's stages of authentic community as a guide before. Peck was a psychologist who outlined the stages we pass through to reach genuine, deep community. The first stage is Pseudo-community, which is exactly what it sounds like: false community.

Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing, according to Peck. Every relationship begins here. Pseudo community is the space where we don't share our full, true selves. We keep back the parts of us we think will be objectionable to the other person (and they're doing the same).

These are relationships built around a hobby or a craft. Friendship grounded in the emotional journey of Cowboys fandom. Parents you see at your kids' concerts or games and the occasional birthday party. The neighbor you wave to as you're both mowing your lawn. The coworker you chat up at the watercooler and holiday party. The person you wave to and greet as we pass the peace here at church.

None of these relationships are *bad*. And again, we're not required to foster a deep relationship with every single person we meet (we couldn't do that, and it's not healthy). But if our closest relationships end at the place of pseudo-community, if every connection we have is shallow, then we're not in true, healthy relationships.

We were created to know and to be known at a deep level.

But you know what happens when we express those deep parts of ourselves. When we let our weird opinions and strange beliefs be known. When we bring up religion and politics.

Things get tense. Fights can break out. (Isn't that why holiday meals with families are so stereotypically awkward? Because we don't feel like we have to be polite around our family, and they have to accept us no matter what, so we just let our freak flags fly?)

Authentic community can only happen when we commit ahead of time to accept each other as we are. If I enter into a friendship with you, the agreement I'm making is to love the authentic you, not just the you you're showing me.

[Scripture Slide] This level of accepting each other is vital for the health of any relationship - a marriage, dating, parent/child, friendships and church. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Romans 14. Romans is a curious letter. It was written by the Apostle Paul, but it's the only letter he wrote to a church he *didn't* plant. The other letters of Paul's we have preserved in the New Testament are letters he sent after he had left churches he started. But Romans is different. Paul has never been to Rome and is planning a trip there. So he sends this letter ahead as a means of introduction.

Planted in the heart of the Roman empire, the Roman church faced some big challenges. Among the biggest was how Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were to live together in harmony. We saw several times in our last series that the cultural differences between Jews and Gentiles caused a lot of problems in the Early Church. They disagreed about nearly everything - from what to eat to even what day of the week to worship.

These divides were deep, sharp and cultural. They were as divisive as politics are today, as conversations around race and privilege, as our conversations around sexuality. As we read, try to imagine you're one or the other of those groups, listening to this letter being read.

Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval.

In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want

to please the Lord and give thanks to God. For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.

I love that, for Paul, this ability to accept each other is grounded in Jesus' resurrection.

And I love that, for Paul, the resurrection compels him to the messiest possible place. How much easier would it have been to just have two churches? The Jewish Christians here and the Gentile Christians here. They meet on different days, have different potlucks, so there's no need ever to fight. Maybe they all come together a couple of times a year so everyone can pretend and play nice.

But no, Paul knows Jesus didn't die for a divided church, a fractured people. Jesus died to make us all whole, not just with God, but with each other. And he *knows* that's super messy. It's really hard. It's *harder* than just pretending and being polite. But to be what God created us to be, who God calls us to be *together*, we have to accept each other. As we are.

If you eat meat and I don't, we have to accept that about each other and live together.

If you think worship on one day is right and I think worship on another is right, we have to live *and worship* together.

Think about the implications of that - there's gonna be meat at the potluck or not. We're going to have to worship on either Saturday or Sunday. Which means someone is going to get their way, and someone isn't. That's just the reality. On these massive issues, we can't just both get our way.

And that can lead to resentment. We can end up looking down on each other, feeling contempt for each other. Contempt is poison, as Paul goes on to warn:

So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? ...Let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. -- Romans 14:1-20

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. The work of God is us. The Church. You and me. Remember: relationships are the heart of Jesus' good news. God's primary work is the wholeness of humanity. And Paul warns us not to sacrifice our relationships with each other for the sake of being right about an issue (even an important issue).

We hear this and wonder, "Does God not care about this stuff?" I mean, we don't really care about meat sacrificed to idols here in America, and we settled the day of the week to worship centuries ago. So it's easy to believe God doesn't care about *that*. But when we remember that, for the early church, these issues were the equivalent to conversations about white supremacy and racial injustice, or human sexuality, or political divides, well it's hard to believe God doesn't care about those issues.

We're right; obviously God cares deeply about not the issues, but the people at the heart of the issues. God cares deeply about Black Americans and our struggle for justice. God cares deeply about LGBTQ persons. God cares deeply about immigrants and asylum seekers. God also cares deeply about White Americans (and Latinx Americans and Asian Americans and Native Americans). God cares deeply about straight Americans. God cares deeply about all of us and raised Jesus from the dead to draws us all into community together.

To insist we accept each other doesn't mean we have to accept each other's positions on issues. Jesus didn't die for issues, Jesus died for people. So we can accept each other even as we continue to disagree with each other (we actually should do this).

**So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up. -- Romans 14:19**

I love the way the NLT renders the Greek word here - it's usually translated 'peace', but here it's 'harmony'. Too often we imagine peace as an absence of conflict, that pseudo-community where everyone just keeps their weird ideas to themselves and sings in unison. But true peace is harmony, a coming together of differences in mutual love and respect. God calls us into relationships with people who are different from us, so we can learn and grow. We need each other.

How do your relationships change if you don't expect people to see the world the way you do? How do your relationships change if you *welcome* their differences as something *you* need to grow?

What does a company that values harmony, not unison look like? A church?

Friends, harmony is more beautiful than unity. It's harder, it takes more work, but it's what we were created for. God has given us to each other as gifts of difference so we can create a harmonious community together.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] God receives us as we are, and it is God's unconditional love that transforms us.