

Gathering Across Differences

11/23/25

We've been talking these past several weeks about gatherings and hospitality—
radical hospitality for strangers
gathering with our ancestors,
gathering at tables,
gathering through rituals of belonging,
and how we make room for others and for God... *on purpose*.

And today our theme is *gathering across differences*.

When I planned this series months ago, I thought,

“What better week than the Sunday before Thanksgiving?”

As we begin bracing ourselves for family dynamics. While cooking.

We joke about it every year—

because there's truth in the humor:

Who's going to say something unhinged this time?

Who do we need to warn the partner about—Uncle So-and-So?

Who can we count on to bring the rolls... and who absolutely should not be in charge of prayer?

We know what it's like to gather with people we love,

and also with people who see the world very differently than we do.

So today I want to talk about why gathering across differences is **sacred work**—

the work Jesus himself did,

the work the early church struggled with,
the work that shapes us into a community that looks like Christ.

AND YET—

I also want to name this clearly:

there is a difference
between *gathering across differences*
and *remaining in situations that are not safe*.

There is a difference between engaging a different opinion
and tolerating harm.

And if we are going to talk honestly about what it means to gather across differences in this
moment—

in this country,
in this community,
in our own families—

we have to hold both truths.

We have to talk about why difference is holy,
and why harm is not a “difference” we are called to bridge.

- so we will go there, but before we talk about boundaries and limits in gatherings across
difference, we have to talk about why it’s important at all. Because gathering across barriers is at
the heart of the gospel.

The truth is:

we need difference.

We need people who see what we don't see.

We need perspectives, experiences, voices, and gifts that are not our own.

Not one of us — has the full picture of God.

We each carry a piece.

That's why Paul says we are **one body with many members**.

Eyes and ears and hands and feet.

He's not using a cute metaphor.

He's naming a spiritual reality:

You cannot be the body of Christ by yourself.

You need the differences of others to be whole.

Gathering across differences is the way God expands our compassion, stretches our understanding, and pulls us out of the smallness of our own experience.

When we gather with people who are not like us,
we grow.

We soften.

We learn something about God we could not have learned alone.

Think of Jesus 'own ministry.

He gathered tax collectors and zealots — who hated each other.

He gathered fishermen and Pharisees.

He gathered women who funded his ministry, and men who followed him from village to village.

His table was not a table of sameness.

It was a table of transformed difference.

And the early church?
Jew and Gentile,
slave and free,
wealthy landowners and widows with nothing —
They didn't gather because they agreed,
but gathered because they *belonged to Christ*.

Gathering across difference matters because:

- **It breaks our isolation.**
- **It widens our imagination.**
- **It refuses the lie that we only belong with those who mirror us.**
- **It lets us practice the kind of community the world cannot create on its own.**

Gathering across differences is one of the places where the gospel becomes visible.

It's one of the ways God heals us — not by making us the same,
but by making us whole.

I believe this with my whole heart.

Because when I've been around people who are different from me, I've had some of my most sacred experiences.

I was on the coast of Kenya for few months in the town of Mombasa and on the eastern coast of Kenya there it has a strong middle eastern feel to it because of the immigrant communities from long ago. And so there were parts of Mombasa, that were heavily muslim, and you'd hear calls to prayer throughout the day. One day I happened to be there and was tagging along with some friends on the day of Eid - the holiday that celebrates the end of the month long fasts of

Ramadan. Looking back I don't even remember the logistics of how or with you, but I broke fast with a whole house of people in a tiny apartment, sitting on the floor. Over a shared dish. That was absolutely delicious. And it was a profound and holy experience. I experienced radical hospitality that day.

When I was in Atlanta for seminary, me and my white self— that had never lived where there was significant racial diversity-- found myself in a cohort of classmates at my internship where I was the minority. I learned way more than I even knew I needed to learn, and learned how much I don't know. They took me to my first protest.

I have numerous stories and experiences like this, and believe that gathering across differences is sacred and holy, and that others have things to teach me about the character of God and of love that I would NEVER be able to know without them.

AND gathering across differences feels harder today for me than it did even a week ago.

And I don't mean the differences we chuckle about —
the Thanksgiving-table differences,
the “pass the potatoes and please don't bring up politics” differences.

The kind of differences that leave you saying,

“I don't know how to sit at the same table with someone who celebrates hurting and kidnapping someone else.”

This week, as Border Patrol has been present in our community...

as Latino families in our own neighborhoods have been terrorized, profiled, and traumatized...

I've felt the weight of that question more acutely.

Maybe many of you have, too.

I've been in Charlotte this week, participating in some safety patrols across the city with the intent of helping create a safer environment for people to get to school and work safely. Because Border Patrol agents with masks have been canvassing the city primarily at hardware stores and hispanic grocery stores and on job sites and profiling and terrorizing brown skinned people about their citizenship. They are detaining people irrespective of their legal status. And are even lashing out at those of us showing up to record and honk horns or blow whistles and draw attention to their behaviors.

So what may have began as differences of opinion on policies around immigration - is now a serious safety concern for people who aren't white. In fact all across NC some businesses were closing and people were not going to work and school for fear of being targeted solely based on their ethnicity.

It does something to your heart to see neighbors hiding in fear.

It does something to your spirit when cruelty is not just tolerated but cheered.

And it makes the idea of "gathering across differences" feel...
complicated.

Painful.

Maybe even impossible.

And so we come today asking:

What do we do with those differences?

How do we gather faithfully in a moment like this?

How do we keep our hearts open without becoming complicit?
How do we stay rooted in love and courage when the world seems content with cruelty?
Those questions bring us into the heart of our scripture for today.
Because Paul is writing to a community that is divided, polarized, anxious, and fractured.

A church struggling to understand what unity actually means
and how to be “one body” when everything around them is pulling them apart.

And Paul doesn’t say,

“Just get along.”

He doesn’t say,

“Differences don’t matter.”

He certainly doesn’t say,

“Tolerate whatever harms the vulnerable.”

Instead, he says this:

*In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...
and the members of the body that seem weaker are indispensable.”*

(1 Corinthians 12:13, 22)

In other words:

**Difference is part of God’s design —
but harm to any member is harm to the whole.**

If one member suffers, the rest of us don’t get to look away.

If one part is in pain, the whole body is called to gather around it.

true Christian gathering is not about avoiding difference,

but about protecting the vulnerable, resisting harm, and staying human together.

Listen again to what he says:

“The members of the body that seem weaker
are indispensable...
and God has so arranged the body,
giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,
so that there may be no dissension within the body.”

(1 Corinthians 12:22–25)

This is not a poetic metaphor.

It is a reordering of power.

- The ones the world sees as “weaker”?
Indispensable.
- The ones who get ignored or dismissed?
Honored first.
- The parts that have been harmed?
Become the moral compass for the whole body.
- Unity is not built around the dominant; it is built around the vulnerable.

In other words:

****If unity comes at the expense of the vulnerable,**

it is not Christian unity.

It is silence dressed up as peace.*

In the Body of Christ,

the pain of one is the responsibility of all.

So when harm comes to the “weaker” members—
the immigrant worker,
the terrified school child,
the mother afraid to go to the grocery store,
the family hiding because Border Patrol is prowling the neighborhood—
Paul is crystal clear:

The Body of Christ does not gather across that difference.

The Body of Christ gathers *around* that wound.

Gathering across differences $\neq$

“accepting harm as just another opinion.”

Gathering across differences =

“standing with the suffering until they are safe.”

That is Christian unity.

That is gospel belonging.

That is the work of the Spirit.

Because when you hear “gather across differences,”

it might sound like:

“Just tolerate what people think, even if it’s harmful.”

But that’s not what Paul means.

Let’s name the two kinds of differences we face:

1. Differences that enrich.

These are differences of:

- personality

- experience
- background
- generation
- theology
- political priorities
- preferences
- culture
- perspective

Gathering across these differences makes us wiser and more compassionate.

This is where humility and listening matter most.

2. Differences that harm.

These are differences that:

- deny someone's humanity
- celebrate violence
- justify cruelty
- treat vulnerable neighbors as disposable
- align with systems that terrorize the weak
- abandon the suffering

These differences do not enrich the body.

They injure it.

And Paul's teaching is unambiguous:

these are not differences we gather across.

These are differences we challenge, resist, and refuse to baptize with the name of peace.

This is discipleship.

This is solidarity.

This is Christian moral clarity.

So what does it look like to practice courageous gathering in a world like ours?

I hate to say but I'm honestly not sure - but what I've learned this week. Is that perhaps instead of me focusing on the people in my family who are diametrically opposed to what I stand for...

I've got to put my energy and focus on where and how to gather with people who are gathering around the vulnerable. Because what we focus on grows. Because honestly I've gathered with more "strangers" in the past week than I have in a long while. What I can say is that the networks of people coming together from all parts of the Charlotte under the premise of helping people get to work and school safely. That is the stated goal. We are talking thousands of "strangers" have gathered for trainings and taken shifts across the city to keep an eye out for others they don't even know.

This week, you may sit at tables that stretch you.

You may find yourself across from someone who sees the world differently.

Let your presence there be grounded in love,

but let your boundaries be grounded in truth.

You do not have to swallow harm to keep the peace.

You do not have to stay silent to stay kind.

You do not have to shrink yourself for the sake of someone else's comfort.

Because Christ does not call us to polite gatherings.
Christ calls us to courageous ones.
Gatherings where dignity is protected,
where humanity is honored,
where truth is spoken gently and firmly,
and where love is not reduced to niceness,
but lifted up as the most powerful force in the world.

And so, beloved:

May you gather with courage.

May you listen with compassion.
May you protect with boldness.
May you refuse to abandon the vulnerable.
May you hold fast to the ones who are suffering.
Amen.

Prayers of the People:

God of compassion and courage,
on this Sunday before Thanksgiving,
we come to you carrying so many layers of emotion.

We pray for our neighbors in Charlotte
who are living with fear, targeted because of who they are,
their language, their neighborhood, the color of their skin

Protect them, O God.
Strengthen those doing justice.
Stir the conscience of those causing harm.
And keep us from the sin of silence.

We pray for all who will travel this week—
for crowded highways, busy airports,
for safe journeys and patient spirits,
for kindness among strangers in the places we pass through.

We pray for families who will gather—
for tables filled with laughter,
for conversations that stay gentle,
and for grace when old wounds rise to the surface.

We pray also for those for whom this week is heavy—
for the lonely, the grieving, the estranged;
for those whose families are dangerous places,
or who have no family to return to;
for those facing empty chairs and memories that ache.

Hold all of us in your mercy,
the joyful and the anxious,
the hopeful and the heartbroken.
Meet us at our tables, on the road,
and in every place love is needed.

Make us people of courage in a fearful time,
peace in a divided world,
and tenderness in a season that is not tender for everyone.