

Is there anything better than the smell of freshly baked brownies? Ok, well, maybe eating them - while they're still warm - that is the payoff after all. But that smell!

- As soon as that scent hits you, you know something good is close by. Only 8 humble ingredients, when they are combined, create something so special, that just by its scent, is immediately recognizable.

About a month ago, a facebook memory popped up of something my mother had posted 8 years earlier.

It's a picture of me, giving a message at my old church in Chicago. I love her caption, "She's Preaching... not baking!"

A small stove had been donated to my church, and since I love a good object lesson, and I knew the moment I saw it that I would put it on the stage and use it to illustrate the power of UNITY.

In a message I titled "**Can you smell the love,**" I whipped up some brownie batter, while explaining that vegetable oil has a purpose. It's useful, but not very tasty on its own. And a raw egg is packed full of potential, just like the flour, and cocoa powder, baking powder and salt. But if I handed you a cup of baking powder and a spoon, or a bowl full of raw flour, would you want to eat it? Of course you wouldn't because each of these food items were never intended to stand alone. The magic happens when these ingredients are combined. When they come together, when they are integrated, they create something enticing - and immediately recognizable.

Now this was the cool part, in that church the sanctuary just happened to be situated right above the kitchen in the basement. I had a friend bake a giant batch of brownies downstairs so that the smell of the brownies in the oven would waft up into the sanctuary as I was preaching. I loved watching everyone's face change when the room began to fill with the sweet aroma of warm brownies. They could 'smell the love.' Afterwards, we all went downstairs and ate them together. **The point of it all was to illustrate the power of one-ness, and the importance of coming together. Like the egg and the oil and the baking powder, each of us is a key ingredient that was never meant to stand alone.** We are meant to be part of something great! Something powerful! And like the intoxicating smell of freshly baked brownies we can become the aroma of Christ - enticing, and immediately recognizable. Like Barry said in week one of this series, **our message spreads farther, and faster, when we stand together as ONE.** Jesus said we ought to be KNOWN for the love we have for one another:

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35

Amy shared this image with us a few weeks ago

[AMY'S CHURCH SIGN]

It stuck with me and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it's implications ever since.

When people see that sign what comes to their mind? What comes to your MIND?

What is our reputation as the Church? What are we known for?

I wish I could add another small sign to the bottom of this one, so that the sign would read "*Church- Never Alone.*"

[Never Alone (words on screen)]

Think about what that would mean to people as they drove by. Think about what the words 'Never Alone' would mean to a single parent. Or to someone who just lost a spouse. Think about what these words would mean to a lonely teenager? Or to someone battling depression? Think about what these words mean to you!

"Never Alone!" It's the title of our series, and it's appropriate because we are in the middle of what we call HOPE MONTH. All month long we are focusing on bringing healing to the broken place of isolation.

Barry kicked off this series by showing us that *the path out of isolation begins with dignity.*

And last week, Tim reminded us that *practicing hospitality means seeing the dignity in every needy, lonely person who crosses our path, and bringing them into the family of God!*

And this week, we're looking at what takes place when we put those things into practice. **What does it look like when *isolation* is healed in Jesus name?**

To find that answer I did an interesting quick study on the word 'isolation' using one of my favorite reference tools ever invented: The Thesaurus. I use this tool quite often when I'm searching for words that have a similar or even the exact meaning as another word.

So I went to thesaurus.com and searched synonyms for the word isolation, and guess what words showed up: detachment. Withdrawal. Aloneness. QUARANTINE!

Quarantine?! It just got real! According to this we have all been experiencing a form of isolation for nearly 6 months! We've all been affected by this broken place in one way or another.

- Many of us have health issues that have kept us in strict lockdown, unable to see our loved ones, or we've been unable to visit our friends and family who have been sick or hospitalized.
- Or our plans have been altered due to cautionary measures to keep this virus from spreading. **Vacations, graduations celebrations, birthday parties, weddings, even funerals - all have been jeopardized, postponed and in many cases cancelled all together due to this unforeseen and ongoing isolation.**
- Many of us are feeling the loss of whatever normal looked like for us 6 months ago. I know you're feeling it. I'm feeling it. We miss going to school and seeing our friends in person. We miss summer concerts, and going to movie theaters. We miss real handshakes and hugs - we've all had to settle for this awkward elbow bump thing.

This quarantine has altered our lives and we are all feeling the pain of isolation.

So if quarantine is isolation, and if isolation is brokenness - what does it look like when it's healed? Well, another quick search revealed opposite words like 'combine.' Integrate. Unite. **That means that the opposite of isolation is integration. The other side of aloneness is togetherness, it's unity.**

This is what the Apostle Peter was concerned with when he wrote the letter we'll be looking at today, the letter of 1st Peter. Peter was one of the 12 original disciples of Jesus. He was a complex character with lots of stories written about him in the first 5 books of the new testament. There's so much I could tell you about Peter, but all you need to know for today is this: he was an imperfect man, who failed many times over, **but his life was radically transformed by the grace and forgiveness of Jesus.**

So turn with me in your Bibles to the book of 1st Peter Chapter 2. **1 Peter 2** And as we turn there, let me give a shout out to folks watching online, welcome! To our North Indy campus, good morning. And to our Fishers campus... Hey ya'll make some noise over there! I'm the worship director at our Fishers campus so they get a special shout out today.

Let me pray for us.

Lord open our hearts to your word... Speak through me and allow the truth of your word to sink deep and take root, and transform our lives.

So in this letter, Peter is writing to new believers, both Jews and Gentiles alike, who were scattered across 5 Roman provinces. These Christians were experiencing the kind of isolation that comes from being a grossly misunderstood minority. To the majority, they were seen as this subversive new sect of Judaism, and among the locals they had a very unflattering reputation. They were viewed as atheists because they no longer worshiped the 'gods.'

Incestuous because of their usage of phrases like, "I love you brother" and "love each other as brothers and sisters."

And even Cannibalistic because of ... well, phrases like this one:

"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you." John 6:53

You can see how that may have raised a few eyebrows among the locals, right?! Suffice it to say Christians were totally misunderstood. And Peter knew this. As struggles and persecutions began to intensify, Peter encouraged the believers to stand strong, and to stand together as ONE. Listen to what he says about the kind of reputation he wants them to have:

1 Peter 2

12 Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world.

15 It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you.

16 For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil. 17 Respect everyone, and love the family of believers.

It sounds so simple, right? Just respect everyone and love the family of believers! According to this, our reputation as the people of God *should be* that we are an honorable, respectful, loving bunch of people. So is that what we're known for?

Do we have a reputation for respecting everyone, and loving each other?

One of my oldest friends would say no. No that is not what Christians are known for. In fact, what I've mostly heard from her over the years, regarding how she views Christians goes something like this:

- Christians are self-absorbed and self-obsessed. She would say that Christians don't care about the poor, they only care about themselves. They don't care about the environment. They don't care about injustice in the world. And so on... and so forth...

This is her frame of mind, and from what I can tell, I don't think she is alone in her opinions.

[Reputation Chart]

Today, only 36% of Americans say they have “**a great deal of**” or “**quite a lot of**” confidence in the church or organized religion— *this is an all-time low.*

A Gallup survey found that among the 66% of young adults who say they regularly attended church as a teenager, but stopped attending for at least a year between the ages of 18 to 22, one of the top reasons for dropping out of church was a political disagreement. Have you seen any of those lately?

And what’s truly sobering is this chart ends in December of 2019. But we all know this year, 2020, is an election year. I wonder which way that graph will be trending by the end of December of this year?

Does this resonate with you? Does this bother you? We all know someone who has been **hurt by the church**, or **has had a fundamental disagreement** or a **falling out within the church**. There are divisions upon divisions within the family of God, and these divisions are creating a devastating culture *within the church* of **an intellectual kind of isolation** and a **hyper individualism**. This isolation is the antithesis of the kind of community God wants us to be. Any why? Peter H Davids said it this way in his commentary on the book of 1st Peter. He said:

“individual Christians stand much less chance of surviving with their faith intact than those united in community...”

“For Peter, salvation is not an individual event, but rather something that a person experiences as part of a community...While it is true that they are brought into a relationship with God individually, in that very process they are formed into another collectivity, a community belonging to God. ... they are now “The people of God.” (1 Pt. 2:10)

If you are a Christian, you are not just a person. You are a ‘people’. When you surrendered your life to Christ, you became part of that great big family known as “the people of God.’

And what should we, “The people of God” be known for? What should our community look like? Peter spells it out for us in Chapter 3 of this letter. Look over at chapter 3:8

Here, he uses just 5 powerful Greek words that capture the essence of how we are to live as examples of Christ’s love in the midst of an unbelieving world. He says in verse 8

8 Finally, all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude.

He’s talking about how to pursue and maintain unity. He’s talking about the opposite of isolation!

That phrase “of one mind” is the greek word **Homophron** - which means of one intent. One purpose. Consider this the ‘finished pan of brownies’ so to speak. When we come together, we are integrated by the Holy Spirit we form one, divine, unified, powerful force for good. This is the ‘what’ - what we are aiming to become.

And to some of us, that may already sound impossible, right? But would you allow yourself for a moment to just imagine with me, how this kind of unity might even be possible? Because it IS possible. This isn't just some ideological, philosophical, unattainable wish. This is what Peter said SHOULD be our reality. He says all of you *should* be of one mind. But how?! With so many differences, disagreements, and divisions, how can we achieve this kind of unity today?

I believe Peter uses the next 4 words to tell us HOW. If the first word tells us what to be - be of one mind, be unified, the next 4 words tell us 'how' we can accomplish that.

Sumpathes, sympathize with each other. And while we may hear the word sympathize and immediately think it means "to feel sorry for someone," as in, write them a **sympathy card** or something - that doesn't entirely capture what this word means. It means a **"whatever affects one similarly affects the other."** Sympathy can sound like this, "I hurt inside, because you are hurting." or "I am celebrating, because you are celebrating!"

And that sounds a lot like what it means to love like family, right?

Philadelphos - It's the 3rd word Peter used. Tim talked about it last week - Philadelphos - it sounds a lot like our word 'Philadelphia', right "The city of brotherly love?" Or Philadelphia the name of my favorite cream cheese - **have you ever tried cream cheese brownies? So good!** Philadelphos means: to love one's brother - like the love between family members.

Look, no one in my family is perfect AND I DO NOT EXPECT THEM TO BE. I mean, think about your family. Is anyone perfect?! Has anyone in your family truly never made a mistake? No, of course not! Families are messy because they're full of humans. **And believe me, in a family as large as mine is, we're bound to disagree on some things.** And we DO! We fight. But at the end of the day, we know we will always return to LOVE. And it's not always easy, but we're determined to keep pursuing unity because if we don't, our family will fall apart.

And let's get personal for a minute, **in a church as large as ours is... we are BOUND to disagree on some things.** And we do! But that does not have to drive us apart! There is a love that can override our differences. We MUST pursue unity, and love each other like family, because if we don't this family will fall apart.

Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Be tenderhearted towards one another, the 4th word Peter used in this scripture. **Eus -plagkh -nos** - And don't let the sound of the word fool you. "Tenderhearted" kind of sounds 'soft' or benign, or sweet, but it's actually a powerful word. **It means a deep sense of mercy and compassion that comes from your guts, from deep down. Like what a first responder must feel when they put their own lives at risk to rescue someone else. That's tenderheartedness, that's living with gut level compassion.**

This is the How! This is how we pursue the kind of unity that Peter is talking about.

- When we sympathize with one another,
- when we love each other like family,
- when we live with gut level compassion for one another

When we do these things we are already well on the pathway to true unity!

But the 5th and final word, I believe, is what makes all the other words possible.

Tapeinophron means humble minded, or humble in spirit. You can not sympathize without humility. You can't love each other like family without being humble. And you can't live with gut level compassion for one another without possessing a humble heart. Without humility, there is no unity.

HUMILITY. HUMILITY LOOKS LIKE THIS:

PETER SAID IN VERSE 9

9 Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing...

11

Turn away from evil and do good.

Search for peace, and work to maintain it. x2

Again, these are strong words. Very strong words. Peter is not making a suggestion. He is telling us literally, to strive for peace, to chase after it until we've grabbed hold of it, and once we have it - we work to maintain it. The verb tense Peter used here is commanding. *He's saying make this happen, don't just try, begin to do this now.*

Because if we don't - if we don't actively pursue unity, we fall apart and our reputation tanks.

[Reputation Chart]

I believe there is a direct correlation between the divisions and factions within the body of Christ, and the all time low we are facing today. Just like it was with the early Christians, if we do not stand together our message won't be heard. **And we have the message of hope!** We have the message of life! The message of Salvation through Christ Jesus!

Our unity in Christ Jesus is the bright light this world needs. If we each possess the light of Christ, when we come together we shine so brightly. Isolation has no place to hide! Loneliness likes to hide in dark places. But when we bring the light of Christ to those dark places, we bring healing to that broken place. We bring hope.

In this, we can be of one mind! In humility and self giving love we purpose together to search for peace, and work to maintain it! **Our pursuit of unity will**

heal isolation, and bring about the kind of reputation God had in mind all along for His Church!

This was Jesus' prayer for you!

In John chapter 17, just moments before Jesus was arrested in the garden, he was praying with you and me in mind. Listen to his heart for you:

21 I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

22 "I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. 23 ...May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.

Without unity, the world will not believe and the world will not know. Jesus prayed that we would experience such PERFECT UNITY SO THAT THE WORLD WOULD KNOW HIM. This is our reputation!

[AMY'S CHURCH SIGN]

When people think of the church, when they see this sign, they should know that something good is close by. Just like the smell of warm brownies, they should be drawn in by that enticing and immediately recognizable aroma of Christ! That our Church, Grace Church would be known as "a people - who love and seek after those who are hurting and isolated." That we would see the dignity in every lonely and isolated person and love them like family.

[PICTURE OF I'M MAKING THE CHRISTIANS ONE]

This is one of my most prized possessions. My daughter drew this picture when she was in the 6th grade while she was sitting in church with me, listening to a sermon about unity. This is actually how she takes notes.

She drew God, whose face has never been seen by human eyes, with His head just outside the frame, and He asks "what'cha making there, Jesus?" The bearded stick figure Jesus replies to his Father **"I'm making the Christians ONE!"** It's like He is taking them from where they had been, in this little box disassembled, and He's fitting them and forming them into one unit - or in her mind as a 6th grader, into the number 'one.' And God looks admiringly at what Jesus is building, the way He is bringing all of His children together in perfect unity, and he says 'Cool!'

Our message of hope spreads farther, and faster, when we stand together as ONE. This was Jesus' prayer for all of us! Church! Let's be KNOWN for this! For standing -together- for what Christ stood for. For healing -together- what he healed. For loving -together- who he loved. And for being ONE as Christ and the Father are ONE.

Let's Pray.