

Covenant Community
Matthew 4:12 – 23; 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 18
Sunday, January 26, 2020

I just spent two weeks in Pittsburgh taking two of my final doctoral classes. When I first started this program two years ago, I started six months *after* the rest of my group. So I missed the first two classes, and they told me I could just make them up later. Last June I made up one of them. A new group was starting the program, so I took this introductory class with them. My original group has five people in it. This new group had *fifteen*. It was a totally different dynamic, and I absolutely *hated* it. There were a lot of strong personalities in this group. The group really didn't work well together, and I did not click with a single other person in the class. But that was the group that I had to work with.

This time, I was going back to make up the *other* introductory class that I missed, and I was joining *another* group that was just starting the program. So I was going into it a little wary, based on my previous experience. I didn't *know* any of these people. I didn't know if we would have anything in common. I didn't know if we would get along or work well together. Well, it was a *totally* different experience. There were 12 people, so it wasn't *too* big, and the group just worked really well together. The personalities all clicked, and I really connected with a couple of other people in the class. We all came from such a diversity of backgrounds (age, race, denominations, worldviews, and politics), and we pushed each other and learned a lot from each other.

Then the second week I was with my original group for our final class together. And my group has been great from day one. There are five of us, and we all get along, yet we are very different people. There is Tega, a 40-something single mother from Nigeria. Connie, a 60-something white southern grandmother. John, a quiet, thoughtful 30-year-old pastor from Pittsburgh. Tim,

a 40-year-old former engineer who lives in King of Prussia. We are not the group that we probably would have *chosen*, but we work really well together. We *listen* to each other and *learn* from each other and *challenge* each other and *love* each other.

I was thinking about these three groups that I have been a part of, and it reminded me of the most important thing that I learned during this program – the idea of the church as a *covenant community*. One of my first classes was with a Dutch theologian named Edwin van Driel, and he introduced me to this idea. He told me how, growing up in the Netherlands, the way that the church worked there was that your church membership (the congregation that you belong to and worship with) was based on where you lived. If you lived in a certain neighborhood or area, you were a member of the church in that neighborhood. It would be like, if you live in Devon, you are a member of St. John's. If you live in Berwyn, you are a member of Trinity Presbyterian. If you live in Wayne, you are a member of Wayne Presbyterian.

Well, around the year 2000, he moved to Connecticut to work on his PhD at Yale. There are a lot of churches in that area, and when he got there, he asked someone, "Where do I go to church?" They told him, "You *pick* one." The idea was totally foreign to him! "What do you mean you *pick* one? How do you *do* that? How do you *decide* which *church* you belong to?" He had never had to do something like that before. Now for *us*, that's a very familiar concept. We're used to this idea of choosing what church we want to be a part of based on how we like the music or the preaching or the building or if there is a group of people there that we connect with and have a lot in common with. We choose a church based on our personal preferences, what we *like*, what we *don't* like, and what meets our personal needs. And if something goes *wrong* at that church, if something happens that we *don't* like, we just find a new one.

Well, van Driel started *thinking* about this and *writing* about it, and what he said was, “Yes, church membership rests on *choice* – but not *our* choice. Rather, *God chooses us* as members through baptism.” He cites Jesus’ words in John 15, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” He talks about how the church is embedded in Israel, and Israel is not a voluntary organization. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob didn’t just say, “We are going to start this group called Israel,” and they couldn’t just decide to *stop* being Israelites. *God* called them and formed them. They were *God’s* creation, not their own.

And it’s the same way with the church. van Driel says that if we enter the church through baptism, then the church is not a voluntary organization. Because to be baptized is to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and resurrection is not something we *choose* to do. It is something that is done *to* us. We are *raised* to new life; we don’t raise *ourselves*. The church, he says, is not based on our personal preferences, our likes or dislikes, or on the fact that we get along or have a lot in common. Rather, he says, it is *God* who calls us together and *Jesus Christ* who grounds our life together. We don’t need to search for common ground as that which holds us together, he says. We already have a common ground: Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected one.

I see this in these groups that I’ve been a part of over the past two years. We didn’t choose each other. We responded to a call from God, and *God* gathered us together. We were all very different. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn’t. But regardless, we had to find a way to live life together. And even when we *didn’t* have anything in common, God still *used* that to help us learn and grow.

We see it in this story of Jesus calling his disciples. Simon, Andrew, James, and John did not seek out Jesus. They did not *choose* him on the grounds of, “Oh, we like the message that this guy is going around preaching about the kingdom of God. We agree with his theology and his politics.” It says, “As Jesus was walking by, he saw them and said, ‘Follow me,’ and they left everything and followed him.” A few chapters later when Jesus calls Matthew, it says, “As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, ‘Follow me,’ and he got up and followed him.” Jesus sought him out and gathered him among his followers. And at that time, tax collectors were *despised* by the people of Israel. They were seen as traitors who took advantage of their own people and helped the Romans oppress them. So Simon, Andrew, James, and John – every day Jewish people – would *not* have chosen to be in a group with Matthew, a tax collector. Or with Judas who is thought to have been part of a radical fringe political group that wanted to assassinate Romans. There had to have been times when these disciples disagreed and did not get along. But Jesus called them together. And they had to find a way to make it work and live life together.

We see it in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Corinth, who are experiencing some kind of conflict and division. The church is divided up into these different groups based on which leaders they like. So within the life of the church, they are all pursuing their own personal preferences; some prefer Paul or Apollos or Cephas. And what Paul says to that is, “Christ is not divided, and so *you* must not be divided. You must be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” And of course what he means there is not that they all have to think or believe or behave the same. It’s not that *you* have to be like *me* or *I* have to be like *you*. It’s that they *all* are called to be like *Christ*. To have the same mind and purpose as *Christ*. It’s like Paul writes to the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the

form of a servant, humbling himself, and being obedient to the point of death on a cross.” They are called by God to *die to self*, empty themselves out, for the sake of something *greater* than the self.

We see that same calling in *our* life together. There are any number of ways that you ended up here. Maybe you were born into this congregation or your parents brought you here and you just kept coming. Maybe you had a friend who invited you. Maybe you just drove by and saw a sign or saw the building. Maybe you liked the music or the preaching or the sanctuary or the people. Whatever the reason that you became a part of the life of this church, it was *not simply your choice*. You were called by Christ and guided by the power of the Holy Spirit into the life of this church. It was *not* simply a matter of your personal preferences, but the Spirit of God stirring in your heart and mind to gather you into the Body of Christ. You are *here* because God has *called* you here.

And like the disciples and the Corinthians, God has called us from a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs and worldviews and personalities and preferences – black, white, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, rich, poor, conservative, liberal. God has called us all together with people that we might not choose on our own. And we might not always think the same or believe the same things about God; we might not always agree or get along. But we have been called here together by God. And as Edwin van Driel writes, “Even when we deeply disagree on what faithfulness looks like – even when our conversations halt, our positions clash, and our votes divide us – we nonetheless still stand on common ground. We still belong together, because the unity of the church is not based on the commonality of our responses, but on the fact that it is the one Lord who brought us together.”¹

¹ https://www.pts.edu/UserFiles/File/PDFs/14Dec_RethinkingChurch%20-%20Edwin%20van%20Driel.pdf

And van Driel says that if God has called *me* to be a part of this body, and God has called *you* to be a part of this body, then when we disagree, we cannot just separate ourselves from each other. We do everything we can to maintain our unity in Christ; to find a way to work it out and live life together. To *forgive* each other and *love* each other, despite our differences and disagreements. We don't just walk away from each other. We have to *hold on* to each other. Because our life together is not based on our personal preferences or individual beliefs, our likes and dislikes. It is based on the calling of Jesus Christ to *each* and *all* of us.

Because when we live life together like that, we make visible to the world what the gospel is all about. We show them that in a world so fiercely divided and polarized, it *is* possible for black and white, rich and poor, conservative and liberal to live life together; to *listen* to one another and *learn* from one another and *love* one another. That is our witness to the world of the love of God in Jesus Christ; that God is breaking down all of the walls that divide us and gathering all people together. And what a witness it would be to the world around us, to say, "It's not always easy, and we don't always agree, but we still *love* each other, and we cannot let go of one another. And if it can work *here*, maybe it can work *everywhere*."