

The Missing Piece, the Model Home

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(Philippians 2:2-4)

How many of you like to do jigsaw puzzles, maybe spread out a great big one on the table over the holidays? Well, what's the absolute worst thing that could happen when you're doing one of those puzzles? That's right—you look and look, and can't find that one piece you're looking for. Turns out you can't find it, because it isn't there. It's a missing piece.

Same with a deck of cards. You're trying to make a run and drawing card after card after card, all the way to the end of the deck. Only to realize that the card you needed is actually missing.

Yes, a missing piece can drive you to distraction, even if it's only a game. But how much more frustrating to await the fulfillment of a dream, only to find out that a key piece of the dream is missing.

On Aug. 28, 1963 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in which he said:

Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

These inspiring words, this inspiring dream, moved the hearts of millions of people more than forty years ago. It was a dream of equality, of opportunity, of brotherhood, of solidarity. Since that time we have made important gains in many of these areas. And, yet, there's remains a sense of frustration—the kind that comes from a missing piece.

So, what's missing? What do we need to make this dream come true? Let me suggest to you this morning that the missing piece is the Church of Jesus Christ.

“Oh,” you say, “but the Church has changed.” That's true. There was a time, even within my lifetime, when many Christians (at least white ones) were pretty satisfied with the historic racial status quo. Separate but somehow mysteriously equal kind of worked for them.

But now we've changed our minds. We're all created in the image of God. We're all equal. And, by golly, we even love all those people who don't look like us—at least from a distance.

Well, yes, we have largely changed our minds about what *ought* to be. And that's a good start. But then we pretty much stopped where we started. We have changed our minds about *what ought to be*, but we have yet to change the reality of *what is*.

It's kind of like the team that's all gung-ho about the game plan, when they're in the locker room looking at the chalkboard. But when they get out on the playing field, they more or less get their butts kicked. Because, despite this *sense* that things have changed, if you visit churches today, you'll see that the demographics haven't really changed much in the last forty years.

The Church, this institution that should be the locomotive of leadership is often the caboose of change. This institution that should be the bastion of racial inclusiveness has fallen far behind both the Army and the ACLU, both of which are far more committed to integration than most local churches. Yes, the Church is the missing piece, and until we find that piece and put it in its rightful place, the dream cannot be realized.

You see, this isn't really Martin Luther King's cause. Our solidarity, our unity, our love in Christ across racial lines—that's God's dream. Unfortunately, however, that dream remains DOA as long as the Church remains MIA. Our picture is on God's milk carton—missing.

People these days seem to be into signs and wonders. There are churches where people are casting out demons. There are churches where people are jousting with the powers of darkness. There are churches where miraculous healings occur on a regular basis. But where are the churches that have cast out the demon of cultural selfishness? Where are the churches that are jousting with the powers of internalized racism? Where are the churches that have healed the deep, historic wounds that ravage the very soul of our collective consciousness? Talk about signs and wonders.

What is the missing piece of the dream? Actual Christian communities founded on the principles that Dr. King espoused, congregations where Christ supersedes culture and brotherhood is more than just a slogan.

We here at Washington Community Fellowship are called to be such a congregation. We have heard that call. And we are answering that call, but we need to lean into that identity even more fully. You see, God is a developer in search of a model home. And that's exactly what we can be, if we will.

When Cindi and I were here in July speaking to the search committee and the elders, we had some time free and we went out and looked at some of the housing in the area. One of the places we stopped in was the Lovejoy Lofts nearby at 12th and D. They were still building, so you couldn't get in and see the whole thing. But what you could see was their model home.

They had one unit all fixed up to show you how lovely it would be like to live in the Lovejoy Loft community. They had furniture in there to make it look like someone was living in the place. It was done right, to display the developer's ideal.

That's kind of what God is looking for too. He is looking for a model home, where he can show what his community is designed to look like. Unfortunately, there are a lot of "before" units out there and not many "after" exemplars.

What would it take for us to become that model home of the cross-cultural Christian community? How can we supply the missing piece of the dream?

Look with me, please, at Philippians 2:2-4: "Then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

The Apostle Paul starts out by saying, "Hey, help me make my dream come true. That is, make my joy complete." And to do that requires like-mindedness or, literally, "of one mind." There seems to be both a vertical and a horizontal aspect to this agreement. First, it's important that we are all reading off the same script. That is, our minds are in tune, because we are all seeking to share God's mind.

But there is also a horizontal aspect to it. What Paul is telling them to do will not work if they are not in the same congregation and in contact with one another. They must be pulling together and for each other, committed not only to the same God and the same revelation, but to one another and to a common purpose that they accomplish together. In a multicultural congregation, this requires some special effort, because not everyone is going to begin with similar agendas.

As a parent, nothing will warm your heart quite like seeing all of your children love and enjoy one another. And nothing will trouble you like seeing barriers built up between them. This is how Paul thought about his children in the faith, and I'm sure it's how God feels about his children as well.

What steps must we take, then, to develop this unity across racial lines in God's model home? Paul proceeds to the next item, which is what I call "messy love." In verse 2 he literally tells us to have the "same love." So, why am I calling that "same" love "messy?"

Because in my experience, love in the abstract is pristine, but love lived out in a concrete reality is messy. Love, as defined in the Golden Rule, is to do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. And that's always hard, mostly because they are "others" and not you. But the more "other" these others are—the less like you they are—the harder it gets.

Therefore, love in a multiracial congregation can be messy. There is history and baggage; there are needs and wants that we might not anticipate. The distance that separates us has been created by a long legacy of destructive attitudes—attitudes that we pretend to have overcome—at least until we are forced to love up close and in person.

I wrote an article back in the year 2000 in which I asked: "Have our destructive attitudes really been eradicated by the Spirit of God, or have they been conveniently swept under the rug of historical amnesia and political correctness? Every time we use race or culture as a basis for rejection, fear, contempt, or superiority, we fail to love. Every time we refuse to appreciate the continuing consequences of past offenses, we fail to love. Every time we run away from the problem, or just ignore it into supposed oblivion, we fail to love. Every time we use someone else's cruelty to justify our own mean-spirited response, we fail to love. Every time we talk about someone else in a way which would strike us as offensive if directed toward us, we fail to love."

It is precisely because the practice of love is so hard and so messy, especially when race is thrown into the mix, that the victory of love done right is so sweet. Such a powerful testimony of the power of God. And, so, God is looking for a place where interracial love is done right to make that place his model home.

This kind of love doesn't just happen. It requires effort. But it also presupposes proximity. Which leads us to the next element that God expects in his model community—being one in spirit and purpose, as verse 2 tell us. I call this connected unity.

The minimum condition for unity is togetherness. Indeed, it's hard to even imagine unity where there is no contact. It's kind of like the marriage in which he lives in Arizona, and she lives in Maine. Everything is great. They've never gotten along better. But that's really not unity.

Even more oxymoronic than "separate but equal" is "separate but united." Jesus prayed for our unity in John 17:21. In fact, one of his last requests on earth, as he is praying at the garden of Gethsemane, is this: "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Unity implies some form of togetherness. "Well," you say "we are united with the universal body of Christ, even though we are not physically interacting with all those folks." And that's true. But that more ethereal spiritual unity is only meaningful to the extent that we are practicing practical unity with the people that we can or should be rubbing shoulders with. To claim oneness with the body of Christ *out there* when we are not one with the body of Christ *right here* rings kind of hollow. A bit like Linus in the Peanuts comic, who said: "I love mankind.. It's people I can't stand."

So, proximity is critical to unity. But, clearly, being close isn't the same thing as "being close." Some of the people who are most at each other's throats are right next to each other. So, how do we foment unity in a multicultural environment?

I'm interest in what Paul has to say in Gal. 3:26, 28: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Paul literally tells us that in Christ these distinctions don't exist: "there is neither... nor... nor. But, clearly, even if you are a Christian, culture does still exist. So, too, do social distinctions. And gender. Paul knew that. He actually spends a great deal of time addressing these differences that he says here do not exist.

Paul was not playing some mind-over-matter game here. His message, it seems to me, is that our commonality in Christ has to supersede any and every human distinction. All of these identities by which we are defined and by which we define ourselves on the horizontal plane have to come under the umbrella of Christ. And when they do, our differences become governed by our unity rather than having our unity governed by our differences. We must be first and foremost Christ followers if we want to be that missing piece and that model home.

So, we have seen the call to messy love and to connected unity. But it's one thing to bring people together and quite another to keep them together and make that congregational dynamic work. What is the grease that reduces cultural friction and keeps all these moving parts work smoothly?

Philippians 2:3-4 gives answers that question with what I call *sacrificial deference*. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Paul has said something profound here that provides a useful tool for navigating cultural differences. It begins with attitudes and then moves on to action.

If we want to actually love people in practical ways just as we'd like them to love us in practical ways, then we need to embrace a certain attitude. We have to consider them worthy of being treated as we would want to be treated. Who would you be most honored to have as a guest in your home? I'll give you a second to actually think of someone. Okay, now if that person actually came to your house, it would be easy to roll out the red carpet and do everything necessary to make them feel welcome, wouldn't it? Why? Because you consider them worthy.

You can, of course, bring yourself to serve or to help someone that you perceive as less worthy than you. Once or twice. For a while. But you can only do it occasionally, not consistently. Paul says not to do anything out of selfishness or conceit, because that makes you the most important person in the room. And, if you are, you're not going to be able to do what he tells you to do in verse 4, which is to act in a way that looks out for their interests more than your own. Whoever is deemed more important gets more attention.

It's not just our personal selves that we consider more worthy. We do the same thing with our own identity group, whether it's based on race/culture or just fill in the blank. We all have a tendency towards ethnocentricity—toward our way of doing things, our way of relating to the world, our way of interpreting experiences, our way of expressing ourselves. That's the default, that's the norm. Yeah, everybody else is ok, too, but maybe a bit weird. Even if I'm afraid to say it, my way really is kind of the right way, or at least the way that feels right.

By invoking the example of Jesus, Paul is invoking quite a radical attitude. In verse four he asks us to approach our interactions within the Christian community, and particularly in our own congregation, by asking, "How I can satisfy somebody else?" And, yes, as we said earlier, that somebody else has to be important in my eyes. But the flip side is that I have to be *less* important, and that requires what we see in the latter half of verse 3—humility. A humility that values others more highly than I value myself.

But wait. Isn't that kind of illogical? If I consider you better than me, and you consider me better than you, then doesn't that kind of cancel each other out? And who, then, is actually better?

Yes, it does seem paradoxical on one level, but relational logic marches to the beat of a different drummer. Because, far from canceling each other out, the result is that we end up serving one another, delighting in sacrificial deference, uninterested in fighting for our own preferences. We're more concerned about whether or not their tradition, their musical preferences, and their worship needs are being honored than we are about our own. And that's the grease that keeps the otherwise squeaky wheels running.

Yeah, but then who is actually more important? Simple. The other guy.

It is this attitude that makes a multicultural congregation attractive to those who may not look like the majority. It's hard not to be attracted to people who treat you like you really matter—and actually believe it. That kind of love can break down any barrier.

Once we have the attitude down, I believe the action comes quite naturally. Look at verse four: "Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

We're not talking about a negotiation of competing agendas. We're not talking about doing a little bit of this and a little bit of that to keep everybody happy. That's a secular model. Rather, our mantra must be making sure that other people are satisfied first, because we put them first. Especially those who are different from us. This is how we live up to our own hype and create a church for all peoples. And a model home for the people of God.

Deep in my heart I still do believe that we shall overcome someday. But someday doesn't come by the mere passage of time. Someday will come, when the Church, when our church, plays the unique role that only we can play. Someday will come, when we find more pleasure in sacrificing for another's good than in securing our own. Someday will come, when we provide the model home that has been the missing piece of the dream. Let it begin today.