

Building Community: Native Aliens

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Ephesians 2:11-22

We started this series on Building Community last week, and I want to back track just a bit to consider why we might be doing a series on “Building Community.” In one way, it might seem obvious. You have been planning this effort called an “intentional restart” since before I arrived at the church. That effort is about building the church through more people being part of this community. So this series would seem to fit naturally.

Last week we talked about God choosing us to be a family — to be an inclusive family in order to be a blessing to others — to be God’s representatives to the world. That is about casting the net fairly wide to include a variety of people into this ministry called First Baptist Church of Birmingham.

Today we are going to add another component of building community related to depth and maturity.

READ Ephesians 2:11-22

We have to begin today with horticulture and “t-budding” or grafting.

Back in the 1980s my dad, who loves growing things in the dirt, started a business called Cedar Lake Vineyards. Although it was a short-lived endeavor, it got my dad involved in various horticulture projects like t-budding.

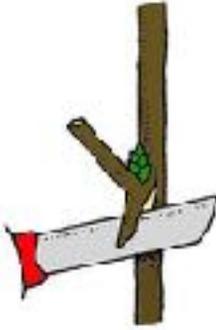
I learned from my dad that most fruit trees have the same kind of root. What I mean is that there is a certain variety of tree that has a great root system — it is virus and fungus resistant, it grows deep and strong and all-in-all out performs all other roots out there.

If you are growing fruit trees you will purchase a good number of these “root stock” trees. You then let them grow a bit to get a small but sturdy trunk.

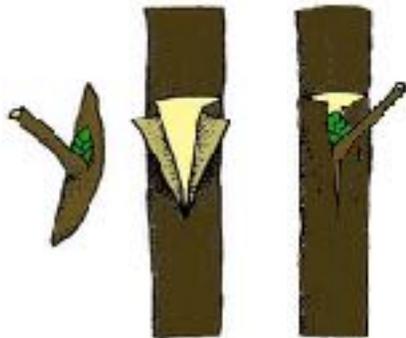
Then you will get a bud from the variety of fruit tree that you want to grow. (picture 1)

After that you go to your root stock find a spot low on the trunk and cut a “T” into the bark and peel back the bark. (picture 2)

Then you insert the bud into that “T” (picture 3&4) and wrap it up



with plastic. (picture 5) The plastic will keep the moisture in and create a sort of greenhouse inside to help the bud take hold to the root stock trunk.



During the following weeks, the bud takes hold to the root stock.



(picture 6) The trunk is then cut just above this new bud leaving only the root stock, and the new variety of fruit tree grows from there.



The same thing can be done on a mature tree. Let's say that you love Honeycrisp apples, and also Golden Delicious apples, but you only have room for one tree. You could begin with either variety of tree and use the t-budding process to graft on the other variety and grow yourself a tree with both that looks like this. (picture 7)



Grafting has been done for thousands of years. Romans 11 talks about a wild olive branch being grafted into an existing tree with a good root stock and then being able to share in the

nourishment that comes from the good and deep root.

From what root are we being nourished?

Sam Van Aken, is an artist and professor at Syracuse University who has been experimenting with grafting for a number of years. During the course of time he was able to graft 40 different fruit varieties onto one tree.

It looks like this during blooming season. (picture 8)



On one tree he grows peaches, plums, apricots, cherries, nectarines, almonds and more. He maps out the tree so that it is aesthetically beautiful as it blooms through the spring and then produces fruit throughout the summer. Here is a picture of the harvest of fruit from one tree. (picture 9)

He carefully prunes, fertilizes and shapes each tree over time as an



artist would a sculpture. It takes about 11 years before each tree is done, but it also takes attention and a lot of work to maintain.

Sam chose the number 40 as a symbolic number from ancient religion, culture, and government because it symbolizes the infinite: "a bounty that is beyond calculation."

Imagine if we consider that the Church God planted is like this tree and God is the root stock that nourishes us.

Adding to our number — grafting in more people is building the quantity in the Church. That is one way to think about how we build the Church.

Growing the Church is also about building the quality of our community as well. One kind of quality is diversity, like a tree of many fruits that are connected to a

deep and nourishing root. When the community is mature it produces such a feast of fruit!

The Holy Spirit is now calling us as God's family into maturity in our faith — to grow past the elementary ways with a deeper and more robust quality of faith.

In Ephesians 2, Paul is declaring once again that it is not only the Jews who can be tapped into the Holy root stock, but the Gentiles are absolutely part of God's plan and can be grafted in as well.

Paul is saying that God has joined into one family those who were born as Jews and those who were not born as Jews.

For Jews the dividing line was who had been circumcised and who had not. Circumcision was the sign of those who were part of the Jewish faith since the time of Abraham. All the males of the tribe were given the sign of circumcision to denote that they were chosen and part of God's family.

It was difficult to include those who were not circumcised because it was so ingrained into their culture that they were different from everyone else.

In our culture today, there is nothing resembling these sorts of divisions because it is clear that everyone plays together wonderfully well — especially those who are card carrying Republicans and those who are card carrying Democrats. We get along so well because we consistently and continually look beyond the labels to who we are as human beings and find a sacred way to agree to disagree about those things on which we differ. Just about every bill that Congress considers these days has a strong quality of bipartisan collaboration. Right?

It's quite the same with race and religious relations in our world today. These days, just about everyone in society embraces others regardless of their race, religion, or creed. We are all seen as brothers and sisters.

We stand with one another to support and embrace in both hard times and in celebratory times. This is why there is no more any racial or political divisions in America or the world. Right?

This is laughably and painfully not true. We have a long way to go.

The Church, with a foundation in the scripture that we read today

and being led by the Holy Spirit can lead a reconciliation campaign and truly be a light in this world.

However, unfortunately it has often been the Church that has initiated racism and created the divisions that we experience.

This is a painful reality that we need to own as members of the Church and take responsibility to change.

I recently heard a TED talk from two best friends, Caitlin and Lauren that might encourage us toward maturity as people of faith in relation to those who are different from us.

Caitlin and Lauren are best friends who find so much in common: they are both working moms, both love Colorado, and love sushi. They both love our country and share a desire to be politically active.

However, they find themselves on polar opposite ends of the political spectrum.

It goes without saying that our current political climate is polarized. We also identify ourselves personally with our political views. So, hearing any opposing view feels like a personal attack.

We place people in their respective camps and seem to have no space for respectful conversation or appreciation of others outside of their polarizing position.

This entrenched, positional, partisan environment has driven wedges between friends, families and churches as we have pulled ourselves back into our respective camps while holding a defensive posture toward who we think to be our enemy on the other side of the aisle.

So, how do Caitlin and Lauren manage as friends with such differing political views?

They are resolved to honestly talk with one another about what they believe — but not with an agenda to convert the other. Instead, they are committed to dialogue instead of debate.

Rather than standing in judgement of one another, they work to understand the other's experiences, values, and concerns.

They replace their egos and a desire to win with curiosity, empathy, and a genuine desire to learn.

They acknowledge that it takes hard work, but what they call their “bipartisan friendship” keeps them committed to the work.

So, rather than hang with her assumptions for why Caitlin could possibly vote for Trump, Lauren had a conversation with her about it, and learned to appreciate her struggle and dilemma resulting in her final reasons for voting.

And rather than remain irritated and angry with Lauren for taking her husband and sons to the Women’s March in Washington the day after the Inauguration, Caitlin had a conversation with Lauren and discovered that Lauren had thoughtful conversations with her family. She learned why they went together.

We can learn from Caitlin and Lauren’s experience but it won’t be found in the content of their positions and if they were good or not. We learn how their commitment to build the skill of dialogue with one another led to a relationship that could survive deep differences.

Caitlin and Lauren are a living sign of a growing maturity as human beings. They have moved beyond the adolescent, ego-driven culture

of right and wrong, winning and losing, of judgement, of partisan entrenchment, and division. They have found a way to love in the middle of diverse opinion.

Wherever you see love overcome sin, division, and hate, there you will find a sign of God’s work. I encourage you to take notice!

May this community that the Holy Spirit is building demonstrate the maturity of generous love in the face of division.