Unity

The blank page between the Testaments, Jesus' prayer for us, and the hostility that keeps the generations apart

SPEAKER	Thomas Cogdell
DATE	Sunday, December 5, 2021
PASSAGES	John 17:20-26; Malachi 4:6; Matthew 1:1; Ephesians 2:14; Ephesians 3:14-15; Matthew 5:21-24; Matthew 3:16-4:1; Luke 10:21; John 10:17-18; John 15:26
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:06:55 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus' one recorded prayer for his whole church is that we would be one as the Father and the Son are one — invited into the love of the Trinity, so that the world may believe. What opposes that unity is not difference but hostility, especially anger and contempt between the generations. So the hearts of parents must turn to their children and the hearts of children to their parents: go, listen, repent, forgive, and be reconciled.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The blank page between Malachi and Matthew is a bridge: the hearts of the fathers turned toward their son Jesus, and his heart toward them.
- Our model for relationships is not the patriarchs, who failed as parents, but the Trinity — a relational unity of distinct persons, not uniformity.
- Jesus' only recorded prayer for us is for unity, and it is also his only recorded prayer for world evangelization: "so that the world may believe."
- His deepest desire is that we feel the Father's love as he feels it, and that we be with him to see his glory.
- The enemy of unity is neither false unity nor distinction. It is hostility — the dividing wall Christ destroyed.

- Jesus treats anger and contempt as murder of the heart, and both run rampant between the generations in the church.
- The remedy is reconciliation: leave your gift at the altar and go.

▶ 1:08:17

Lisette had begun her October message by honoring the men, so Thomas returned the favor. Genesis teaches that the image of God is male and female, he told the women: "The world needs the part of God's image that you uniquely bear. Hope Chapel needs your leadership, your voice and your prayers." Then he asked them to vote in a poll.

A poll, and a blank page

▶ 1:09:07

A mother of several children has died, and you are a historian writing about her deepest desires for her children. Which source would reveal them best: recordings of her conversations with her husband about them, recordings of her secret prayers for them, a book of advice she dedicated to them, or letters she wrote each child on her deathbed? He promised to come back to the result. Then came a few funny signs from a series he calls "Missing Something."

▶ 1:12:21

The last "missing something" needed a story. Thomas and Amy helped lead Wittenberg 2017, a seven-year initiative with leaders from Europe and around the world "to grieve the great divisions in the church, which came about because of sin, and pray for Jesus to bring about the unity in his church that he is worthy of."

▶ 1:12:57

In October 2010, before his first trip to Wittenberg, John Bybee prayed for him and gave him a word: look for John 17. Thomas searched windows and pamphlets and found nothing — until he saw that Martin Luther's pulpit was open, which almost never happens. Hoping the Bible there might be open to that chapter, he climbed the steps ("I could always plead being an American") and found it open to the one blank page in the whole Bible, between the Old and New Testaments.

▶ 1:15:12

An appropriate image for this Sunday, he said, with the Old Testament series paused for Advent: "Here we are on the blank page between the Old and New Testaments." He did not know what to make of it until 2013, when Friedrich Aschoff, a leader of the German Lutheran charismatic renewal, responded to the story:

▶ 1:15:49

> "He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."
>
> MALACHI 4:6 ↗

▶ 1:16:27

And the first verse of the New: "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). The blank page is a bridge, Friedrich said: the hearts of Israel's patriarchs turned toward Jesus their son, and his heart toward his Jewish forefathers. Shouldn't our hearts turn toward them too?

▶ 1:17:12

So as the church pauses its Old Testament series, Thomas urged, take these fathers into your heart as they are in God's — and their descendants, the Jewish people today. He saw signs of that turning already, including Bob O'Dell at Hope partnering with an Orthodox Jew to create Root Source, which connects Christians with Jews who want to help them be better Christians.

▶ 1:18:27

And he believed God had a prophetic word for Hope in it: "the hearts of fathers and mothers at Hope Chapel turning to the younger generation, and the hearts of precious young adults in our congregation softening towards us who are in the older generation." Broken relationships between generations are everywhere — in the world, in our families, and here.

The unity of the Trinity

▶ 1:19:06

Where do we find a healthy model? Not in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who all made serious parenting errors, nor further back in Noah and Adam. We have to go back before the foundation of the world, to the Father and the Son: "not a monolithic singularity, not a uniformity, but a relational unity between distinct persons." Theologians describe the love between Father and Son as so full that it is itself a person, the Holy Spirit.

▶ 1:20:39

Scripture shows some of what that relationship looks like — "milk instead of meat," the parts we can begin to take in: peace, patience, confidence, blessing, transparency, trust, gentleness, attentiveness,

nearness, truth, submission, kindness, joy, sacrifice, humility, respect, responsibility, honor, tenderness, delight.

▶ 1:22:02

> "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness."
>
> MATTHEW 3:16–4:1 ↗

▶ 1:22:44

Jesus, "full of joy through the Holy Spirit," praises the Father (Luke 10:21). "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life" (John 10:17–18). The Advocate, sent from the Father, "will testify about me" (John 15:26). "Don't you want your relationships to look like this?"

▶ 1:23:29

The good news is that those who believe in Jesus are invited in. "It's as if the three persons of the Trinity were dancing this dance of love, and suddenly they opened up their circle and began beckoning to you, to me — come join, they joyfully cry. The blood of the Lamb has made a way."

Jesus' prayer for us

▶ 1:24:20

Where is that invitation? In the prayer before the cross — "the one recorded prayer from Jesus, the head of the church, for his body across time and around the world." He prays not only for the eleven, "but also for those who will believe in me through their word. Here we are." He could have prayed for many good things. He prayed for this:

▶ 1:26:02

> "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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me — so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."
>
> JOHN 17:20–23 ↗

▶ 1:26:50

"I firmly believe that this would be considered heretical to pray if Jesus our Lord had not prayed it first." And his only recorded prayer for us is also his only recorded prayer for world evangelization. "We may not understand why missions is connected to unity in Jesus' head, but it seems to me that we should take him seriously." He asks for complete unity — not half-hearted, false or partial — and the key is the glory he has given us: "Do we recognize the glory in our brother and our sister?"

▶ 1:28:38

Thomas recognized his friend Danny from Phoenix, president of Antioch Network, who has pressed into that connection between missions and unity for over a decade.

▶ 1:30:20

Then Jesus' one request about us: "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24–26). Thomas recalled Earl's sermon on the word *with*. "Our bridegroom wants to show off for us." And the prayer ends with its goal: "that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them" — the very love that is the Holy Spirit.

▶ 1:33:13

Back to the poll: the women chose the secret prayers, and a few the deathbed letters, as the truest window into a parent's deepest desire. "This combines both of those" — a prayer prayed to the Father on the way to the cross. "I believe this prayer lifts the veil on Jesus' deepest desire for the people of God."

▶ 1:33:56

And it is not primarily individual. Jesus prays for a corporate reality: that the unity between you and me, and between us and "those guys in the other church," would be of the same quality as the unity of the Father and the Son.

A foretaste

▶ 1:34:46

Hope had tasted it that very morning: worship was led by a Roman Catholic brother, Philip Owens, with his children Sam and Bethany — cross-denominational and intergenerational — and Philip "wisely led us to look and focus on what we have in common: Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

▶ 1:36:12

He showed another glimpse. The culmination of Wittenberg 2017, at the Reformation's 500th anniversary, was a day of repentance in Wittenberg's city hall: six hours of history, two of repentance, and then a Shabbat celebration led by Messianic Jews, where a worship leader called the 500 people to dance. "Nobody who was there will ever forget the joyous unity that the Holy Spirit visited us with that night."

▶ 1:39:01

The video showed five generations, sixteen nations, and believers from Catholic to Mennonite, Armenian Orthodox to Messianic Jewish — "just a glimpse, a small appetizer" of the unity of the Trinity. More people came from Hope Chapel than any other church, and the first chapter of Thomas's forthcoming book on the story is titled "Hope Chapel."

The enemy of unity is hostility

▶ 1:40:25

Paul echoes the invitation: "I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Ephesians 3:14–15). Parent and child find their source and goal in the Trinity. Every person is someone's son or daughter. So do our relationships between generations look like that list? "Sometimes yes, but if we're honest … maybe not so much."

▶ 1:41:48

Is the problem false unity, differences swept under the rug? It is a real counterfeit, but Scripture doesn't make it the main enemy, and "if we spend our time trying to stamp out shadows, the enemy has us right where he wants us." Is it division? No — there is distinction within the Trinity itself, and as Matt showed last week, the "one" of the Shema is the "one flesh" of two distinct people. "I am so glad, Amy, that you are not me."

▶ 1:44:45

> "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility."
>
> EPHESIANS 2:14 ↗

What opposes unity is hostility. Thomas focused on two forms of it, because Jesus focuses on them and because they mark too much of our intergenerational life.

Anger and contempt

▶ 1:46:14

> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment … and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."
>
> MATTHEW 5:21–22 ↗

▶ 1:47:10

Anger is a sin of violence, "murder of the heart," and angry words wound both hearer and speaker. Thanking Matt for preaching on the fear of the Lord, Thomas said, "We should be afraid to speak words of anger, but we are not." Both old and young feel angry, often because they feel threatened. Younger people say they aren't listened to and that their concerns are brushed aside.

▶ 1:48:45

And some in his generation answer with the second form: contempt. Calling someone a fool or an idiot is no less a sin of violence. "We claim to be people of the Bible but brush aside Jesus' clear warnings about contemptuous speech." Thomas said he had thought, said and heard such words himself, and sees them everywhere on social media.

▶ 1:50:36

Then he asked everyone under thirty-two to stand. "The hand of God is upon your generation, and the battle is fierce for your generation, and you need us standing by your side." Too often they have heard the older generation tear them down to build itself up, and minimize their concerns. "This is wrong. I want to say it very clearly: this is wrong. And I myself apologize to you. I repent, and I ask you to forgive me and our generation."

▶ 1:51:39

The younger generation shows contempt too, just as the older knows anger. Contempt breeds anger and anger breeds contempt, and unresisted they lead to thoughts and acts of murder. "This is all demonically driven," and the church has opened the door to it.

Go and be reconciled

▶ 1:52:30

So close the door. Fathers and mothers, turn your hearts to your sons and daughters, actual and spiritual: put away anger and contempt and speak affirmation, affection and love. Younger generation, turn your hearts to the fathers and mothers in your life: put away anger, contempt and distrust, speak honor and respect, "asking us to walk with you." But the damage is already done, on both sides.

▶ 1:54:21

> "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift."
>
> MATTHEW 5:23–24 ↗

Reconciliation removes hostility, repairs the damage and restores unity.

▶ 1:55:11

Instead of Hope's usual benediction, Thomas gave only its first word.

> *"Go — whether we are in the older or younger generation, whether we are the offended ones or the ones who have caused offense. Go, listen, repent, forgive. Go and be reconciled."*

To your brother and sister, your father and mother, your son and daughter: "go and begin to enter into the unity of the Trinity in new ways, here today at Hope Chapel."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Malachi 4:6 (NIV)
- John 17 (NIV)
- Matthew 1:1 (NIV)
- Matthew 3:16–4:1 (NIV)
- Luke 10:21 (NIV)
- John 10:17–18 (NIV)
- John 15:26 (NIV)
- John 17:20–23 (NIV)
- John 17:24–26 (NIV)
- Ephesians 3:14–15 (NIV)
- Ephesians 2:14 (NIV)
- Matthew 5:21–22
- Matthew 5:23–24

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What does the image of the blank page as a bridge between the Testaments stir in you about how we relate to Israel's fathers and their descendants?
2. Which words from Thomas's list of the Trinity's relationships do you most long for in your own relationships?
3. Why do you think Jesus tied his prayer for our unity so closely to the world believing in him?
4. Where have you seen anger or contempt between generations — in the church, your family, or your own heart?
5. Whom do you need to go to this week — to listen, repent, forgive, or be reconciled?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Thomas Cogdell and Amy helped lead Wittenberg 2017, a seven-year initiative with leaders from Europe and around the world to grieve the divisions in the church and pray for the unity Jesus is worthy of, culminating in a day of repentance at the Reformation's 500th anniversary. He has written a book telling that story, whose first chapter is titled "Hope Chapel."

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEu2B9RI0-g&t=4015s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.