



Circle the Wagons
Part 1 We're All in this Together
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Isn't it something, all the opinions flying around? If you have an opinion on COVID-19, would you raise your hand? Could I just see that? How many of you don't have an opinion? Good for y'all. You have an opinion, Jim Brawner. That's the biggest lie you've ever told in church.

Isn't it something though when you think about unity? Let's just talk for a second. Patriotism is something that we've seen as a bond in our nation. I'm a patriotic pastor. I don't know about you, but if you remember after 9/11, that unity that we felt for those weeks after that because we were in mourning together. But then did you see how it faded and went away? You see this happen often.

I think we had great unity as a nation in the first couple of weeks of this. When we were asked to stay home to slow the spread, we said, "Let's do that. It sounds responsible to not overwhelm the hospitals." You didn't have much debate or arguing going on. I didn't experience that with family, friends, or church members. But then when the tone changed from stay home, slow the spread, to stay home and eradicate the virus or stay home until it's gone, then things started to change; people started to have opinions.

And then... We didn't even see this coming, but we knew it had to be coming – the idea of reopening. The reopening was as controversial, if not more controversial than shutting down. You want to talk about just even the last few days what I've been experiencing from other pastors or other churches. Again, it's not really fair to compare what's going on at Woodland Hills in Branson, Missouri to a church in Southern California. It's very different. We've had 12 cases in the last couple of months and I don't know if that's changed since yesterday when I checked. And we are taking every safety precaution.

But you've seen pastors now start to debate one another. I actually heard a friend say earlier this week, and he put it out there on a video. He was encouraging churches not to do what we're doing today, not to do social distancing church services. He actually said these words and I'm going to quote him. Kids, don't quote me. This is a guy from Southern California. They use a little more colorful language there, but I have to quote him so you can know what I wanted to say back. He said, "Socially distancing church services – the quality of those services will suck."

I typed out my reply and my reply was, "We're going to suck the best we can." Oh, a few of you are clapping, but let me tell you... I did not hit the enter button. Look at you... See, the rebels are in here today. That was half the staff. I told them what I did, and they were like, "I hope you hit reply!" No, I didn't.

I am married to a godly woman who has taught me how to use the backspace button. And we'd be a lot further along in life had I listened to my wife and all the men said... Amen. That's right! So, I hit backspace, backspace, backspace...

How many of you held back opinions during this season? Would you raise your hand? How many of you are proud of yourselves for doing that? Would you raise your hand? How many of you have not held back? Would you raise your hand? Okay, let me see. It is hard!

Today, here is where we start. *We're All In This Together*, so we circle the wagons. Ephesians 4 has been a guiding passage for us through this whole time. And not just for our church, but what our brothers and sisters in Illinois are experiencing and in Wisconsin and Michigan and Minnesota and Florida and Texas and California and then our brothers and sisters around the world.

Ephesians 4 - ***2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*** When you do Bible study methods classes, they teach you to be a fly on the wall. Picture the words coming through to the original reader. Paul is writing to the Ephesians and I want you to get his heart. He's wanting them to be one. He's wanting them to be united and a lot of us have different opinions on masks, on vaccines, on all sorts of issues that are going to be discussed, but at Woodland Hills Family Church, we're placing those in the non-essential category, that you and I can still be one, we can still be united. But the only way we can be is what he's talking about here – humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another in love.

3 Make every effort to keep the unity... And do you know what you need to know about “make every effort to keep the unity”? Backspace, backspace, backspace. That's what I need. ***...of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*** And all God's people said... Amen. That is where we have our bond; it is in Christ.

The bond we're talking about today is stronger than the bond we have in a flag. This bond is the bond that holds us together as followers of Jesus. We are bound together in Christ. You hear a lot of people talk... “Where have I found comfort?” I have to tell you that over the last two months, this church has been an incredible source of comfort for me. Watching you respond to each other and watching you respond to this community. Watching business owners wrestling with doing the right thing, how they've been called to minister and serve even in their place of work. Watching theaters and shows and hospital workers and banks and restaurants and fast food chains working as one in this community. Followers of Jesus Christ, it's been something to watch. It's been something to watch in this church.

I haven't received a lot of comfort from celebrities in their homes, telling us, “We're all in this together.” I heard one say, “I'm cleaning my own pool now.” I was like, “Oh, really? I am sorry.” That hasn't brought me comfort.

I like satire. Does anybody here like satire? I need to let everybody know I love the Babylon Bee. I could write for the Babylon Bee, but then... I saw this. I need you to know that if you see an article from the Babylon Bee, Woodland Hills family, it's not true. Like most stuff you see on Facebook, it's not true.

People post like it's accurate, but I saw this: celebrities lined up their yachts to spell out "WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER." It just brought comfort to us.

So, you've heard this saying off this idea. **We're in the same storm, but not in the same boat.** Let me tell you followers of Jesus, we're in the same boat. Whether you make this much or this much, whether you have not been affected at all by this or now you're on unemployment and you're figuring out what happens July 25, when your benefits run out July 24. I pray you're thinking through that and not counting on government, but giving what God has called you to do and getting passionate about your work and getting back to it.

Wherever you are right now in this storm that we're in, followers of Jesus, because of Jesus, we are in the same boat. We're one because we're part of the body of Christ. A lot of different approaches over the last couple of months. Again, you know I don't have the gift of evangelism, I'm not an evangelist, I'm not called to be an evangelist. Alex Himaya, who will be here in a couple of weeks, is. I believe Joe White is.

So, a lot of pastors got excited when the numbers took off online and every church saw these numbers just explode with people coming to the church for answers and tuning in online. All across the nation I'm sure you can imagine those numbers are going down as the crises have gone on now a couple of months. We chose to leverage technology to be a local church and to lean in. Some say you have to do outreach and I get all that at the same time.

Here are the words of Jesus – **34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** The way you care for each other, the way you love each other, the way you pour into each other, the world will see that, people will see that, they'll take notice of that.

People have driven through some of our meet-ups over the last couple of weeks and they're like "What's going on!"

"We're just giving out free donuts."

"WHY!"

"They're donuts. Don't get all worked up over donuts."

"Who is doing this!?" It's like some kind of conspiracy theory.

"Just get your donuts. Right down there they are going to inject you with your biochip..."

We ain't got none of that going on, but you could just see people doubt when you're giving them free stuff. And then you say, "It's just our church wanting to do it."

"Oh, why is the church doing this? Why?"

“I’m done asking why. Move the dang car along and get your donuts.” You are known as a follower of Jesus by the way you live this out if you love one another.

I want to take you to Acts 2 which is the foundation for this whole series as we talk about fellowship. Alex is going to come at the end of the month and he’s also going to come in June. As you can imagine, we’ve been walking through this. Alex probably won’t reopen their campus until June. It’s kind of comical to hear two pastors talk about reopening because most of the time you’re like, “I don’t know.” “I don’t know.” I’m just sharing my inner thoughts with you as we go through this.

This is the first time we get this word in the New Testament: *koinonia*. It’s the Greek word for community. Acts 2 – **42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...** Here’s why it’s important to be devoted to the apostles’ teaching and to the teaching of Christ. I read an illustration this week in a commentary about this where... And Adam Donyes would do a much better job with this illustration, but I’ll give it my best shot.

In basketball, you want the shot to be in your muscle memory. Do we have any athletes in here? I see some people nodding. So, you know you want it in your muscle memory, so you don’t have to think about it. When that shot comes, you’re not even thinking about it.

That’s the idea here. Devoted to the apostles’ teaching means when something hits you, you don’t even have to think about it because it’s flowing out of you. It’s what you do. The teachings of Christ are a part of your life and you’re living those out. It’s automatic.

We had a debrief after the aid (?), Travis Brawner (he is an athlete), one of our elders, said, “It’s important to know because when the virus hit, it was just automatic. That follower of Christ knew the right thing to do. You just did it.” Some others were like *I don’t know how do we do this? Do we care for these people or not care for these people?* I’m grateful for our elders to say this is not a time for this church to hold back; it’s a time for this church to lean in and give more.

If I could just add this part. We’re going to take an offering at end of the message so don’t think about the offering right now, but some might have asked, “Did you regather because of money?” The answer is absolutely not. Offerings and money made zero difference in our decision to regather on campus. For the two months during quarantine, our offerings were up about 20% - 30%. If anything, we should have stayed in quarantine.

I’m just grateful that this is a church with no underlying health conditions. You understand a lot of businesses and churches are going to struggle with this because they had underlying health conditions going into this. They were over extended or over staffed, overbudgeted. They had no reserves and heavy debt. We have heavy reserves and no debt. So, we are able to do the stuff that we’ve been doing as a church because of your generosity. That’s why when this hit, being devoted to the apostles’ teaching... This is so important because this is what you are going to see throughout Acts.

From here on out, when *koinonia* is used in the New Testament, it's about sharing. ...**and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.** *Koinonia* means a commonness, but everywhere you see it in the New Testament, it's referring to sharing. There are two types of sharing. Let's give both of them to you.

Sharing something with someone. It's something that you have. We read in Acts that they had everything in common. No one claimed what they had was their own. Through all of this, some of you haven't been affected and, frankly, some of you have done better through this. We're going to encourage you with your giving to do more. Know the right thing to do, lean in. Other's have been going through great challenges.

I'm just going to share this as a church. Benevolence requests have been very low, almost non-existent. You know why. It's because this town has had an influx of money, like many towns in this country. Through stimulus and unemployment, people are doing very well until July 24. So, for many of you, this is a time to be generous. This is a time to share what you have to help other people. We felt that in August... We're not relying on other funds from government, we're being generous as a people. We know that there is going to be need in this community in August, September, and on, and we want to be ready for that.

But it's not just sharing the physical; it's **sharing in something someone else is experiencing.** The idea of being one in Christ together means we have shared suffering, we have shared mourning or shared grief. We've rejoiced together, we've worshiped together, we're sharing in life with one another. Those are the two ways *koinonia* is used.

James Packard defines the sharing idea this way. *Koinonia* is the Greek word for fellowship. It comes from the root meaning common or shared. So, fellowship means common participation in something either by giving what you have to the other person or receiving what he or she has. *"Give and take is the essence of fellow ship..."* You're pouring something in, you're receiving something. *"...and give and take must be the way of fellowship..."* of *koinonia* *"...in the common life of the body of Christ."*

It means that you and I are **sharing equally in both the privileges and the responsibilities.** But there are many that gather in the church that share in one without the other. It also means that we **share equally in blessings and burdens.** There are some saying, "I want to share in the blessings, but please don't call me when the burdens happen." That's not true fellowship.

A few years ago... This is probably ten years ago now, but a philanthropist contacted our church and he loved what we were doing with marriage and family. He wanted to make a gift to our church to help marriages and families in Stone and Taney Counties. He had sold his business. You can find a lot of this out online so I don't feel like I'm sharing too much. But he's giving away, in what he would call his sunset years, hundreds of millions of dollars.

He asked me to come to Atlanta to meet with him and his wife, so we went out to lunch and ordered our food. When the bill came, I said, "Steve, I'd like to get the bill." He looked at me like, "Absolutely not! Why would you get the bill?" We started fighting over the bill.

He's in that place where he's got lots and lots of money, so it's just assumed that he's the person at the table that picks up the check. I'll never forget his wife reaching over and grabbing his arm and saying, "Steve, let Ted pay for this." Now, before you think I'm a super generous guy, we were at Chick-fil-A, okay? So, it wasn't a big deal. If it were a fancy restaurant, I would probably not have fought so hard.

We take our food and we sit down. It was a great conversation because Steve said, "My wife is really helping me learn this. I need to allow other people to pick up the check so we can have fellowship together. I can't be the only one pouring into a relationship." Now this is very important, don't get income levels in mind here. You have to pour something in, and Steve said, "To have fellowship with you and for you and I to break bread together that we're both putting something in and we're both taking something out." This is important for fellowship.

This is my friend, Eugene. I hope Eugene is watching and hears this because it's a thank you from the Cunningham family. He was my interpreter in Tanzania last year when my family was there for the pastor's conference. We had multiple talks. He was standing there side by side for hours teaching and then doing Q&A. At the end of the week, he was taking us back to the hotel and he said, "I want to pick your family up later and my wife and I want to buy you souvenirs."

I remember my family looking at me like, "Dad, don't let him do that." Because you all, your generosity to the work in Morogoro, Tanzania, ministering to the camps there has been so generous. My whole family was like, "You're not going to let Eugene do this. Then we all, collectively, said, "We are absolutely going to let Eugene do this. We were driving into Morogoro and he gives us the rules, and I loved it. Eugene goes, "You can each pick something little out." It was so important to him. Amy and Corynn got fabric and Carson got a weapon and I got a rhino made out of wood. We went back and I said this is how fellowship works.

Here's the bottom line of the morning. **You will never experience true fellowship until you give something of yourself.** Have you ever heard anybody in a church say... During this time, we haven't heard this a bunch. "No one has reached out to me." My question for you is who have you reached out to? The bottom line is you could leave this church, go to another church and someone could call you every single day to check on you. Someone could call you every single day to check on you, someone could offer to bring you grocery every single day, someone could offer to pour into you, pour into you, pour into you, but I'm here to tell you that you will never experience true fellowship until you give something of yourself. And you'll be tired of that church and move on to the next church.

We see the two sides of this coin. There are those among us who give more than they receive, and you have to be really careful because this a recipe for burn out. We have many people that come to our church from other churches, not in our town, but in other communities and when they show up... Maybe they were on staff somewhere, but they show up and they're like, "Are you okay if we just sit here for a little while? Do we have to plug in right away?" We say, "Absolutely! You can refresh." That's because they've been in a situation where they've been giving, giving, giving and receiving very little.

But be very careful because you don't want to be on the other side of this where all you're doing is taking and not giving. You're not going to experience fellowship, true koinonia, the sharing of what you have with others and then the sharing in the experiences of others.

Let's take two minutes as we close out our service, pause and reflect. Online, we would like you to just take two minutes to discuss this. If you're here today, single, this is a time for prayer. If you're here with your family and you just want to pray... But just discuss this one question.

Pause and Reflect: In what ways do you share in the fellowship of your church?

We have had a hunger for fellowship during this time and many of you... I've met several who have moved to Branson during this time in the last two months. They've connected to our church online. For many, this will be their first day actually at the campus. Others who moved here are still waiting, but here's the question as we talk about fellowship, and we want to unpack this over the weeks to come. "How do I join fellowship?" "How do I be a part of this fellowship?" We have something here called Starting Point. We're going to give a creative way for you join even online if you're not coming back to campus right away. But here's the number one question you have to answer at Starting Point before joining the fellowship and that is do you have a relationship with Jesus Christ?

Here's what we read in 1 John 1... It's the source of our fellowship. It's where we find fellowship. We talked earlier about patriotism is finding unity around a flag and around love of country. When we talk about fellowship, we're talking about unity around the person of Jesus. **3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.** We want you to join our fellowship. **And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.**

Pastor John Piper says... This puts us in an eternal relationship. *"Fellowship is a mutual bond that Christians have with Christ that puts us in a deep eternal relationship with one another."*

In Romans 14: 7-9, we read, **7 For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.** We are in fellowship with one another because of Jesus. **9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.**

That's the question you have to settle. Online and in here today, over at the Cabin, Chapel, and those who are watching out in the parking lot. Because Paul has this same idea in Philippians 2 – **1 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ... Again, united with Christ and each other. ...if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded... We'll unpack that in the weeks to come. ...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... Are we getting that humility message today? I hope I am. 4 ...not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.**

And these have been the sweet times. Just one of the practical ways that we have done this... It's started at Chick-fil-A. We threw this together and there has been no greater violator of social distancing than this unicorn. How many of you drove by the lines at Chick-fil-A and decided not to stop? Yeah, there were about 2,000 meals served. Then we went to Andy's Frozen Custard. We have snacked our way through this, church family, and all God's people have said... Amen. We're going to make.

And then we went to Crispy Crème and she shares my exact sentiment about donuts. And then last week, we had the Mother's Day meet up with flowers and cold brew and cards for Mom.

We want to do another fun one. Again, we're doing these so we can stay connected as a family. So, we want you to know online we are one church, multiple locations today, but we would love for you to swing through on Thursday. It's a surprise meet up. We're not telling you. How many would like a hint? Okay, it's Thursday, May 21. Come to the WHFC Parking Lot any time. It's a surprise drive-thru meet up, anytime between 4:00 – 6:00pm for a special gift, a way to bless you and a way to bless our community. I guess that's a little hint that I wasn't supposed to give.

Make this a priority. We would love to see you. We just love being able to say, "Hi." I've been limited on the amount of words I'm to use per car, so I'm going to say hi, one sentence, and then I need you to move it along to get your chip implanted at the end of the parking lot. We're going to pray and as we pray, we're going to ask everyone in here and in the Cabin and in the Chapel to remain seated as we pray. You'll be dismissed starting from the back, a row at a time. Stephanie Watson and I are going to stick around and talk to everybody as you are being dismissed. Thank you for joining us online; we look forward to seeing you next week.

There may be some changes coming. We stumbled into something and I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, but let's try it. There were people sitting in their cars in the first service watching one of the jumbo screens we had outside so that kind of gave us an idea. We'll think through that and we'll let you know. They're all back there going, "He's talking too much; shut him down; turn his mic off!" Again, we're taking this whole thing a week at a time.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we thank you for the unity we have with one another, the fellowship, the community, the commonness, the sharing. We only have that because of you. So, we keep our eyes focused on you.

For those who are not part of our fellowship, but have been watching, that today would be a day they confess their sins before you, they confess that Jesus is Lord, they believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead that they would be saved. That today would be the day of their salvation and that they would become part of our church fellowship. We would love nothing more than for them to join our fellowship and to experience the unity that we've not only experienced the last couple of month and the community we've experienced through this quarantine, but over the last 18 years as a church.

We are so grateful. Thank you, Lord, for what you have done in this church family. We pray all of this in the name of Jesus. Everyone agreed and said... Amen