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**Circle the Wagons**  
**Part 4 – When Diversity Unites**  
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today we're talking about *When Diversity Unites*. I want to say a couple of things up front. Number one, this is not a political speech to unite a nation. This is a sermon to unite a church. This is speaking today to believers. I also want to ask, as your pastor, as we launch into this, that if my words don't come out just right, that you would please hear my heart on this. Today, we are living in a time where every word is thought through and I can tell you I've been waking up at all sorts of times throughout this week. At midnight sometimes, 3:00 am, 4:00 am, and thinking through words. I grab my phone and I put it in the notes section. So, we had a debrief in the 8:00 service and in that debrief, we cut some things that were shared, so please hear that in this.

This is hard, but this is part of the message that I was prepared for, but then I actually had to say something at 8:00 and I want to make sure it's clear going into this. I'm not here to tell you when to amen or when not to amen, but in the first service, I felt it on some statements made. Through our amens, I could feel the division in the church. Does that make sense? Some statements made were not amended as much; other statements made were amended a lot. Can I just ask you to really watch that today? Knowing what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, I get that, but today, we're talking about what it means for us to be united as a church and what it means that diversity is such a good thing for the church. We are one church, we have one Lord, and we are united.

Today, we have to talk about something because when I put these two pictures up, there is a lot of outrage today. This is where I had to watch the amens. There is a lot that we agree on and most every single person I talked to is outraged by the death of George Floyd. I believe it was a murder. That's my opinion coming at this. I believe it was senseless and every person I talk to agrees, whether they call it murder or a senseless death, most every single person I've talked to... I haven't met anybody who would say they don't want justice for him. We're on the same page there. I'm outraged by it, but I'm also outraged by David Dorn, a retired police captain in St. Louis, who loses his life trying to help. I'm outraged by seeing a police officer beaten by three people and not given the permission or feeling the authority to be able to protect himself.

We're all dealing with a lot of emotions right now. I don't put these pictures up here to stoke the emotion, but this hat and this shirt bring out a lot of emotion. Again, I'm not speaking to the nation today. I know people are tuning in from around the nation. I'm speaking to Woodland Hills Family Church, a body of believers who desire to be one under Christ.

There are those in our church who see this hat as a symbol of patriotism. There are those who see this hat as a symbol of racism. There are those who see this shirt and this statement as a symbol of racial equality, crying out for it. There are others who see this shirt as a symbol of rioting and looting.

I've had a lot of conversations this week with people. This week, I heard one pastor refer to this hat... A pastor who is a believer in Christ Jesus referred to this hat as a Klan hat. I've heard another believer... I had dinner with him on Tuesday night; he didn't know what my day looked like on Tuesday, but on Tuesday night, he said, "I went through my Facebook today and I unfriended every single person who participated in Blackout Tuesday." There's where we are.

I'm not talking about organizations today. I'm not even talking about a hat and shirt. I'm talking about these words that we see and what they mean to people. I'll say this upfront. I don't believe everyone who wears this hat is a racist. I don't believe everyone who wears that shirt is a thug. Today, instead of convincing someone else, I'm going to ask that you ask the Lord to search your heart this entire time. I have been. Some of you right now are already stirred up just by looking at... Some of you right now are mad with this hat on the screen. Some of you are mad with this shirt on the screen. Can we, as believers today, talk about it?

We've said it plenty around here. You know going into 2016... You can go back and look up the message; it was called NOTA – None of the Above. Because many believers were struggling with the 2016 election. They were struggling with choices that we were given. We stood up as a church and I said "I'm struggling." I've prayed for it since the very beginning and to this day because I know what I've been taught about leadership. One of the things I've been taught about leadership is when to bridle my tongue. And I have prayed before this congregation I don't know how many times, "Lord, would you bridle his tongue. Would we be united. Would we come together." And I shared that.

But, in that message, what was most important was that we stood up as a church and said these are essentials that we believe. I know there is a lot of emotion right now and Ryan Pannell has taught us this over and over again. Emotions are like our children; we should listen to them, we should care for them, but we should not allow them to make major decisions for our family.

What should make major decisions for our family is this right here: the Word of God. We stood up here and declared what essentials are. We said as we go to vote... I don't know if you know, but 2020 is another election year. We're back to the crazy all over again. I'm letting my emotions come out this morning. If you don't think it's crazy, I don't know where you're living.

Today, we have a lot of... I just talked to a worship team member back there and we have a lot of differences of opinion on non-essentials... a lot of differences of opinion. But on what we're talking about today, we are 100% in step with one another because what we're talking about today is an essential. We amended it when we shared it in 2016 and we are going to share it again today. It's the Imago Dei from Genesis 1: 27 - ***27 So God created mankind in his own image...*** The image of God in man is what gives every single person automatic intrinsic value, period!

There is nothing I can say to you or do to you that removes any of your value. When I honor you, all I'm doing is recognizing value. If someone dishonors you, it does nothing to your value because you're created in the image of God, period. I have not had a Christian argue with me on this one. **...in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.** I posted it this week. I have a dear friend who is watching right now that I have run everything by, even some stuff I shared at 8:00 and we're editing because we want to cover this well. We want to help our church. We want our church to not lose what I feel we gained through the pandemic, which is being a light to this community. We didn't waste the moment in the pandemic. We reached out to our community, we helped our community, we helped people. I am praying we don't ruin this moment. This is the moment.

I have pastor friends this morning that will be preaching boldly, as I hope to be doing as well, against the sin of racism. I hope they're preaching well, but, my pastor friends, I hope you also preach about life in the womb. I hope you're not one... because I hear pastors saying, "You white evangelicals, if you're silent on racism, you're complicit. I would say the same thing about abortion; if you're silent, your complicit. We don't get to pick and choose. I have pastor friends who are speaking this morning on racism and they, in ten years, haven't even touched abortion. I also have pastor friends this morning that talk about abortion all the time and this morning, they won't say one word about racism. I challenge both of you to the Imago Dei, the image of God in man. It gives us automatic, intrinsic value. People are valuable.

This is why growing up in Sunday school, we sang this song. "Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." **The Imago Dei, honoring the image of God in man means we see every human being, from every nation, tribe, and tongue, as personally autographed by God** – that you can give an amen to – **and highly valuable.** And all God's people said... Amen. That we can give an amen to.

In Acts 17: 26... This passage hit me this week. I don't know why... Acts 17 to me... Paul, before the Areopagus, it feels to me like a blend of Ravi Zacharias and Lee Strobel standing before people and sharing the gospel of Jesus. He stands before the men of Athens and he presents. Maybe it's just the way my brain works, but in this great speech before them, in Verse 26 of Acts 17, he says, **26 From one man he made all the nations...** from Adam. God sovereignly created Adam and then, through Adam, he multiplied and formed the nations. Through it all, God sovereignly directed the courses of the nations. He was in it all. **...that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.**

That's the first point. Do you know what the second point is, the context of this verse? This statement in Verse 26 is a blow to Athenian pride, to the men of Greece, who thought their nation was the best nation. Their nation was superior over all other nations. Paul is saying, "Let me remind you where your nation came from."

I just want to say it clearly. This is one of the hardest things I knew I was going to say because the rhetoric must be toned down. I have a flag, the American flag flies out in front of my house and it still flies there since Memorial Day. I love my nation. I love being a citizen of the United States, but as a follower of Jesus Christ, I am called to love all nations of the earth, period. It is not racism to love your people,

but it is to love only your people. ***For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.*** I love our country, but I'm called to love all the nations of the earth. This is why as a church, we take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Years ago... Here's the struggle I'm having too. I'm just done with this we can only have conversation at a time in our country. We are adults and I pray that once the chaos starts to die down, this conversation doesn't go away. Please don't live your life according to the news cycle. If God is doing something in you right now, don't let the news cycle tomorrow abandon the conversation we're having right now.

I was in Minneapolis; I preach at two large churches in Minneapolis on almost an annual basis. I remember standing up... I was talking about honor. That's one of Gary Smalley's favorite messages that he ever taught and it's one that he placed in me. I'm glad that four years after his death, men that he disciplined are still going out and teaching people how to honor others, how to see them as highly valuable.

I'll never forget making the statement... I was going through all the people we need to be honoring and I made this statement and I've made it here multiple times. I said every single immigrant that crosses our southern border is created in the image of God and highly valuable. Every immigrant that crosses our southern border, whether legally or illegally, is created in the image of God and is highly valuable. It was silent. Afterward, I started getting messages. "How dare you speak about open borders." I said nothing about open borders. Can we learn to listen? I didn't give you my opinion on immigration. Do you think I have an opinion on immigration, yes or no? Yes, and guess who is not getting it this morning? You! But we all better have the same belief about the immigrant. And when they get here, whether legally or illegally, we treat them... Lord help us, we treat them with dignity and honor and worth. They are created in the image of God.

I sat down next to the pastor afterward and he was like, *Hey thanks for that.* I was like, *Hey, no problem. I know what you're going to hear.* May we never stop... ***What we think about people and how we treat people matters to God.*** That's what he told the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 10: 17-19, ***17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. 18 He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. 19 And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.*** Do you know what God is saying to the Israelites? He's saying, "My generous treatment of you should be how you treat other people. The way I care for you, the way I've been kind to you, that should be all the motivation you need; you need nothing else." That's how you should treat people.

In Leviticus 10, ***33 "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. 34 The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."*** That is motivation enough.

Do you know racism is not a new thing? Racism is not a new thing. Paul dealt with it between Jew and Gentile. And when making the offer of salvation, we read this in Romans 10: 12 - ***12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on***

*him...* Let's make it really clear here. The image of God in man gives you value. You get the image of God through creation. You become a child of God through salvation. Let's be very clear here biblically because this week, I heard people saying, "We are all God's children." No, before salvation, you are an enemy of God. Through Jesus Christ, you become a child of God. But Paul dealt with this the whole time because Jews and Gentiles, we ain't getting along, and he's saying, "With Jesus, we're one. We're dividing no more."

We read in Galatians 3... We're talking about racial, social, gender. ***26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God...*** We've been adopted. We're all this blended family under God. ***...through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free...*** Hold onto that for a second because we are going to see a picture of that in Philemon. ***...nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*** He has brought down the wall of hostility.

We read in Ephesians 2:14 - ***14 For he himself is our peace...*** Can I just encourage you during this time? If He is your peace, that makes you a peace maker. Does your social media reflect that right now? I'm just calling on all of Woodland Hills family. Those who are with the hat, the shirt, going back... Can I just encourage you? Be a peacemaker. Anyone can stir up strife. Proverbs says any fool can do that. Be a peace maker. Jesus Christ is our peace. ***...who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...***

If you get time today, I want you to read the whole book of Philemon; it's only one chapter. Onesimus is a runaway slave and he comes to know the Lord, he becomes a Christian. Paul is going to send Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter. I absolutely love this. Paul says to them, Onesimus is coming back, ***16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.*** If you don't think there is humor in the Bible, you're mistaken because when you go on past Verse 16, Paul says to Philemon, "Oh and by the way, if Onesimus owes you anything, charge that to me, but I want to remind you, you owe me your very life as well." If you read right past that and you don't smile, read it again. He's reminding them, you accept Onesimus as a brother in the Lord.

So, what can we do to not ruin this moment, to not breeze by this moment? What can our church do? What can I do, as I want to be a part of this conversation? I want Woodland Hills to have this beautiful picture of diversity in our church. We would love more diversity in our community.

One of the reasons Amy and I... One of our favorite Cities to visit in the country is New York City. We've gone there almost once a year for the past ten years. We love New York. We've mourned through all that's been going on. We walked to all these places we see where the buildings are being smashed and burned and looting is going on. We're like, Man, we've walked those streets."

One of the reasons we love New York and we love taking our kids to New York is because of the diversity. I love watching couples fight in 15 different languages. It's the same fight, different language. We've walked by people... I mean knock down drag out fighting. I have no idea what they're saying, but I feel your pain, bro. I love visiting churches. I visit a lot of churches.

I'll just say it. I believe Assemblies of God churches are leading out on diversity right now. I visit 50-60 churches a year and my brothers and sisters... I mean, to get into a church that is honoring people and loving people and welcoming people and inviting people is healing to the soul. What can our church do? How can we get better in this conversation. How can we come alongside our African American, our Asian American, our Native American friends and say, "We love, we hear you, we want to learn, we want to be convicted of the seeds of racism in our hearts. May the Lord call those out, may we confess those.

What can we do? We're going to start with one that you're hearing a lot of:

**Love** – I hear people at concerts say this a lot. We believe love has a name and his name is Jesus. Because of Jesus, we're called to love. Jesus makes it very clear to us. You can't get any clearer than ***Love your neighbor as yourself.*** –Matthew 22:39 Who is your neighbor?

- **Different** – Your neighbor is someone who is different than you. It's someone who doesn't look like you, talk like you, believe like you, vote like you. Who is your neighbor? Let's be even clearer with that. Your neighbors are young and old. Your neighbors are republicans and democrats. Your neighbors are Trump supporters and never Trumpers. Your neighbors are Christian and Muslims. Your neighbors are citizens and refugees. Your neighbors are citizens and immigrants. Your neighbors are red and yellow, black and white. They are precious in His sight. These are people that aren't like you, not like me. We're called to love.
- **Difficult** – But you go beyond that to not just different, but difficult. This is someone that doesn't just no longer looks like you, think like you, vote like you. This is someone who challenges how you look, talk, believe, think, and vote.
- **Dangerous** – Jesus doesn't stop there. In Matthew 5, he says, ***43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you...*** These are the words of your Lord and Savior. ***...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...*** Do you know what that means? I'm even called to love those who are dangerous, not just different and difficult, but those who are dangerous. This isn't just someone who challenges what I think, feel, vote, how I look. This is someone who threatens how you look, talk, believe, think, and vote.

Years ago, I sat in a church with thousands of pastors at a conference. And the boldness of a pastor... I'm grateful for this because the Lord started revealing in me attitudes of the heart. Attitudes like I'm only going to love people I like. I'm only going to love people that agree with me. President Bill Clinton was coming out to speak at this conference and this pastor started getting lots of hate mail. I'll never forget this. With the lower lip quivering, he said, "Someone in here among you Bible scholars needs to remind me when God changed the hate rule. Just explain that to me. When the president walks out of this stage, you will honor him and the office. You will stand for him."

Some of you need to be reminded of that because we've got more elections coming. And for some of you, loving a president is easy right now. For some of you, it's very hard. That could flip in the next election. Where will you be? Go over your social media feed. Everything you've challenged friends and family to do towards the president, will you do that when it's someone you don't agree with? Will you follow through with that? Love your neighbor, love your enemy.

**Listen** – We need to be doing a lot of this right now. In James 1: 19-20 we read, **19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.** George W. Bush summed it up for me this week when he simply said, "It's time to listen, not lecture." It's time to be a peacemaker. It's time to deal with what's going on in the heart rather than trying to convince the next-door neighbor. It's time for me to deal with what I have going on in my heart and not try to convince the family member who is so far away from what I believe, think, feel, and vote. I'm just going to listen.

**Confess** – This is what I really want to challenge you to do. There are two stories that I shared at 8:00 that I won't be sharing in this service. That's because when I was ten years old, riding in a car with my friends, and the dad, we came across an African American family flying a kite in the neighborhood where we were going to play football. I'll never forget the dad making a racial slur and we all laughed and went on about it. I was ten years old. I quoted the dad in the first service and we were torn. I even called friends between services. I'm not going to share the whole story with you... And then a church secretary at a church I served at using probably one of the most offensive racial slurs referring to needing to clean her house before her guests come over.

It's interesting; this week I've been asking the Lord. I believe racism is a level six belief. If you're new to Woodland Hills, you can go back to a message I did last summer called the *Six Levels of Communication*. Level six is in the heart. There are messages written on the heart. Where do we get messages written on the heart? They come from things we saw, things we heard over and over again and eventually we started believing them. That's many of your stories. I believe every message on the heart has a story connected to it.

I was ten years old and 36 years later, I can still remember sitting in that car, where I was, which was on the far-right side of the back seat, the dad making the comment. I can remember the color of the car, the interior. I can remember it all. I said it in the first service. A part of my story, which I'm grateful for, is I'm 46 years old and in 46 years of living, growing up outside of Chicago for the first half of my life, having lots of diversity in our town and in our schools and friends and in my parents' workplace. In 46 years of living... Remember, with kids, they see everything, they hear everything, they forget nothing, and then they repeat. I am grateful that in 46 years of living, I've never once heard my mom or dad use a racial slur. I've never once heard them tell a joke about another race or nation.

I'm grateful for that, but that's not everybody's story. Some of you know these messages and you're like, "Well, I'm not going to dishonor my parents." You need to address the messages written on your heart. You need to share the stories.

I was grateful for one lady that came up to me after the first service when I shared the story and I used the racial slur in quoting this person. She said, "Thank you for that, grateful for it." She wasn't telling me not to do it, but she just said, "Hey, now I'm going to have to go home and tell my kids what that word means." I said, "Well, I'm proud of you. I'm grateful that your kids aren't hearing that come out of your mouth." For some, it's still coming out. This is a time to confess. This is a time to really address the messages written on the heart.

In James 5: 16 we read, ***16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*** We will always, in this church, root out racism. We'll always call it out. We'll always address it. We'll practice church discipline if necessary. It will always be part of who we are. Find freedom in confession. Find healing in confession. ***The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.*** The next one, after we love, listen, and confess...

**Invite** – I want us to think through and strategize what a more diverse church looks like. I pray that for Woodland Hills Family Church. Here's what I love about everything we're talking about this morning. Every single one of us gets to be a part of the healing of what's going on right now in our nation. We all get to be a part of it. Everybody watching online, everybody at the Chapel, everybody at the Cabin, everybody outdoors, everyone in their cars. We all get to be a part of it. May this church always be known as invite, come one, come all.

I love how Max Lucado puts it when he talks about Pentecost in Acts 2 and all the diversity that was there. Not that ended up in the church, that was in the church day one, the day of Pentecost. He says this, "*Consider the genius of God's plan. The first generation of Christians was a tinderbox of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least fifteen different nationalities heard Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Jews stood next to Gentiles. Men worshipped with women. Slaves and masters alike sought after Christ. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other?*" He answers that question when he says, "*The early church did—without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).*"

I am grateful when you read in Acts that you see this beautiful picture of the church. We also get a picture of what eternity is going to be like in Acts 2 42-47. We'll start in Acts 2 – ***44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.***

That's what we're going to do now. I encourage you to prepare the elements at home, to prepare the elements here as we take the Lord's Supper together. I'm going to give us a little bit of time. Take a couple of minutes to examine your heart and to prepare the elements. In the scripture, Paul says to a divided church in Corinth, dealing with much disunity, "Whoever eats of this bread needs to examine themselves. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgement on himself."

I encourage you that if you are not a follower of Jesus, this is not something that you need to participate in right now. We would not have you eat or drink judgment upon yourself.

But for the follower of Jesus taking the Lord's Supper today, I want to encourage you to prepare your heart. This would be a great time if a story hits you from your childhood of something your parents said over and over again and you know you look at African American or any race with hatred, any race with a disconnection, not wanting anything to do with them, this would be the time to confess. Pray before we partake.

Father, where there has been no love in my heart towards someone of another race, I confess that. I want none of it in me. If I get more worked up over a person dying yesterday or the day before because of the rioting than I do George Floyd, Lord, call that out in me. It's Jesus that brings the healing and for that I am grateful. It's Jesus that gives us new life, a new heart.

The apostle Paul said, ***23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."***

***25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.***

From the first church until now, we've been praising our Father in heaven that we would praise him with great diversity because we will spend eternity with great diversity. So, if I can just say to the Woodland Hills family, let's get started now. On earth as it is in heaven.

In Revelation 7: 9 we read, ***...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*** And all God's people said... Amen.

Father, we stand today, recognizing that all men, all women are created in your image. They are valuable, they have worth. Anything in our hearts, anything in our words, anything in our actions that come against that value, convict us. Have the Holy Spirit call us by name that we would confess that. May Woodland Hills be a church that invites all. May we, on earth, have what I know we'll experience and have great joy in heaven, praising with every nation and tribe and tongue.

We're grateful for a church that's never been afraid to talk about difficult conversations. May we not pick and choose what we want to talk about and may we be true to your Word. May we root out, clean out, confess all racism. We denounce it today as destruction of the image of God in man.

May we do the work individually today. May we lecture less online trying to convince people who are different than us, or difficult or dangerous. May we do less of that and be peacemakers, starting with us.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, that today that would be the start. They would confess with their mouth and believe in their heart. They would confess their sin before you and ask Jesus into their life to be the Lord of their life.

We pray all of this in the authority of the good name of Jesus. And everyone agreed and said... Amen