



Week 1 Preaching Resources: Celebrate Diversity

Scripture Passage: 1 Corinthians 12:12-20

Focus Statement: As the body of Christ, we are called to celebrate the diverse ways God is reflected in each and every person.

ME: Share a story about a time when differences were celebrated and where they were needed. (For example, if you do wooden puzzles, you realize that many of them don't have the same piece twice. Each has a unique color and shape, with interlocking patterns. You need each unique piece in its place to see and celebrate the beauty of the whole picture!)

WE: Many people struggle with issues of self-esteem or self-worth. We commonly compare ourselves to others, thinking others are better than us in some way—smarter, more talented, more beautiful, etc.—but God has created each of us to be unique and special. Each person inherently belongs and is needed in the kingdom of God because we were created by God for it. We are called to celebrate our differences as they reflect the breadth, depth, and width of God's image in humanity.

GOD: This passage uses the metaphor of a body to describe the necessary diversity of human beings, particularly, as they work together as "members of the body of Christ," (the church community). Using the body metaphor also emphasizes that our differences are *embodied*, not only differences of talent or perspective.

All people are sacred and important to the body of Christ exactly as they are. Notice in verse 13 that people do not have to change or become the same as one another to "drink of one Spirit." It is in and with their differences that they are made to drink of the one Spirit. This was important for the Corinthians to learn because Corinth was diverse ethnically, culturally, religiously, and economically. Followers of Jesus (both Jewish and Gentile) had a lot of questions about what practices they had to do or to leave behind to be part of the church. This is part of Paul's answer. People can remain different and still be united by the Spirit—in fact, it's what makes for a healthy church body!



God's vastness is reflected in the diversity of creation. As God created each of us to be different, our differences must be celebrated. As Paul writes about each part of the body being unique and important, we must remember that each person is also unique and important. No one part of the body of Christ is more important than another.

Sometimes, especially in the church, we downplay our differences because we want everyone to feel equal and know they are equally loved. While it is true that we are all equally important and loved, our differences are not problems to be overcome or unimportant details to be ignored; they are *gifts* to be celebrated. Our differences allow and enable us to work together, like a body with different parts that work together, to build the kingdom of God. Each person, different as they are, is necessary to reflect the work that God has called us to do.

Verses 15-17 warn against comparing ourselves to others as though one set of "body parts" is better than another. Instead, Paul encourages us to lean into and celebrate the fact that each of us was created intentionally. Just as the foot should not wish to be a hand, because a foot has been uniquely created to be a foot, so should we celebrate what each person brings to the body of Christ, even when the presence of difference might be challenging or look different from the way we ourselves are used to doing things. As each person is celebrated for the things that make them who they are, it allows for each individual to be honest about who they are and live authentically.

Invite your community to acknowledge those on the margins, who may not "fit the mold" of what is considered normal, average, or typical, especially for your congregation (e.g., single young adults, undocumented people, people who speak other languages, disabled people, people of other faiths, etc.). How does their absence, or ignoring or erasing their differences, affect the way the community experiences the diversity of God's good creation? How might the community be worse off for not including, celebrating, and embracing these differences? Just as, if not more important, how might the absence of people with these differences, or ignoring or failing to celebrate these differences when they *are* present, create harmful experiences of Christian community?

YOU: We all desire to live openly and authentically as we are, and we do this best when we can celebrate what makes us who we are as individuals in the community of faith. Encourage congregants to think about differences that make them feel self-conscious or "less than." Encourage them to stop comparing with others and offer some ideas about how to reframe these differences as attributes to be celebrated. Consider also inviting people to think about how they *truly* react to differences in others, especially differences that make them uncomfortable. How might they begin to see these differences as part of the diversity of God's creation and move towards celebrating them?



WE: Highlight differences that are not necessarily celebrated or talked about in your context. How do those differences help us to see the vastness of God? How can your community celebrate the differences that often go uncelebrated? What would it look like if we not only welcomed or tolerated difference, but if we celebrated it? Think about how your church community can celebrate the vastness of God's creation in your community.



Week 2 Preaching Resources: Celebrate Unity

Scripture Passage: Ephesians 4:1-16

Focus Statement: Celebrate that unity does *not* mean uniformity! Our diversity is knit together in the unity of faith as we grow into Christ.

ME: Share a story of a community that is meaningful to you in some way, one that has helped you to celebrate who you are but has also helped you to grow and mature.

WE: Community and belonging are huge parts of how we understand ourselves, how we fit into the world, and how we function it. Most of us belong to a variety of different kinds of groups. Offer some different kinds of groups as examples (e.g., book club, sports team, age groups – children, retired, family units). Have people think about the groups in which they can be most themselves and which groups encourage and celebrate their growth. How has being part of those groups been better than “going it alone.” Now think about what unifies those groups. Help your congregation define unity. Unity can be understood in many different ways, but once you have a clear definition in mind, it can be measured and celebrated.

GOD: All things are from God and the vast diversity of creation reflects the vastness of God. Remember that last week we celebrated how all the differences in our communities reflect the richness of God’s being. This week we celebrate the unity of that diversity. The God we worship is a Trinitarian God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and yet, somehow, God is still one. It is difficult to wrap our minds around a God who is three-in-one, but even without fully understanding it, we can appreciate that relationship and community are at the core of who *God* is, the God in whose image we are made. (Verse 4 talks about each “person” in the Trinity but repeats over and over again the oneness not only of God but of God’s people and all creation: “...above all and through all and in all.”)

Because we have been created in the image of the Triune God, *all* people are inherently good and worthy and find the fullest expression of themselves in their relationships with others. The world around us often sends misguided messages about the importance and role of unity and community. On one hand, we are told to work against each other, given the impression that for us to win, someone else must lose. On the other hand, when community is encouraged, we often get



the message that in order to be unified, we must act, think, look, and believe the same way (and often in distinction from a real or imagined “other”/outsider/enemy).

Instead, God asks us to be a community that celebrates our diversity in the midst of our unity. What does it mean to be a community that celebrates our diversity while also celebrating our unity? The passage describes a number of characteristics of such a community: growing together with gentleness, humility, patience, and “bearing with one another in love,” and to do so by choosing to live in peace. (Remember false/superficial peace is just as unhealthy as false/superficial unity). Paul tells us that we should make every effort to keep the peace of unity. Along with telling us to “bear with” one another, the idea that this will take effort tells us that we can expect it to be difficult and require work! We may fail at times. Unity is not easy, especially a unity that celebrates the connectedness of different people and communal growth in love. But this is the task to which God has called us.

This community that we are called to be a part of is one of discipleship, one that commits to growing and maturing with one another. Notice the movement and growth language in verses 11 through 16. Often, the appearance of unity and peace in a community is achieved by keeping things surface level or not talking about difficult things. Sometimes we don’t challenge others or allow ourselves to be challenged by others, assuming that in order to maintain unity, we should just let everyone (ourselves included) do or think whatever they/we want. But there is a difference between accepting and celebrating the differences that make us unique, and remaining immature or stunted in our faith because we refuse the kind of change that comes with growth. Paul makes it clear that we are all different, just like the parts of a body, but we all work together, again like a body, and this body needs to grow over time and despite growing pains (you don’t cut off the leg just because it’s sore!).

YOU: Each person you are preaching to belongs in a community that celebrates who they are authentically, that is constantly pushing them toward growth, and that supports them in failure. Ask them how they can seek to live together with humility, gentleness, love, and in peace. You may offer some examples of common challenges to living this way and how they might take small, practical, and concrete steps towards addressing them.

WE: Each one of us is searching to belong to a community in a deep and meaningful way. We are longing to be celebrated for making a meaningful contribution to the world around us. The Kingdom of God is built up by the community celebrating the movement of their connection. How can your community celebrate this new understanding of unity?



Week 3 Preaching Resources: Celebrate Promise

Scripture Passage: Romans 4:3, 13-25

Focus Statement: Abraham is a model of what it means to grasp hold of what God promises us through faith. Like Abraham, we can *embrace* God's calling on our lives, *believe* that God will do what God promises, and *take* courageous action.

ME: Share a story of a time when someone remained steadfast, even when it might have seemed like nothing was going right, but everything worked out in the end.

WE: We celebrate God's promise for us (our congregation) and for all God's children. We often forget to acknowledge that God's promise extended even and especially to neglected and marginalized people. We can find many examples in the stories of the Bible, in which God made and fulfilled promises to people who seemed unlikely to be at the center of God's story. Abraham is one of them, a man who would end up becoming the "father" of three major world religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam).

GOD: Briefly revisit the story of Abraham as told in Genesis 11-25. Some key highlights: Abraham began his new life chapter as an immigrant. He left his hometown and followed where God called him to go, no matter what, even though he was "too old" and despite the fact that the journey was too long and uncertain. God promised to Abraham and Sarah that they would have descendants that outnumbered the stars, and they remained steadfast in their faith that God would keep that promise.

Because of Abraham's faith in God's promise, he was counted as righteous. In Paul's letter to the Romans, he makes the point that God fulfilled God's promise to Abraham not because Abraham followed the law and got it right, but because he had faith in God's promises. Preachers, please note that there is a long and complicated history of interpretation of Paul and Romans on this issue, and it is worth treating carefully. He is writing to a church that has both Jewish and Gentile Christians in it. There was tension about who the true inheritors of the faith were and whether observing the whole law (Torah) was necessary even for the Gentile believers. Paul is not saying the law is bad or wrong, just that following it is not the basis for God fulfilling God's promises. Following the law, in and of itself, does not make us righteous.



Receiving God's promise is not about following the law and getting it right. God loves us and saves us even if and when we fail. First and foremost, God's promise is freely made by God to us! We celebrate this and accept it by having faith that God will do what God says and responding to this grace. The promise worth celebrating is that we do not need to be perfect throughout our life's journey, but that by faith, we can follow where God leads and experience the journey of grace. This promise helps us forge ahead even when things get difficult, "hoping against hope" (verse 18) and "growing stronger in faith" (verse 20).

Through our shared history of faith with Abraham, we, too, are brought into the scope of God's promise, which is both being fulfilled and is not yet entirely fulfilled. The specific promise is that Abraham will be the "father of many nations" (see Rom. 4:18) and "that all the families of the earth will be blessed in him" (Genesis 12:3). It is a promise about the broad scope of God's reign and blessing throughout the earth. Abraham did not get to see the totality of the promise fulfilled in his earthly life, and we join in a long line of journeyers who will only see partial fulfillment in our earthly lifetimes. But that line gives us reason to celebrate that, even in our diversity, our unity in the community of faith draws us into a larger promise that is on its way to being fulfilled.

Because God so deeply loves us for who God created us to be, we are continually a part of this promise of God's everlasting presence and steadfast love. The promise tells us that we are fully loved and fully known for who we are, that Jesus never leaves us, and that new life is forever and eternally ours through faith.

Abraham's story also reminds us how we can respond to God's grace and promise. He *embraced* God's calling for his life, *believed* "God was able to do what he had promised" (verse 21), and *took courageous action* in his faith. He was willing to leave his hometown, his comfort zone, and take a risk to embrace challenges and changes in his life so that God's promise could be fulfilled in, for, and through him.

YOU: God's promise is for all people, even for you and your church. Invite congregants to reflect on this question: How will you *embrace* God's calling on your life, *believe* that God will do what God promises, and *take* courageous action so God can fulfill God's promise in, for, and through you?

WE: How can we celebrate the promise that God is with us in all things, no matter what? How can we celebrate both the promises that have been fulfilled and those that we are still waiting to be fulfilled? We are called to enter together



into the promise with excitement and joy. Celebrate the promise that we all become a part of the families of the earth, blessed through Abraham in our journey.

Week 4 Preaching Resources: Celebrate New Life

Scripture Passage: Mark 5:35-43

Focus Statement: Celebrating new life is about celebrating how we are transformed for joy and to thrive.

ME: Tell a story about an experience that no one thought you would make it through.

WE: We tend to imagine “new life” being eternal life in heaven, beginning sometime in the future, after death, where everything will be all right and good. But restricting “new life” to what happens after we die does not allow us to embrace the new life that God is creating for us here and now.

GOD: This story can be a difficult one for some people, as not everyone who has faith will experience miracles. It may lead to questions about why some people are healed, saved from harm, etc., and others are not. Be sensitive to this and clear that we do not all receive new life in the form of miraculous healing, but that new life happens in all sorts of different ways. Further, an absence of supernatural miracles does not reflect an absence of faith.

Notice that Jairus continues to have faith even after the worst news has been delivered—that his daughter is now *past* the point of death (see Mark 5:23) and is now dead (Mark 5:35). In the face of this news, Jesus comforts Jairus with the words, “Do not fear, only believe.” And it would seem that Jairus did continue to have faith that Jesus would do something for him.

When Jesus arrives at the house, those who are mourning laugh at him when he says that the girl is only sleeping, and those who do not have faith are removed and do not witness firsthand the miracle Jesus is about to perform. Jesus takes those with him who are closest to him and those who have hope in Jesus’ abilities, and they become the firsthand witnesses to the raising of new life. Explore how sometimes our faith allows and helps us to see life in places where, without faith, we might not be able to recognize it or get close enough to it.



In Jesus' time, there was a very different understanding about sickness and sin, in which it was believed that sickness was related to having sinned. This would often cause a break with the community. Jesus' healing miracles are about restoring not only physical but also spiritual health, and thereby welcoming people back into a right relationship with one another and with the community/Temple. When Jesus restores the little girl back to life, he is offering her connection, community, and belonging again. How can we both have the faith and be open to receiving similar gifts of life from Jesus? How do we celebrate when we do? Consider sharing an anecdote or contemporary story that illustrates this kind of new life in relationship (even better if there is a celebration of it!).

The restoration Jesus offers is for all people—that in Christ we are taken out of our sleeping state and offered the opportunity to be able to live and thrive. Jesus did not just raise people to new life so that they could continue on in the same old way. Jesus raised people to new life so they could thrive, so they could celebrate, and so they could live transformed.

YOU: There are countless stories that we find in our communities about finding joy and celebration in the midst of things that do not seem like they should bring celebration or joy. It is not about finding superficial joy or “the bright side” to every situation; it is about celebrating that Jesus is bigger than death and that new life is about healing, thriving, and being the best version of you that you were created to be. Encourage your congregants to think about one sign of new life in their own lives and commit to celebrating it. If they cannot think of anything, maybe it is time to seek support from their church community or from professionals in whatever struggles they are dealing with (depending on what it is) so that they can begin to move toward healing. Yet others might need to put on “the eyes of faith,” to make an adjustment in their perspective and grow in their relationship with God, in order to be able to see the life that is in front of them.

WE: This might be a good time to recap and summarize the “Celebrate” series as a whole. The gift of new life we receive in Jesus is one in which diversity is celebrated, rather than being a cause for division. The gift of new life we receive in Jesus is a life of unity, born not from uniformity but growing together in faith. The gift of new life we receive in Jesus allows us all to inherit, along with Abraham and the people of Israel, the promise of the blessing that God is working in the world. Paint a picture of what new life might look like in the lives of your congregants and congregations and emphasize how important it is to celebrate it!