

Our Cities Are On Fire

by Carter Conlon

This sermon emphasizes the importance of unity, love, forgiveness, and generosity in the church, especially in the face of societal challenges like racism and division. It calls for believers to model the love of Christ, be a light in a dark world, and seek the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to overcome barriers and bring about positive change. The message highlights the early church's unity and impact, urging present-day Christians to walk in the same spirit of unity and love.

Scripture: Acts 2:38, John 13:34, Matthew 5:14, Psalms 133:1, 1 John 4:4, Ephesians 4:32, Romans 12:10, Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:14

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Love and Forgiveness"

Description

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Transcript

People are wondering, what does God's word have to say about this? What is our part in the go ahead strategy for the future? Can we actually make a difference as the people of God? Let's take a look at what the word of God says tonight. And then after I do, Pastor Tim Delina, who had to go home to Louisiana for some family matters, will be joining us via Skype to pray along the lines of what I'm about to speak this evening. And so Father, I just thank you, God, that as we talk about some hard topics, as we open your word, as you begin to illuminate our path ahead of us, Lord, you're the only one.

You're the only one who can be the light for our path. You're the only voice that can say, this is the way, walk in it. And you are the only source of strength we have to do what we know in our hearts is right.

So God, we yield our bodies to you tonight as a living sacrifice, and we ask you to give us the strength to rise above the tide of this moment in our society and in our world. My God, as your people, give us the power to be those lights set upon a hill that cannot be hidden from this generation. We recognize, Lord, that we don't have the strength within ourselves.

We have natural things inside of our lives that have to be supernaturally overpowered by your Holy Spirit, God, so that we might truly be the testimony that you call us to be. Give us grace tonight. Give us strength, my God.

Give us the power that we need, Lord, to be your ambassadors in this fallen and darkened world. God, we thank you for it in Jesus' name, amen. If you have your Bibles or a device where you can get the word of God tonight, I'd like to start reading Acts chapter two at verse 38.

And this is on the day of Pentecost when God's Holy Spirit came upon the people in a prayer room. They went out into the marketplace and a whole crowd. Now, this whole crowd, keep in mind, they had just crucified the Lord Jesus Christ.

They weren't in much of a mood for his followers. There was a violence, may I say. How much deeper violence can you get than killing the Son of God? And it was fresh, it was in the air, it was in everybody's conversation.

I have little or no doubt about that. And suddenly, a group of people who had been together in a prayer meeting stepped out into the marketplace. And if you can see it with me, the whole crowd stopped to hear what they had to say.

They were empowered by the Spirit of God to do something that only God can do through a people. Verse 38 of Acts chapter two, it says, then Peter said to them, that's to this crowd, repent, in other words, turn from the way that you're going. Turn from what you've been doing.

Turn from the way you've been thinking. Turn from wrong and turn to what God says is right. And let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.

And you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, turn from the way you've been living. And God says, I will, I will give you an empowerment of my Holy Spirit inside of your life.

In other words, to become much more than you can ever hope to be in your own strength. For the promises to you and to your children and to all who are far off, that would be us today, as many as the Lord our God will call. And with many other words, he testified and exhorted them saying, be saved from this perverse generation.

The original word really means crooked. Be saved from this generation that is destined to live in darkness, to walk in darkness, to do things associated with darkness, to are given to darkness. Be saved from this perverse generation.

Then those who gladly received his word were baptized. And the baptism was an immersion in water and it symbolized putting away this old way of living, this old way of thinking and adopting this newness of life that is promised to every person through God. And that day, about 3,000 souls were added to them.

Now this is the early church. This is the influence of the early church. And they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine that they gave good heed to what is true, what the word of God says is true.

And they put away the other thinking. And fellowship in breaking of bread and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.

Now all who believed were together and had all things common so that there was a sudden breakdown of selfishness. Old grievances were put away and suddenly people are looking outside of their own needs and they're looking to the needs of others around them. This was a supernatural work of God.

They were willing to part maybe with things that they thought belonged to them exclusively. And they were willing because they suddenly were thinking as God thinks outside of themselves, looking to the needs of others. Remember the Bible says that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son.

He saw us when we were in our fallen condition. He saw us when we hated him. And he came down to us when we were not even seeking him, went to a cross, suffered a terrible death so that we might be set free from both the penalty and the power of sin.

And suddenly that same spirit is upon these people who have opened their heart to the ways of God. And the first evidence of that spirit being upon them is they're given supernatural ability to speak to people that they normally wouldn't have been able to speak to and to give to one another in a manner that they normally would not be able to give. Verse 45 says, they sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all as anyone had need.

There was this, the immediate presence of God's Holy Spirit caused this outflow of generosity one to another, this care and compassion one for another that wasn't there. Mankind is inherently selfish without the spirit of God. And continuing daily with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. So in other words, they were walking in this newness of life and people looking at it found it to be desirable. I want you to, I'm gonna build on this foundation.

People are looking at the early church and they're saying whatever they have, whatever power has come upon them, whatever brought them together with this kind of power, we want to be able to live like that. And so they had favor with the people and the Lord every day was adding to the church, not so much doctrine. Doctrine is part of it, obviously, but it's the way they lived.

It's the kind of people they became. It's this bond of love and unity that is not attainable apart from the spirit of God. Now think about this, John chapter 13, verses 34 and 35, Jesus said to his own disciples, his followers at this time, a new commandment I give to you, a new commandment.

I've preached on this before and I've called it the 11th commandment. He was the one God gave the original 10. This is a son of God.

This is the 11th commandment. A new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all will know that you are my disciples.

If you have love, this kind of benevolent love, this giving love, this sacrificial love, this forgiving love. If you have this kind of love one to another, all men will know you are my disciples. And my brother and my sister, listen to me.

We are desperately in need of this testimony in this generation one more time. We are in need of all the walls that would try to divide us in the body of Christ. They have to come down by the spirit of God.

We are in need of this moment where people look at the church again and say whatever power brought them together in the unity they know, we need that unity. It's even more pronounced today perhaps than it has ever been because as you know, and as I know, our cities are now on fire in America. On May the 25th, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African-American man was killed by at least one white police officer by the use of excessive and unconscionable force which appeared to have strong racial undertones.

At Times Square Church, I speak now for the leadership of Times Square Church, for Pastor Tim Delina, our senior pastor, for the pastors, for the elders of Times Square Church, for the congregants, for everybody in ministry. We have always, for the 33 years of our existence, and we continue to condemn in the strongest terms possible those who abuse authority and any and all forms of racism. Let me say it really clearly, racism is evil.

It's an evil that propagates destruction and violence and heartache all throughout the world, and it belongs nowhere in the church of Jesus Christ. And by the grace of God, we will extricate it from our ranks in the future and believe God that we will be a testimony of the love and the unity and the benevolence that only God can bring into his church. The display of one police officer's knee on another man's neck is vulgar beyond words, in my opinion.

I don't have a vocabulary to describe the feelings in my heart about this, this absolute and arrogant abuse of authority, this vulgar display of... I don't have the words. It's opened again a raw wound in this nation, which has never, ever in American history, in my opinion, fully been healed. And so now the question is, what are we to do as the church? In the gospel of Matthew chapter five, and beginning at verse 14, Jesus said these words.

He said, you are the light of the world. A city that's set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father, which is in heaven.

As the church of Jesus Christ at this time, we are given the responsibility of modeling something to this world that's still possible with God. We are the light of this world. We are the city that's set upon a hill.

We are the ones who represent God in such a fallen time and such a darkened generation. We are to be a testimony that so shines in this generation that they may see something in us and of us that could only come from God and that they might turn and give God glory because of it. This is our opportunity.

At Times Square Church in New York City, we've been a church for 33 years that has over a hundred nationalities in it in one place. Many people have come in the door as we have worshiped God with true love and true unity. Yes, we've had our struggles over the seasons.

I know that we all do, but we've overcome these struggles and we're walking together, mixed together as one body, worshiping one God at one cross. And I'm telling you, people have walked in who have been guests in Times Square Church and no matter how cynical or hard their hearts have been, I've watched the tears start to come down their faces about 20 minutes into every service. People have looked around and I've heard the testimony and they've said to me, this must be what heaven is like.

Who but God could do this? Who but God could bring together a hundred nations, some of which are actually physically at war, these nations, but yet people from them are here sitting beside each other,

loving one another, caring for one another and worshiping the Son of God together. Only God could do this. I've heard it over and over and over again for the 26 years that I have been part of Times Square Church.

We are given that responsibility of modeling to the world. Now, what only God can do. This is a time for the body of Christ to be unified.

This is a time for you and I to come together to drop our grievances, our differences, our prejudices. If anything is in the human heart, take it to God and say, Lord, don't let me have any remnants of this in my heart. Help me, God, to see every man, every woman, every child of every race, every language, every place.

Help me to see people the way you do. God, take away this, anything from our sight, God, that causes us to propagate any form of division in the house of God. Don't let us be found among those who would prefer to do violence or to alienate or to marginalize any other people of any other place, any other culture, any other race.

God Almighty, what an opportunity to be of an opposite spirit than the spirit of this present dark world that you and I have today. And trust me, if we will let God do this in our lives, it will be attractive to this world. People will look and turn.

People are sick of the conversation. I'm talking about, yes, there are people in the streets that this is their whole raison d'etre. They want to cause trouble.

They want to make division. They want to propagate cultural wars in the country. You and I get that.

But the majority of the people are not like that. The majority of the people just want to love others and they want to get along. They want to learn how to forgive.

And as you and I do and have all through our lives, every one of us needs some kind of a role model, somebody that proves somewhere that this can be done. It's not just a pie in the sky kind of a wonderful theology that has no practical application. There has to be somewhere.

And that somewhere is in the body of Jesus Christ. It's in the church of Jesus Christ. There cannot be walls in the church of Jesus Christ.

And God forgive us for ever letting those walls be erected in any place, any town, any city, anywhere in the United States of America. Let this evil not be found in the house of God any longer. By the grace of God, may we fulfill the commandment that Jesus gave to us.

When he said these words, a new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this, all men will know that you are my disciples, that if you have love for one another, not a pretended love, not a feigned love, not just a vocal love that has no practical application, but people actually see that we do love each other. Oh God, only you can do this Lord Jesus Christ.

Only you can break down the barriers and the walls. Only you can forgive the ignorance of this moment and this hour in this nation. Only you can raise up your church Lord and make us what we ought to be in the sight of all men.

And as we saw in our opening scripture in Acts chapter two, we're not called just to love in word, but we're also called to love with our deeds. They continued in doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers, which is great. This is all of the things that we do in our churches.

Then fear came upon every soul. Many signs and wonders were done through the apostles and all who believed were together had all things common. All who believed were together.

Oh God, if that one truth could be realized in the churches in New York City, for example, right now, the great good that could be done for the kingdom of Christ. If the barriers that have even found themselves dividing the body of Christ could break down by the spirit of almighty God, we would be found praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord would add to the church daily those who were being saved.

We have a great opportunity that our testimony of unity can become desirable to all people of our generation, especially in this season where there is such hatred in society one for another. In this Matthew 24 season where Jesus warned that ethnic culture would rise against ethnic culture in the last days, that the love of many would grow cold, that even those in the body of Christ who professed to know God would be found without oil in their lamps. Could it be possible, could it be possible that the oil that has drained out of their lamps is the ability to love one another as Christ has loved us? Is that the oil that Jesus was speaking about? Is it possible that the spirit of the age has gotten into the church? Is it possible that the conversation that is out there that is generated by those that don't know Christ becomes our conversation? The animosity of the hearts becomes our animosity.

The division of their culture becomes our division. Is it possible that we end up speaking the same things that they do and we lose our influence when we are called to love one another as Christ loves us? Think it through. How can you be a light on a hill without oil? And how can you have oil without the presence of God? And how can you have the presence of God without loving one another? I don't think it's possible.

You can have religion, you can go house to house, you can break bread and you can even say prayers, but you will not have the presence of God and the church will have no influence. Now we know from that early church in the book of Acts chapter two, when they stepped out in the power of God, and yes, they had to forgive. In that upper room, there was the fisherman Peter and there was a tax collector Matthew.

Peter would have naturally hated Matthew and Matthew probably hated Peter. Matthew was a tax collector for the Romans. He was considered a betrayer of his culture and his society.

Only Jesus could bring these two together as one. Only God could have done that. But he did do it because when they stepped out, they stepped out in unity.

They stepped out with the love of God in their hearts. And Psalm 133 tells us that when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity, there's an anointing there of God. There's a presence there of God that's not found in the world.

A presence of God that causes God himself to command the blessing of life. Isn't that what happened when they stepped out of the upper room? When they reconciled one to another because of the cross of Jesus Christ. When they chose to walk in God's way, God gave them a spiritual empowerment to speak to people in other cultures and other languages.

God gave them an empowerment to break through the barriers that were wanting to dominate that particular society. And it opened the doorway for thousands to come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And if I may say so, with just 120 people walking together in unity and love and forgiveness, eventually Rome, with its violence and with its arrogance and with its supposed superior intellect and cultural lifestyle eventually bent its knee also to Jesus Christ.

It only took 120 people walking together in unity. And think about what could happen today in our cities. Think about what could happen in New York or any other place throughout the country.

If we would just simply make the choice to say, God, I will not be part of division. I will not be part of racism. I will not be part of what is dominating the darkened parts of our culture at this time that we're now living in.

But what I will be part of is unity and love and forgiveness and generosity. And I will also be part of a great ingathering of hungry people into the kingdom of God. This is what I will choose to be part of.

I will not let an ounce of racism get into my life. This has to be your prayer tonight because there's an overriding darkness now that's literally running rampant in our streets. And the only defense against it getting inside of you is the spirit of God.

Greater is he who is in you or in us than he who is in the world. Ask for the spirit of God. Ask for the ways of God.

Ask for the word of God to become your guide. Ask for the heart of God to become your heart. Don't be found associating with the darkness of this moment that we're now living in.

God's kingdom. I'll close with this thought. Then Pastor Tim Delina is going to come in on Skype and pray with us tonight along the lines of what I've just spoken.

God's kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness. I don't know about you, but I want to be an ambassador of that kingdom. I want my life to emanate forgiveness.

I don't want any bitterness to any person, no matter what they've done in my life. I don't want that to be part of my life. I want to walk with Christ.

So Father, thank you. Thank you for what you are going to do. Thank you, Lord.

God, thank you, God. Thank you that out of this evil moment in society, good can still come. Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh God, I do pray for the family of George Floyd. I pray, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God, my God. Have mercy.

Have mercy on his family, his brothers, sisters, all of his relatives, my God, and those that were close. And I understand that this man was trying to get right with you, Lord. I do pray, God, with all my heart that he found you as savior.

Oh God, have mercy on this nation in Jesus' name. Pastor Tim, over to you to lead us in prayer.

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