

APNTS theme for year:

“Break Down Walls –

Build Bridges –

Bond in Love”

SERMON THEME FOR TODAY:

Living Together in a Diverse Christian Community

Ephesians 4:1-3, 25-32

Periodically I was asked the question while serving as presidents of two Nazarene educational institutions: “What keeps you awake at night?” I usually respond that it isn’t tight finances – although we are always “pushing the envelope” for new programs, personnel, facilities and financial assistance for student support. And it wasn’t the enrollment - even though we wanted and needed to break through to new enrollment goals.

Rather, the gut-wrenching questions that drained me of energy by day and sleep at nights were these: Are students *growing* in their Christian faith while pursuing their academic disciplines? Are faculty and staff *maturing* in Christ-likeness as a result of working at this institution? When I could not sleep at night, I was usually pondering the *painfully conflicting and often irreconcilable expectations* I feel from seminary or university’s multiple constituencies: students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni community, pastors and the Board of Trustees.

And in the midst of these conflicting and often seemingly irreconcilable expectations, expressed through emails, letters, phone calls, and personal conversations, often asked myself the question, “Is it possible – really possible – to live in “*unity and peace*” at APNTS or MVNU?”

The “unity and peace” that is referred to in Ephesians 4:3, “*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Paul is speaking to Christians. He is talking about Christian living together in Christian community. His words are for us.

In the midst of our incredibly rich, yet potentially explosive, diversity on the APNTS campus, is it *realistic* to view ourselves as “*an academic community of faith, shaping Christ-like disciples and leaders for lifelong service and global impact?*” Is this a **fantasy** of our imagination, delusion of grandeur, OR is it a God-inspired conviction for which we humbly, yet firmly stake our lives to the glory of God?

When I moved to APNTS in 1984, it did not take me long to discover the rich diversity, various theological traditions, levels of emotional and spiritual maturity, and the conflicting expectations associated with that university campus.

Soon, very soon, I began to ask two questions.

#1: “How can we live together on this campus in such a way that our relationships are redemptive, not destructive, and a witness to unbelievers, especially within our campus community, of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”

#2. In the midst of conflicting expectations, differences of opinion, conflict of ideas, degrees of maturity/immaturity, varieties of traditions, and the uniqueness of cultures and numerous expressions of subcultures on campus, is it possible – really possible – to live and lead on this campus with “the mind of Christ”?

My answer was and continues to be a resounding **YES!** I give my life to this convictional affirmation. It is very definitely possible, **if** we reaffirm three fundamental convictions – convictions that will shape us at our best.

Conviction #1. We need to reaffirm, often, **who** we are as a Christian institution. We are an academic community of Christian faith.”

Nazarene faculty and staff on *this* and *other* campuses have heard me repeatedly speak of some of the *implications* of our **identity** as a Christian community of faith.

Implication #1. We believe that every student can make a difference for Christ, regardless of her/his vocational choice or academic ability. Whether students are accepted into Ph.D. program or into the English language program; regardless of the economic condition of their families, and notwithstanding the urban or rural environment of their high school communities from which you come to APNTS, we believe, really believe that “One person can make a difference in this world. We affirm to every student, “**You** are that person.”

Implication #2. We also believe that every student should come to the point of viewing herself/himself as a *world Christian with a global vision*. “Red, yellow, black, white – all are precious in His sight.” The world the whole world is the arena of God’s activity. God’s love for us *does not depend* on the color of our skin or the nation of our birth! [L] [SEP]

Implication #3. And, we believe that every student, following graduation, can *live a holy life to the glory and praise to God, regardless of where his or her vocational assignment takes her/him . . . [L] [SEP] . . . to Manila or Montreal; . . . to Calcutta or Cebu; [L] [SEP] . . . to Sydney or Seoul. [L] [SEP]* What we are, we are becoming. This means that we must now cultivate and develop a lifestyle of praise, worship, gratitude, devotion, respect, spiritual formation and faithfulness. [L] [SEP]

These *three critical implications are distinctive differences* of an APNTS education. [L] [SEP]

Again, “How can we live together as Christians in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ? **First** of all, reaffirming, often, *who* we are. We are an academic community of Christian faith.

Conviction #2. *We need to reaffirm, often, **why** we exist as a Christian community. We exist to nurture and shape the life of faith.* Can our vision of APNTS include another step;

“We are an academic community of faith,

Shaping Christian disciples and leaders....”

APNTS exists to communicate and nurture the life of Christian faith in the context of a quality graduate-level theological education setting. A Nazarene Seminary or a Christian university is the church at work in higher education.

[L] [SEP] But the task is not only to *communicate* the faith; our responsibility is the *nurture the life of faith* in every student regardless of where she or he is on the spiritual journey. [L] [SEP]

Courses are taught to increase your knowledge and strengthen your faith. Bible studies are formed for small groups to explore the Bible. Contemporary issues are addressed in classes and forums not just from a sociological theory but also from a Christian [L] [SEP] perspective. Chapel services are intended to inspire students to worship and [L] [SEP] instruct them in the faith. Service opportunities are encouraged both on and off campus.

Involvement in local churches helps us relate our seminary studies to congregational life, realities and responsibilities.

To repeat: We need to reaffirm, often, *who* we are as a Christian community, and *why* we exist as a Christian community.

Conviction #3: *We also need to reaffirm, often, **how** we are to live in a community of faith. We are to live as a Christ-like community **maturing** in faith, (individually and collectively).*

*We are an academic community of faith,
shaping Christ-like disciples and leaders
for life long service and global impact.*

Communities like MVNU and APNTS are *dynamic* laboratories wherein we learn *how* to live together as the graced, blessed and gifted children of God. This is our ministry! A dynamic laboratory! Therefore, we must be characterized as **a confessing, forgiving, affirming, praying, discipling, worshiping, disciplining, supportive and maturing community of faith.**

Sven Wahloos, in his book, *Family Communication*, encourages the reader make our communication as realistically positive as possible. He recommends “a praise to criticism ratio” of 80-90% praise to 10-20% criticism. Often the opposite is true of our interaction with others with the family of God.

Sometimes being emotionally honest necessitates criticism of another in an appropriate manner. However, 80-90% praise is needed and empowering. *Thank you. I appreciate you. You were helpful. You affirmed me. I am grateful for you.* Our praise cannot be superficial. Look for the positive. We can find it! Choose “praise” of others over cynicism, judgementalism, or negativism. Look for the good in others, not the opposite! Be known as one who encourages others!

We are talking about a life-long learning and growing process. We must understand that we live together as a Christ-like community, day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year, *maturing* in our faith.

You may ask, **so what? How specifically do the three fundamental convictions relate to me practically and personally on this campus? What are the personal day-to-day implications for me --for you --for us?** [SEP]

SOME SPECIFIC IMPLICATIONS:

Ephesians 4:25-32 spells out very specific implications for living together in an academic community of Christian faith.

#1. Eph. 4:25. *Be honest and not lie to one another* because we are members of “one body” (family) – whose head is Christ (4:25). In the process of being honest and not lying, remember the person about whom you are speaking or writing. He/she is my brother or sister in Christ. [SEP]

#2. Eph. 4:26-27. *“In your anger do not sin.”* Satan loves dissention within the body the Christian community We stay focused on principles and do not cross the line by attacking persons, persons like yourself, for whom Christ died. Satan laughs when Christians attack one another and create division within the body. [SEP]

Conflict management absorbs much of our time as leaders. It is expected within [SEP] this diverse community. *But be careful in attacking motives and ascribing judgments to others. Stay focused on principles and policies. In your anger do not sin.* [SEP]

#3. Eph. 4:29. Watch your words. *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen”*(4:29). Choose words that encourage others, not discouraging words when speaking to and about others. In New Testament terms, dialogue is a sacrament. [SEP]

#4. Eph. 4:31-32. *Practice forgiveness (often)! Be kind and compassionate...forgiving each other (4:32), (and don't harbor malice or resentment).* [SEP] You and I were forgiven when we didn't deserve it! [SEP] The result of this kind of living is a **Christ-like lifestyle** (5:1-2), [SEP] the life to which we are called to live as Christians.

Conclusion

Let me ask you: are you *stronger* in your faith since coming to APNTS? Are you praying for others and assisting them in *their growth* in faith? ^[SEP]

How can we as an institution change *our* ways to be both a strong academic institution *and* a strong faith community? Is there someone – faculty, staff, student, parent or friend *to whom you need to speak or write*, regarding some un-Christ-like words spoken or deeds done to the individual? ^[SEP]

Yes, it is possible to “live in peace” shalom – completeness-wholeness, in a diverse Christian community. *As we remember **who** we are as a Christian institution. We are a community of Christian faith; remember **why** we exist as a Christian community. We exist to nurture and shape the life of faith, and remember **how** we are to live in a community of faith. We are to live as a Christian community maturing in faith.* ^[SEP]

These convictions will characterize and shape us. They will also challenge us. ^[SEP] God help us! We stand in need of your mercy, grace, forgiveness and wisdom. Amen ^[SEP]

PLEASE STAND AND SING TOGETHER “THE SERVANT SONG”

The Servant Song *Sing To The Lord Hymnal* #678

Brother, let me be your servant,
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey;
We are brothers on the road.
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey thro'.

When we sing to God in heaven,
We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.

Sister, let me be your servant,
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant too.

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