



KNU International English Church

A LOVING COMMUNITY THAT CHANGES OUR WORLD.

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Nazarene Heritage Series Week 4: Unity

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-17

Numbers 21

⁴ Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, ⁵ and they began to speak against God and Moses. “Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?” they complained. “There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!”

⁶ So the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died. ⁷ Then the people came to Moses and cried out, “We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes.” So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸ Then the Lord told him, “Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!” ⁹ So Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!

Snakes on a Plane was possibly the worst movie made in the last ten years. The basic concept is that someone releases hundreds of poisonous snakes on a plane flying over the Pacific Ocean. They can't land, and they can't get the snakes out. Just so you don't have to watch it, let me give you the summary. It's a bad movie, and lots of people die.

At the risk of extreme cheesiness and possible biblical irreverence, I want to use snakes as a theme for our talk today on unity. You might call this sermon *Snakes in a Church*. Let me give you the summary. It's a bad problem, and lots of people die - spiritually.

In Moses' story, God sent the snakes as a punishment for Israel's complaining and lack of faith. In our story, the snakes are more the cause of the problems. Our snakes are our sneaky, sneaking sins that hide in the darkness, tell us lies, and masquerade as truth. They poison our lives, and they poison our churches. Both stories point to Jesus as the cure. Listen to how Jesus describes himself in John 3:

¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.

Unity is central to Nazarene Heritage. Our denomination emerged as a merger of various regional groups from a wide variety of backgrounds. After one of the mergers, a new Nazarene leader explained: "Here meet and mingle in blessed unity and fellowship a multitude of people once divided in many ways but now merged into a harmonized body of saints."¹

Bringing together such diverse groups necessitated an emphasis on unity and careful attention to the poisonous snakes that cause division. Today, I want to suggest four of the same snakes that threaten our church (and every church) and how Jesus brings us the cure.

First is the snake of **PRIDE**. Pride is a beast of a snake. Pride is big, hairy, and sneaky. Pride can act like it's doing the right thing for the right reasons, while all the while it's doing the wrong thing for the wrong reasons.

Most of the groups that merged into the Church of the Nazarene were regional groups led by strong regional leaders. Each of these leaders was deeply revered and respected by their own people. For mergers to happen, some leaders had to step aside to let others lead. Some leaders, like Horace Trumbauer of Pennsylvania, simply receded into the background after leading their groups to merge with the Church of the Nazarene. Other leaders, like Bresee, Hiram Reynolds, and E. P. Ellyson learned to share leadership by having three General Superintendents instead of one. All along the way, pride had to be laid down. Sometimes, the merger couldn't happen until the founding leader of the regional group died and laid down his pride once and for all.

Pride is a snake that ever threatens to attack us. We can easily begin to believe that we have more rights, that we are more right, or more righteous. Pride is a special danger for people who highly value intelligence and holiness. We can easily fall into the trap of considering others stupid and incorrect or unholy and ungodly. Beware, beware, the snake of pride.

The cure for pride is **HUMBLE SERVICE**. When James and John asked Jesus for the places of pride as Jesus' right and lefthand men, Jesus said *You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:25-28).

After the 1907 and 1908 mergers, there were three Nazarene magazines. Bresee's magazine, the *Nazarene Messenger* was his key connection with the world outside his local church. But Bresee and another leader laid down their printing presses in favor of unifying the publishing effort with *The Herald of Holiness*. Bresee's wife wrote to her friend: "We feel bereft almost that we will not have the *Messenger* but we feel that the *Herald* will ... meet the needs of all the people more fully than our own dear

¹ Isaiah Reid, quoted in Carl Bangs, *Phineas F. Bresee*, (KC, MO: Beacon Hill, 1995),

paper did.”² They gave up their pet project, which brought them glory, so that the larger group could benefit.

This week our small group talked about John Wesley’s “Covenant Prayer.” It is a classic description of the prayer of humble service. Instead of just reading it to you, I want to invite you to pray it with me now. The words are on the PowerPoint.

I am no longer my own, but Yours.

Put me to what You will; rank me with whom You will.

Put me to doing; put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for You or laid aside for You,

Exalted for You or brought low for You.

Let me be full; let me be empty.

Let me have all things; let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

You are mine, and I am Yours.

So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,

Let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

If we will pray like this every day, our church will experience such a unity with such power and purpose that God’s love will swell in us and change the world through us. Praying like this will crush the snake of pride.

The second snake is **CONTROL**. It’s a close cousin to pride, but it is like a chameleon. It has a million different colors because there are so many things we want to control. The early Nazarenes have many of the same struggles we still have today.

- They had disagreements about *worship style*. Some liked worship services to be quiet and traditional. Some liked flexibility, free expression, and new music. Through it all they tried to make room for all perspectives while still following the leading of the Spirit.
- They had varying opinions of quite a few points of *theology*. Some baptized babies; some only baptized adults. They had widely varying views on the end times. Formally and informally, they chose the middle road between extremes and gave each other freedom on debatable matters.
- Early Nazarenes also disagreed about *ethical choices*. Some of the hottest issues were tobacco use, gold jewelry (seen as a sign of wealth and pride), and the appropriate length of women’s sleeves. Some of these seem funny now, but these were make-or-break issues - issues some groups considered fundamental to holy living and rules other groups considered flagrant legalism. At one point, when the Southerners kept insisting on their rules, Rev. Brown, a leader from the Northwest, stood and said, “Mr. Chairman, let them go.” In other words, “We don’t need them. We don’t need to make any more compromises.” Bresee answered, “We can’t let them go, Brother Brown; they are our own folks.” Bresee knew that they needed each other and that they must find ways of living and working together. On some issues the

² Maria Bresee, quoted in Bangs, 248.

liberals accepted some of the rules, and on other issues the conservatives accepted some of the freedoms. But through it all, they remained committed to each other.

Bresee often quoted the 16th century Lutheran, Petrus Meiderlinus: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity [love]."³ When I was a seminary student, I often passed a plaque outside the library with a quote from Bresee. Finally, I wrote it in my Bible: "On the great fundamentals we are all agreed. Pertaining to the things not essential to salvation, we have liberty. To attempt to emphasize that which is not essential to salvation, and thus to divide forces, would be a crime. An unwillingness for others to enjoy the liberty that we enjoy in reference to doctrines not vital to salvation is bigotry from which the spirit of holiness withdraws itself ..."

Control is a sneaky snake. We can think we are being soldiers for the right, when all along, we are simply trying to control others.

The cure for the poison of control is **MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE**. Listen to how Paul points people to Jesus in the midst of a discussion about disagreements in the early church:

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ... So let's stop condemning each other. ... So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up. ... For even Christ didn't live to please himself. ... May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. (Romans 14:1, 13, 19 & 15:3, 5-7).

In the midst of our disagreements, we look at each other and say, "You are our own folks." We are one body. We belong together. If Jesus has given up his life to accept us, we can make space in our church for differing opinions on worship styles, theological points, and ethical standards. We do not have to control everything about our church. Instead, we can choose Jesus' path of humble acceptance. It is not always easy, but it is always necessary.

Here's another snake that often divides the church: **PAIN**. One thing you can be sure of is that people hurt people. Any time people get together for a long enough time, someone is going to get hurt. Pain happens everywhere, but it seems to hurt more when it happens in the church. We expect the church to be a pain-free zone. New hurts and old hurts can drive us apart.

The Church of the Nazarene was formed in the beginning of the 1900s. Most of the leaders had lived through the American Civil War. Northern Americans lined up against Southern Americans and killed more American citizens than in any other war in history. But the Church split before the nation split, with most denominations dividing along North/South lines. Talk about pain. Talk about serious baggage.

Yet, in 1908, Americans from North, South, East, and West joined hands to create the Church of the Nazarene. "Northerners and Southerners embraced each

³ Quoted in Bangs, 227.

other ... for the first time since the Civil War.”⁴ How did it happen? How were they able to avoid the snake of pain and its poison of bitterness?

They met the cure in the **FORGIVENESS** of Jesus who taught his disciples to pray, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” (Matthew 6:12). Paul again points us to Jesus:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:31-32).

You’re going to get hurt. Welcome to life. Don’t walk out. Don’t give up. Don’t talk bad to others. Step up. Go and talk to the person. Deal with the problems. With as much kindness as you can muster, tell the person how they hurt you. Listen to how you may have hurt them. Then forgive each other. This is the way of Christ. This is the way of freedom.

The last snake is the mother of all snakes: **FEAR**. Fear puts the hiss and slither into all the snakes. The backside of pride is a fear of worthlessness. The backside of control is a fear of losing what is important to us. The backside of pain is fear of being hurt again.

Fear is our driving and motivating factor far more than we know. We are afraid of failure. We are afraid of success. We are afraid of pain. We are afraid of shame. We are afraid of others. We are afraid of ourselves. More than we know, we live in fear.

And this fear drives us apart. Fear drives us to mistrust each other. Fear drives us to attack each other. Fear drives us to walk away from each other. Fear breaks down our faith in God. Fear is the core motivation for sin. Fear is the most poisonous, most deadly snake in the world.

What is the cure? The cure for fear isn’t courage. We can’t just decide not to be afraid. The cure for fear isn’t even faith. We can’t muster enough faith to overcome our fears. The cure for fear is **LOVE**. Listen to how John points us to Jesus for the ultimate cure for broken community.

⁹ God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. ¹⁰ This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

¹¹ Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other... ¹⁶ We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love. God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. ¹⁷ And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world.

¹⁸ Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced his perfect love. ¹⁹ We love each other because he loved us first.

So when you see divisions starting to arise, go to the root. Ask yourself, “What are people afraid of here? What am I afraid of here? Are they afraid of being taken for

⁴ Bangs, 255.

granted? Am I afraid of losing face? Are they afraid of losing control? Am I afraid that people won't like me if they really know me? Do they have some old hurts? Are they afraid of being hurt again? Get down to the root of it. Then show some love.

It's amazing how love calms our fears. When people know that we love them, they start to trust us a lot more. When we know that God loves us, I mean know it deeply in our bones, we start getting a lot kinder and gentler with each other. When God's love soaks us through, we stop being afraid of the same old stuff. We stop depending on each other for our value and approval. Our value comes from the God who loves us unstoppably. If God loves me like that, I can act with a little less fear and a little more love with you.

As a church, the real key to unity is staying focused on God's love. We don't let all of the side issues and pains distract us from the overall mission. In 1895, a flyer for the Church of the Nazarene explained how to keep the main thing the main thing. The Church of the Nazarene "is not a mission, but a church with a mission. It is a banding together of hearts that have found the peace of God, and which now in their gladness, go out to carry the message of the unsearchable riches of the Gospel of Christ to other suffering discouraged, sin-sick souls."⁵

We have a lot of snakes. The Church always has, and the Church always will. We can't fully get them out of the church because they come from inside us. But we can find healing. We're stuck with the snakes, but we aren't stuck with their divisive poison. Instead, we can band together as people are enjoying and sharing God's healing love.

The root of our healing is in the cross. God loves us so much that he died for us. Yes, we are broken. Yes, we are sinners. Yes, we have all kinds of mixed up, messed up ideas and opinions and preferences. Yes, we don't deserve our seats in this room. That's true for all of us. But God still loves us. God still forgives us. And because God loves us and forgives us and accepts us, we can love and forgive and accept each other. Because of God's love, we turn away from disunity and schism. We turn away from pride, control, bitterness, fear, and sin, and through Jesus, we turn toward humility, service, acceptance, forgiveness, and love. And this kind of loving community changes our world.

⁵ *Welcome to the Church of the Nazarene*, 3rd Edition, (KC, MO: NPH, 2002), 12.