

In Alabama, it's not just politics and religion that divide us. It's sports too. And there's no bigger agitator of this than the callers of the **<SLIDE #1-Finebaum>** Paul Finebaum Show. For many years, this radio show was based out of WJOX in Birmingham, but now is also a television show syndicated by ESPN. The show focuses especially on the SEC, where of course, football is king. And the Alabama/Auburn rivalry often takes center stage. There are a small handful of callers who have gained reputations and nicknames for themselves on the show, often by calling in and saying outlandish and divisive things. Much of it is the typical sports trash talking of devoted fans with a distinctively southern flavor to it. But at times, it certainly seems

to go beyond that, as divisiveness takes over and decency, decorum, and general civility go by the wayside. Callers scream and rant on the show, say ugly things - and of course, this is a big part of why people tune in. They want to hear the fireworks. I confess, this is why I listen at times. It was the Paul Finebaum show where Harvey Updike called in to proclaim to the world that he had poisoned the trees at Toomer's Corner. That's why the following story from the Paul Finebaum show is so remarkable: A caller named "Jay in Huntsville" explained to Finebaum that he "grew up in Alabama and was raised a racist." His father was in the KKK, as were all his uncles, and he was proud of it.

But in a decision that would end up changing his life in countless ways, Jay joined the Marine Corps in 1967 and ended up in Vietnam alongside a fellow Marine who he described as the “most militant acting and talking black person that was ever on the face of the Earth.”

They “tried to kill each other for the next couple of weeks, about every day,” until a gunnery sergeant took them aside and told them “next time that happens, you’re going home on a bad-conduct discharge.”

They decided to put aside their differences for the

time being, in spite of the strong animosity they continued to feel toward each other.

But once they ended up in a fox hole together in the jungle of Vietnam and the bullets started flying, things would never be the same.

“Over the next two years, he saved my life a couple of times and I saved his life a couple of times,” Jay explained. “And didn’t neither one of us want to leave Vietnam... but in ’69, we both had to leave.”

Jay moved back to Alabama to go to school and his newfound “well, I guess you could call us ‘friends’” moved to Detroit.

They kept in touch over the next several years as Jay earned his engineering degree in Tuscaloosa. But things weren't going quite as well for his buddy in Detroit, so Jay invited him down to Alabama to work under him at the company where he'd landed a job after graduation.

His friend went on to get his degree from UA, but the story gets even better.

“He decided he wanted to outdo me, which he always did, and he went on and got his Master's degree,” Jay explained, “so I wound up working for him.”

And then the bombshell:

“And 32 years ago come April 3rd of this year... I will have been married to his sister for 32 years,” Jay said, stunning Finebaum. “He was the best man in my wedding. We had two sons a piece. All four of them graduated from the University of Alabama.”

And four decades after they met each other in a war zone on the other side of the planet with hatred in their hearts, they’re best friends and live on the same street.

“We’ve had a good life and he lives about 3 houses down now and we still try to lie as much as we can

about our war exploits,” Jay laughed. “But it just goes to prove that anything can happen to a former racist... He turned out to be a lot better than I thought at first, and I hope I did, too.” **</SLIDE #1>**

<BLANK> In our Scripture this morning, Jesus emphasizes how much he is in the Father and the Father is in him. Jesus finds about four different ways to say it. Jesus and the Father spend quite a lot of time together. They get intimate. And as a result, they are one.

All of this is part of what is known as Jesus’ “Farewell Discourse” in John’s gospel. It is Jesus’ longest speech and it is part of the Last Supper in

Gospel of John. Jesus was celebrating Passover with the disciples. He washes their feet back in chapter 13. He gives them bread while at the same time identifying Judas as the one who would betray him. And then Jesus' long "Farewell Discourse" begins in chapter 14 and runs all the way through our Scripture today. In fact, today's Scripture, is really just the second half of the concluding prayer after the disciples finally and briefly react to Jesus' long speech. This Farewell Discourse is part of an ancient genre of rhetoric. </BLANK> **<SLIDE #2 -**

Quote> One commentator states, "Jesus' discourse at the supper corresponds to the genre of a farewell speech, such as were often attributed to famous men just before their departure." Moses had given a

similar, long farewell speech at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, just before his death. And like Moses would not cross the Jordan River into the promised land, neither would Jesus be physically with the disciples after his ascension. Today in the life of the church, we celebrate Ascension Sunday, commemorating the moment when Jesus ascended into the heavens after his resurrection. And Jesus' farewell speech tells the disciples the plan for how to carry on after his departure. Before our Scripture, earlier in the discourse, Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment – to love one another. He likens their relationship to a vine and branches. These things point to the fulness of what Jesus prays for in

our Scripture today – union with one another and union with God. **</SLIDE #2>**

<BLANK> Friends, this is the “promised land” of the New Covenant. It is what Jesus wanted for his disciples and so in his farewell discourse, he linked his mission to their future. And as promised, he did not leave them orphaned. He clothed them with a power from on high. </BLANK> **<SLIDE #3 -**

Quote> The union Jesus prayed for is consummated at Pentecost. And from Pentecost on, the lives of the disciples look far more like that of Jesus than they did during most of the time that Jesus was with them. Jesus returns to them in this union with God and in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

So what do we do to move towards this union with God that Jesus speaks of. How do we prepare for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost? **</SLIDE #3>**

Well, to share with you these divine secrets, I need to tell you about I chicken wing I once ate.

I am a chicken wing officianado. Now, typically, when you get chicken wings some of your wings are flat and others are the drumsticks. But one time I got this wing that I couldn't quite tell what it was - it was this monstrous franken-wing - neither a drumstick or a flat. I saved it for last because I wasn't quite sure how to eat it. But upon digging

into it, I realized that once upon a time, this Frankenwing was actually three wings. But over time, these three little wings had been through quite a lot together. I suspect they were flash frozen individually in a factory somewhere. Then somewhere along the line, perhaps they got situated at the edge of the bag or box and maybe when someone neglected to shut the freezer door completely, they started to thaw. But later, were frozen back together. Yet all of their other peers remained frozen individually. So when it came time for them to go into the fryer, the cook dumped them out of the bag into the basket. They were lowered into the oil and fried together. This served further to make them one rather than three separate

wings. And when they came out of the deep fryer, they were sauced together and then when my wings were counted out on my plate, they officially were no longer three, but one. I counted to be sure, this frankenwing, only counted as one of my ten wings.

This is what happens when different things spend time in close proximity to one another for an extended period of time, especially under pressurized circumstances. All of this has a unifying effect on things. This is what happened with my chicken wings. This is what happened with Jay from Huntsville and his fellow Marine who would become his best man and brother-in-law. This is what happens with any great team, organization,

marriage that travels through adversity and sticks together for the duration. This is what happened with Jesus Christ and the Father. It is what happened with the disciples and the emergence of the early church. And Jesus invites us into the same sort of relationship with himself, one another, and with God.

When you decide to follow Jesus Christ, you're going to go through some things together that will serve to forge you together with the Holy Trinity. But, you'll only be on your way to becoming one with God, if you spend enough time together that your identity, your ego melts a bit. Then, you're malleable enough to fit in a new pattern of relationship together with

someone different from you. And then when you share some adversity together, no longer will you be an “I and them,” but rather a "we."

Jesus words, however, don't stop at becoming one with God. Jesus, more than once in our Scripture, says that his followers should also be one with each other. Christianity isn't an individual exercise. This is the beauty of the church. It's an opportunity for us to be in close proximity with one another, with people, who are at times, very different from us. And we go through things together - good times and bad. And we become a body of Christ together. Many of you have been together for decades, even the better part of a century for some of you. You've

experienced all seasons of life together. And still there's more coming.

</BLANK> **<SLIDE #4 – Quote>** I believe at the heart of union with God and unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ – is one core gesture. The release of our ego, our carefully cultivated sense of self. Often times that ego comes in the form of the things we believe and the identity that we've cultivated for ourselves. And if we hold our identity and our beliefs as fixed things that are impenetrable to being moved, then who we are at the level of our core self, it simply cannot move towards union with God or even with other people.

When Jesus gives his farewell speech, he does not leave the disciples with a set of doctrines to believe. His commandment is to love one another, to abide in him, to become one with one another and seek union God. What we need is not an entrenched identity that as often as not actually inhibits love of others, abiding in Christ, union with God, and unity with fellow believers. Nor do we need to ace our theology exam, calibrate our doctrines precisely to some orthodox standard. Doctrinal purity, almost always, comes at the expense of the unity of the church. But if we care about union and transformation, if we care about growth, if we care about sanctification, about letting God make us into something more beautiful, more wonderful, more

faithful, abundant and eternal tomorrow than we are today, then there are times when our hearts most soften. It seems that God has designed the process by which we grow into something bigger than ourselves to be one in which we must be in relationship with those very different from us and go through the pressure cooker together. **</SLIDE #4>**

<BLANK> As our nation is torn asunder by shootings, and deep rifts widen around convictions held on abortion as our church navigates a historic split – what does Jesus’ great farewell speech and final prayer to and for his disciples mean in our own context? Here’s what I believe Jesus’ command to love and plea for union mean for those of us sitting right here, right now in a little church in Wedowee,

Alabama. The God who is with us even now, those who are sitting around you today in the pews are exactly what you need. It is how God has equipped you; how God has equipped us. We are for one another, for the world around us and for God who empowers us. We are for each other what we need to be in order to grow - not because we all think alike, but precisely because we don't. During this divided era, let us cling to one another, to God, and to love even more consciously than before. For we are going through the pressure cooker together. And on the far side of the pressure cooker – God will have done something with us – like God did with Jay from Huntsville and his future brother-in-law. God will bind us together in union with the Holy Spirit.

</BLANK> As John Wesley said, **<SLIDE #5 – JW Quote>** "As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we think and let think." and likewise Wesley said (though there is some dispute about provenance of this quote), "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity." In our divided times, this is the kind of church the world needs. And as a church, let us be so in love with the world, despite its many faults, that we never let ourselves be separated from the world, but rather love the world in the midst of its adversity that one day, all of creation will again be called one. Amen. **</SLIDE #5>**

Gracious God.

We give you thanks that you and the Father are one.

And that you invite us into this relationship too.

Let it be for us a model of loving others.

We confess that too often, we have been the sources
of division.

Declaring that we've had enough,

That this is the final straw

That we can no longer be in relationship with
someone else.

Help these times to be few and far between in our
lives.

And that far more often we are surprised, delighted,
and yes transformed

By loving someone very different from ourselves.

Amen.