

What do you think people look for in a church home? What kind of community do they want to be a part of? I expect that they want a place that is friendly and where people care about each other. Often times when I meet visitors they will share the story of past church experiences and those are not always positive.

If we could form any kind of community that we wanted, what would it be like? Maybe you'd say, "I'd like to have a community where everyone got along and issues were clear and there were no problems and we all thought the same way." It would be nice to have a perfect community, but is that realistic?

(show trailer from *Pleasantville*, available on You Tube)

The 1998 film, *Pleasantville*, shows a town where things seem perfect, where things are black and white and everyone is good and nice and helpful. The town is actually within a TV show depicting the 1950's, when television was only black and white. Through a unique remote control, two 1990's teenagers are transported into the show and into the town of Pleasantville. They experience this strange community, which isn't anything like the one they've come from. Where they come from, life isn't simple or easy or perfect. Teenagers fight, people make bad decisions, families don't always agree.

During the movie, the two teenagers begin to bring a new perspective into Pleasantville. A lot of that perspective is good and some of it is not. (This movie is not really for kids.) Slowly the people in the town begin to experience "color," and I mean that both literally and metaphorically. Things begin to change...again, some for the worse and some for the better, and the townspeople have to figure out how to live in this new reality where things are not perfect.

What kind of community do we want to live in as God's people? We, too, may want things to be perfect where everyone gets along and issues are black and white and we always make good choices. But that isn't reality...and Jesus knew it.

Jesus knew that we would fall short of caring for each other. Jesus knew that we would disagree and then act badly with each other sometimes. Jesus knew we would have problems that could tear apart relationship and community. And so Jesus, with the wisdom and compassion that only God can bring, speaks words in Matthew 18 that guide people in how to navigate this reality.

Jesus knew that being community was hard, but Jesus also knew that being community, when we do it well with truth and love and understanding, it can be the greatest blessing of this life. So much of what Jesus teaches in his ministry surrounds how to be with others well AND how to fix it when we don't do it so well. It was God's same goal as he guided the people of Israel in being together. It was the disciple Paul's same goal as he helped the church AFTER Jesus, to live together well.

Jesus' words in Matthew 18 appear in our Lord of Life constitution. Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Unfortunately, we often hear these words as the method to get rid of a problem church member, that these are the steps to removal. Actually, in the constitution this passage is cited so that we first go through an attempt at reconciliation, at correcting and restoring broken relationships. We are presuming, as Jesus does, that being in community will include times when we are sinful and hurtful with each other, that we won't be perfect. And so we will follow the wisdom of Jesus in attempt to repair and restore community.

Preacher and teacher, David Lose writes, "Authentic community is hard to come by. It's work. But it's worth it. Because when you find it, it's like discovering a little bit of heaven on earth; that is, it's like experiencing the reality of God's communal fellowship and existence in your midst. And, as Jesus promises, when you gather in this way -- with honesty and integrity, even when it's hard -- amazing things can happen because Jesus is with you, right there, in your very midst, forming and being formed by your communal sharing."

He then goes on to say,

“So what kind of community do we want from our congregation -- largely social, somewhat superficial (which is, of course, safe)? Do we want something more meaningful or intimate (which is riskier and harder)? Do we want a place that can both encourage us and hold us accountable? Are we looking for a place we can be honest about our hopes and fears, dreams and anxieties? Do we want somewhere we can just blend in or are we looking for a place we can really make a difference?”

What kind of community do we want to live in? One that pretends that there is no color, no contrast, no conflict among us OR one that recognizes and acknowledges it and then uses God’s plan and wisdom to work through it, knowing that God is with us as we do?

We don’t need to pretend we’re perfect; God doesn’t. God meets us and loves us as we are and points us to how we can live with each other honestly, joyfully, and truthfully. And yes, Dr. Lose is right that it is hard to come by, but it is worth it, and God blesses it.

Let us pray...

Amen.