

Seeing “Them” as “Us”

Well, we’ve come to the last week of our mission in focus series. I know you’re all torn up about it and wondering where you can get your commemorative souvenir t-shirt. We don’t have them, but maybe if you ask Keith really nicely, he’ll whip one up for you.

But actually, what I hope we’ve communicated to you over the last 5 weeks is that this is not the end, but the beginning of a new season. This is about to be an exciting place to be—a place where we are growing and learning a ton about all the ways God is able to transform people and reveal the masterpiece he created all of us to be.

I’m excited about it, because I believe that too often churches settle for the routine and ritual—giving the impression that Jesus died and rose again, overcoming the powers of sin and death just so we can be free to go church on Sundays. Maybe we’ve lost faith that Jesus can bring life from what was once dead. That’s the core of the Gospel.

So, from the first week, we’ve been learning to communicate the Gospel in a way people understand. Every person you see is **“God’s masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Eph 2:10)** We don’t recognize it because we’re all sin-stained, muddy and torn, sometimes completely beyond recognition. But even covered in mud, God wants to restore each of us.

But making a lasting impact takes more than individuals. It takes a whole community of people who see others the way Jesus sees them, values them the way Jesus values them, and are willing to reorient our lives around God's call. So, today I want to end this focus series by talking about creating a life-giving church culture that doesn't just preach the Gospel, but lives it. So what is culture and why are we talking about it?

Culture is *the spoken or unspoken rules, behaviors and attitudes of a group that cause us to do what we do*. Culture is like this. [what is water pic] Culture is kind of like the personality of the church. It's what you do when you're not thinking about it.

Culture can be *good or bad*. It can be inspiring and life-giving, or it can suck the life out of you. A little over a year ago my family was in St. Paul at my son's cross-country meet. On our way home, we stopped at a Wendy's to grab dinner. When we walked in, there were a couple of people ahead of us, but we made it to the register where a teenage boy took our order. While we were waiting, I noticed there was no one in the kitchen making food because the remaining employees were hauling bags of ice out to a pickup truck. Apparently, ice was only \$.75 so someone bought a million bags.

More customers got in line and the teenager at the register became increasingly uncomfortable. Everyone could see he was taking people's order and their money, but there was no one in the kitchen making food. We waited about 15 minutes before the employees finished with the ice and made our food. The food was fine, nothing special,

but at least we got to eat—which is more than could be said for Paul Pearson, who was behind us in line and ended up leaving before he got served.

We left the restaurant that day thinking a couple things. 1) *They don't care about their customers;* and 2) *they don't know what business they're in.* I don't blame it on the kid at the register. It didn't matter who was working. What we experienced was culture.

That experience was powerful, but what happened the very next day drove the point home. My daughter, Ellie, passed her driving test, so stopped to celebrate at a fancy restaurant—Chik fil-a. It was around the same time of day, but the restaurant was hopping. We were immediately welcomed with a smile. The helpful lady at the counter took our order and within about a minute another woman was standing beside us with two bags—“here's your food! Enjoy!”

The food was great but the service was amazing! There were employees wiping tables, taking trays and one of them even got me a refill. As the valet brought us our car (OK, that might be an exaggeration), I couldn't help but think about how polar opposite those two experiences were. And I believe it wouldn't have mattered who was working that day. I experienced two cultures. One was draining and the other was life-giving.

Know this...life-giving culture doesn't happen by accident. Draining culture does. I'm certain the manager at that Wendy's didn't get up in the morning wanting to disappoint his customers. He just let things happen naturally. On the other hand, the

manager of that Chik-fil-a didn't just happen to inherit good employees. She intentionally curated it that culture. The leadership is relentless about creating that culture.

Think about this...if paying attention to the culture of a restaurant that sells chicken sandwiches makes such a difference, imagine how much more important it is for the Church where people's lives and eternity is at stake? As a matter of fact, next to the power of the Holy Spirit, it's quite possible that the culture of the church is the most significant factor that determines whether or not someone experiences life here. That kind of culture isn't a show, it comes from the core of who we are.

Here's a life-giving culture in Acts 2. **"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."**

Here's another from Acts 4, **"³²All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the**

Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”

Now, do you think that happened by accident? Did the Apostles and the early church just stumble into this kind of community? Not at all. They knew their calling and they went to great lengths to create that environment. They taught it, modeled it, they were consistent and ruthlessly protected it. If you doubt that, just read the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.

Turn with me to Hebrews, chapter 13. Just like in the early church culture is key for us as well, because over the course of 2000 years, the mission of the church hasn’t changed. We’re called to model our ministry after Jesus, who didn’t come to condemn the world, but like he said in John 10:10, **“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”** With that in mind, I want to look at three simple commands to the church that I believe are just as critical today as they were at the time the book of Hebrews was written. Hebrews 13:1—3.

“¹Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ²Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels

without knowing it.³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

In this passage, we find three characteristics of life-giving church culture. The first is that it's a culture of *authentic community*. Verse 1, “**Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters.**” In English this verse is a mouth-full. But in the Greek it's only two words—“*meno philadelphia*.” *Meno* is to “keep on” and *philadelphia* should be familiar because of the city. Now it's ironic because the word is a combination of *philo*, which means “love” and *adelphos*, which means “brother.” Ironically enough, Philadelphia doesn't have a reputation for being particularly nice.

Now, I know there's always a danger in our day to associate the word love with affection—warm feelings toward someone. And I know sometimes we disparage that kind of love because it's too fluffy and fleeting. But that's actually the meaning here—that within the church, there should be deep friendship—an affection like family.

That was one of the characteristics of the early church that didn't make sense to the people around it. For instance, the Roman writer Lucian wrote this about the early Christians, “*Their original lawgiver (Jesus) persuaded them that they should be like brothers to one another...Therefore, they [share everything], and view [it] as common property, accepting such teachings by tradition without any precise belief.*” In other words, they treated each other in ways that are typically reserved for family.

Our small groups have three core values—Word, Worship and Friendship. Now, I know a lot of churches might use the word “fellowship,” but we decided fellowship was too churchy. Fellowship conjures up images like potlucks where you share some food at a church function, then you go home to your separate worlds.

But *friendship* communicates something different. Friendship means you identify with each other and you make time to hang out because you just enjoy being together. With friendship, you’re proud to say, “He’s with me.” “These are my people.” It’s one thing to “love” each other, but Hebrews tells us here that we should *like* each other, too. It means hanging out. It means grabbing coffee or lunch, going to a game. Strangely enough this is a bond that’s more than an obligation to love someone because “Jesus says I should.” I love because I feel like loving.

One other note before we move on. Authentic community means that we like each other as we are, not as we want each other to be. Close families know each other’s flaws and shortcomings and secrets and they stick together anyway. They’re not afraid to ask for help and they’re not afraid to give it. This kind of community is a community with nothing to hide and no condemnation for each other. We talk about this all the time—not only does that create genuine connection, but it creates spiritual growth because we’re not afraid to deal with our mud. Authentic community is life-giving.

The second characteristic of a life-giving culture is *radical hospitality*. Something really interesting happens in verse 2. It uses a word similar kind of word. In verse one, it's *Philadelphia* in verse two, it's *philoxenia*. From *phileo*, which is "love," and *xenos*, which means stranger or foreigner. *Philadelphia* is love for each other, *philoxenia* is "love for the other." It means anyone who is outside of your group. It's translated hospitality.

But biblical hospitality isn't making sure the house is clean and the salad fork is in the right place when you have people over for dinner. It's far deeper than that. It means to love those outside your community with the same kind of love as those inside the community. In fact, the goal of radical hospitality in the church is to move someone from *stranger to family*. It means seeing "them" as "us."

But people need time for that to happen. In fact, the church must be a place where people can *belong* before they *believe*. We have to be a culture where people can come as they are, with all their mud and sin and struggle and be embraced and loved even if things don't change as fast as we'd like or even if they never change. People today need to see that God is for them, not against them. And we know this is true, because God stuck with us, too. No one is perfect. There's plenty of mud to go around. **"But while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8)**

The most pressing question for people today isn't, "What should I believe?" it's "Am I worthwhile?" or "Will I be accepted?" People do think about what's true. It's not

like they never ask that question. It's just that the quest for acceptance comes long before the quest for meaning. And sometimes it takes a long time for people to sort out what they believe. As they do, we have to be willing to walk with them every step.

Finally, the church needs to be a culture of *unrivaled compassion*. Verse 3 says, **“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”** Now, why does the writing specifically mention those in prison?

The book of Hebrews was written at a time when Christians were being persecuted. It's possible that the writer was referring specifically to Christians who were imprisoned. Sometimes it was for their faith, other times it was debtor's prison, and sometimes there seemed to be no good reason at all. The word for “prisoner” literally means “someone in bondage.” What it seems like the writer of Hebrews was talking about is someone in a vulnerable state.

People in prison are certainly a vulnerable population. We might think, “Well, that was the Roman Empire. Sure, they were unjust, but today it's different.” Most of us in white America today think of prisons as places where justice is done. But there are others who aren't so sure—especially our black brothers and sisters. A couple of books, “The New Jim Crow” by Michelle Alexander and “Just Mercy” by Bryan Stevenson tell story after story of how the justice system is often not just at all.

Even if someone is in prison for something they legitimately did, it's also true that our prison system doesn't do a good job of rehabilitation. In fact, the demographic most likely to be sent to prison is those who've been there before. 67% of people released from prison will be re-arrested within 5 years. And not only are they vulnerable, but their families—usually a wife and kids are especially vulnerable to poverty and isolation.

It's easy to forget these people. That's why the writer of Hebrews tells us to remember them. Whether it's someone in prison, or their family, or someone experiencing health problems, or single moms trying to make ends meet, or children living in poverty, those with disabilities or mental illness—when everyone else forgets the vulnerable, the church needs to remember.

People struggle with many things, but you are part of a community that can help, even if you're one who is struggling. In fact, those who have been through it are often better equipped to walk beside someone struggling. And that's the purpose of the church. If we do less than that, we're just playing church. But it will take a compassion that is unrivaled anywhere else in the world. This is the call of the church. It's to look at "them" and learn to see them as "us."

A life-giving culture isn't something that develops overnight and it can't just last for a season. Authentic community that results in deep friendship, radical hospitality that tells people they can come as they are, and unrivaled compassion for people in

vulnerable situations has to be a relentless pursuit. So, you're going to get tired of us talking about it—and then we'll talk about it some more. But it can't just be talk. Make the commitment to be a part of the effort. The last two years have been leading to this.

We'll structure the church around this mission and give you the opportunity to serve. Last week, when Together for Good was here, we handed out surveys that asked about your spiritual gifts, skills, experience and interests. If you didn't fill one of those out, we want you to do it today. You're essential for what we're doing and we want to be able to call on you when someone has a need. If you're having a hard time with them, we have people who would love to sit down and talk with you and help you figure it out.

We'll help create the opportunities and keep us moving in the same direction. But we can't do it without *you*. Although leadership is critical in shaping culture, the most important shaper of culture isn't verses on a wall or ministry partners, it's the people of the church embodying the mission of the church. It's you, opening up your life and developing friendships here. It's remembering that you serve a God who accepted you as you were and extending that same come-as-you-are attitude toward anyone who walks through these doors. It's being unshockable by the messes all of us are capable of making. It's being homed in, looking to walk beside people in vulnerable situations. It's you remembering the grace of God.