

#90 “Willing to Be Real”

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There is a severe malady that has affected much of the church today. The funny thing is that the church is almost proud of its error, glorying in its shame. This is very sad. This spiritual illness affects both those inside of the church and those outside. What is missing is authenticity, being real, and being discerningly transparent and vulnerable. Because the church has degraded into a place where we must look like we have it all together, like we have no doubts, like we have no struggles, and where we must perform rather than be, we have lost much. Churches go on to lament a lack of community and true fellowship and hope that merely instituting another program will fix the situation and make love happen. It doesn't work that way. The church needs to recover an aspect of love and compassion that it once knew and which compelled those outside of the church to watch and wonder and even long for being part of such loving community and fellowship (Acts 2:42-47). The church needs to be real.

We have gotten so good at role-playing, acting, and mask-wearing when we are “at church” that it makes it very hard to know someone for who they really are. How can a friendship or any kind of relationship even in Christ's church happen or develop when one person is being dishonest about who they are, where they are at, and what they need? Sadly, this dishonesty about a person's true state of being is encouraged when the church lacks compassion, sympathy, empathy, and the desire to meet needs (c.f. Hebrews 4:15). For some reason, too many churches fail to actively seek out needs in their own body of believers, let alone in the community. Needs aren't bad; they are normal (Philippians 4:19). Part of the church's life and ministry is to meet needs, physical, financial, emotional, and most importantly spiritual. But how can that happen unless it actively seeks needs out and unless it cultivates an environment of acceptance and compassion which invites needs to be expressed and shared? Too often admitting needs is associated with lacking faith or being disorganized or lazy. The reality is that needs are part of life, and the church is there to help one another out.

Many churches are proficient at the 20 seconds or less “shake the hand of the person next to you” attempt at fellowship which amounts to nothing more than a mere “good morning” or “how are you?” Those rituals of pseudo-relationship are dangerous because they make us as churches feel like we have achieved love and care when really we have achieved nothing more than a handshake and a smile, if either are even genuine. There is nothing wrong with a welcoming handshake, a “how are you this morning,” or a genuine smile, but we can't suppose that this defines having arrived at community akin to that which the early church possessed and experienced.

So what makes an authentic, Christ-like community? When people who recognize their own imperfection are willing to let Christ shine through them such that they love another person in his or her imperfection, something powerful and wonderful takes place. It is called Christian fellowship in its truest, purest, and warmest sense. It is not contrived, forced, or fake. It is genuine, authentic, and real. Needs can be shared without being

judged, doubts can be voiced and be gently answered, and something that cries “you are safe” is present in such a community. Only when people feel safe will they be willing to share struggles or seek help that the church is called to provide. In too many churches the feeling of safety is nowhere to be found because there is such pressure to conform to various external things that identify that particular church or denomination. In other churches, people are just too busy doing church things to have time to care about a visitor or even one of their own. Yet in other churches, the churches purposefully ignore the visitor and just let him or her observe. The whole point about a church community is to be there for one another, to communicate, to care, and to serve each other. This can't happen if we hide from one another, if we avoid one another, or if we are too busy for each other. Churches must learn that it is normal and acceptable for its people to have needs and for them to be able to seek out help for whatever they might be struggling with. If everybody acts like everything is fine even when it is not, how can compassion be shown? Kindness leads to repentance (Romans 2:4), not judgmentalism, church activity, church membership, or any other externality associated with church. Church is a living organism made up of God's people and indwelt by God Himself. We, not the association, locality, or building, are the church. How loving we are is how loving the church will be. We can be the difference; we need to be the difference.

Let us pray for churches to have leaders who aren't too busy building ministries to minister to people. Let us hope for church people to care and not perform. The community that the early church had in Acts 2 is possible for us today, but it starts with being willing to be real.