

Worship +1: The Need for Community

A couple of months ago, I received an email from my high school, Francis Parker, that 2023 is our 10th anniversary. They invited us back to homecoming and there are going to be a few events and a git together at a local bar after. My first thought upon seeing this was, “how in the world has it already been 10 years since I graduated?” Of course, I graduated in 2013 so it makes perfect sense, but time has just flown by since then. This initial thought was quickly followed by a second one: “There’s no way I’m going.”

Now, you may be surprised to hear that, but there is truly no part of me that wants to attend the reunion. I could pretend that the main reason is I have a work conflict, as the events take place on a Sunday, and I am needed here at the church. I could try to say practicality and finances are the main factors, as I went to school across the country in San Diego and it is expensive and time consuming to get there. But, I think honestly the real reason is that high school just wasn’t the place where I felt I belonged growing up.

Don’t get me wrong, I had great friends, some awesome teachers, and made lasting memories along the way, but I struggled a lot in high school too. The school was for K-12 students, and I entered during my freshman year of high school. I struggled to make friends when I first arrived, as everyone already knew each other, and I was very shy. For the most part, I really didn’t feel like I could be myself at school, which may very well have been my own fault more than anything the school itself did. When I think back on that time in my life, I wish I had done more to be present and enjoy it. Yet, I was happy to get out of there as soon as I could. Since high school, I have only stayed in touch with one person- my best friend Spees who remains my best friend to this day. Put simply, high school just wasn’t a place where I felt I belonged. Today, we are narrowing in on this important concept, belonging, and how it is an important part of our lives.

Here at the church, the program year is back in full force. All of our small groups, education classes, youth and children programs are back as we seek to grow closer to God and one another. To this end, we are setting an intention for the Fall and challenging ourselves to live out Worship +1. As pastor Emily explained last week, Worship +1 means we are getting back into the rhythm of worshipping each week and seeking to do one other thing that nourishes our souls. In some ways, it is easier than ever to worship every Sunday, as all of our services are live streamed and can be viewed any time. If you miss a Sunday or are travelling, you can easily follow along with what is happening and worship from anywhere that can connect to the internet. The same can be said of many of our +1 opportunities here at the church as quite a few small groups and committees meet on Zoom. Our world has been rapidly changing and becoming more and more online, which is something I want us to consider today as we ponder the passages from Romans and Matthew that we just heard Chris read.

Our scripture readings today are all about community. Paul in his letter to the Romans spoke of the diversity that can be found within faith communities, even long ago. In his time, there were both Jews and Gentiles gathering together to worship Jesus in these new churches that were forming. As you might imagine, Jews and Gentiles came from very different upbringings. The Jews were taught how to read and speak Hebrew, grew up following the Ten Commandments and the Torah, and kept to Kosher laws that impacted what kinds of food they could eat. The Gentiles on the other hand, were from a variety of different backgrounds. Many likely used to believe in and worship multiple gods in the temples of Rome and converted to be a follower of Jesus. It is no surprise that this led to some conflict,

as people had different customs and lived their lives in very different ways. However, they had a common goal and something that bound them together. They wanted to grow closer to the Lord.

This is the foundation that the church is built on. In 2023, we are still striving for the same goal that the church had long ago in Paul's writings. First and foremost, we are a community built on Jesus and his teachings. Last week when we welcomed our new members, we were reminded of what exactly binds us together as members of Potomac Presbyterian Church. The new members were asked 3 simple questions that really boil down to believing in Jesus, following Jesus, and renouncing sin and evil in the world. Anyone who wants to pursue these three things is most welcome here as we strive to Care for ALL with Faith, Hope, and Love and seek to draw closer to the Lord. And we mean anyone.

Paul was earnest in his letter to the Romans that there is space for everyone in the church. It didn't matter if someone was a Jew or Gentile, it didn't matter what they ate, what traditions they followed, or what faith they grew up with- for all are united in the church under Christ. Put into modern terms, it doesn't matter whether you grew up Christian or not, it doesn't matter what music you like, what you wear to church on Sunday, or what political party you belong to. No matter your gender, race, nationality, sexuality, or ethnicity- you are most welcome here. Paul emphasizes and is emphatic that everyone belongs and has a place in the church.

Growing up, the church was the place where I felt I truly belonged. Church was where I found my faith, met lifelong friends, discovered my love of singing, and most importantly felt I could truly be myself. We had amazing choir directors and youth leaders who invested in us and helped us grow as we moved toward adulthood. I can remember conversations I had with youth leaders that helped me through difficult times and anxieties. These ranged from innocent fears, such as being afraid I wouldn't be able to sing anymore when my voice dropped, to more serious topics, such as feeling lost and being unsure of how to find my way back. When I needed it most, the friends and leaders from church were always there for me. This is what made it a place where I truly belonged, despite the times that I fell short.

Another dimension that both passages touched on this morning is the importance and power of forgiveness in community. We all make mistakes and being a part of a community will at times be messy. People won't always get along, things won't always go smoothly, and sometimes toes get stepped on and feelings get hurt. What makes the church unique is the call to forgive in abundance.

In Matthew's Gospel Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who has sinned against him. I imagine that Peter tried to think of a number that would be around the sweet spot for how much someone should forgive another, and he threw out the number seven. Well, Jesus raised the bar and said seventy-seven times. We can assume that Jesus didn't intend this to be a hard cutoff at 77 and instead is a call to forgive others constantly and consistently. This is something that the youth choir at my church modeled for me.

I attended youth choir from the 6th grade all the way through high school. In my sophomore year, I was invited to be a leader in the group and asked to be a role model for the younger students. At first, I wasn't sure if I could do it, but was given guidance along the way. I didn't always do as I should, as there were times when I would be late to rehearsals for no reason, occasions where I was not as enthusiastic about choir or church as I should be, or failed to act as a leader. Yet, time after time I was forgiven and invited to try again. By my senior year, after watching all my older friends and people I

looked up to move on, I understood what it meant to lead and how I could impact the group through my own attitude and participation.

I think the same goes for all communities, but especially the church. Participation matters. Your presence matters. When you come to church on Sunday, attend a small group, education program, sing in the choir, or get involved in any way- you are helping to build up the church and form community. This is why worship +1 is such an important concept. You and I are able to impact others around us in more ways than we might realize. We can help this community be a place where even more people feel like they truly belong as we strive after Jesus together. And we have our work cut out for us in this regard.

Just as it isn't always easy to be part of a community, it isn't always easy to follow Jesus' teachings. Take the parable of the unforgiving servant for example. In the whirlwind of a story, we heard how after begging, a servant was forgiven by the king and forgiven of his debt. When that same servant went and forced others to pay debts owed to him, he was punished by the king and imprisoned for not extending the same forgiveness to others. Jesus ended the parable by saying this is how it will be with God if we don't forgive others.

There are high stakes here and it speaks to a reality of life that forgiveness is not easy. It is complicated and there are things that may be hard or seemingly impossible to forgive. This parable stands as an example for how Jesus calls us to deeply reflect on our lives and change. These are difficult things to do, and the road will not always be easy. Yet, the Good News is that we are not alone on this journey as we seek to follow Jesus. We have others to rely on, others to converse with, and others who will pick us up when we inevitably fall.

I believe that what we have here at Potomac Presbyterian Church is something that is worth sharing and inviting others to. For we all want the same thing- a place to belong. I remember when I first invited my best friend Spees to come to youth choir with me. I did so because it was such a blast that I wanted him to be part of it too. It took a few times asking until he agreed and before long, he became an important part of the group. He started hanging out with all my church friends who became his friends, made everyone laugh during rehearsals with his jokes, and started calling our choir director Coach Nina which she always loved. These are the best times that I had in high school because I saw my two worlds, school and church come together. When I check in with my church buddies, they often ask how Spees is doing which shows the lasting impact that this had. For, each person that comes to a community changes it.

I'd like to end where we began. Thinking back to high school, I know I was not the only one who struggled and had a hard time fitting in. If I had done a better job of reaching out and getting to know others, I perhaps would be far more likely to want to go back to the reunion. If my youth choir had a reunion, I would be there in a heartbeat because of how much it was a part of my upbringing, simply because I truly belonged there.

As we look to our world, one of the things that I feel personally and keep hearing echoed through relationships, articles, and media is the fact that it is hard to find community and belonging. We live in a world where things are moving more and more online. It is easy to fill our days with entertainment, television, or social media and not forge real connections with others around us. Or put

another way, it is easy to have surface relationships without truly belonging and being part of a community. So many of us today are feeling lost and need a place where we can truly belong.

So, where do you belong? Do you know someone who needs a place to belong? How might this community of Potomac Presbyterian Church be that place for you, a friend, or a loved one as we strive to live out Worship +1 this year? Amen.

**401 Here in this Place (4 Verses)*