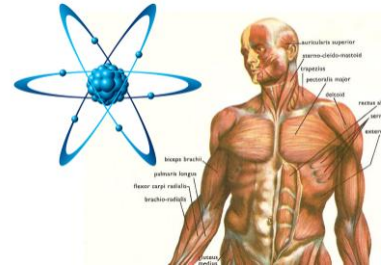


We started this series talking about the reality that we weren't designed to thrive in this life alone, that we were created for community. We took a hard look at the individualism our culture encourages, that we're taught to think of ourselves as atomic humans – that we're all basically identical, interchangeable units. Minerals are made of atoms, so take Iron for example. Iron is made of iron atoms. And the smallest piece of iron that's still iron is the iron Atom. A single iron atom isn't significantly different from a million iron atoms – other than the weight.



But we saw that the Scriptures don't talk about us as atoms – we're not okay on our own. Paul talks about us as body parts in Romans 14 – that we all need each other to be at our best. I'm a foot, you're a hand, she's an eye, he's a nose. We all have to work together. We all *need* each other.

Then last week, we took a hard look at what it takes to make community happen: we have to choose to be authentic. But what does it really mean to be authentic? No more and no less than asking "Am I trying to be myself or am I trying to be someone else?"

So today, as we wrap up our introduction to Community, we'll be asking the question that's weighing on at least half of your minds, especially if you've ever had to be a part of a group of any kind, from a group project in school to a focus group at work to a small group in a church setting.

In fact, I'm sure there are more than a few of you for whom this singular question is why your name isn't on one of our posters out there.

## What about That Guy?



You know, the one who gets under your skin? The one who every time they open their mouth, it's like a cat scratching across your brain? The person who you figure out what car they drive and show up late so if it's already parked you keep on driving and text in some excuse or call in sick or something?

Oooo *THAT* person. Believe me, I've been in enough groups with him (and her). It's loathsome. All kinds of reasons we don't get along. Maybe it's their personality. Or maybe they have wildly different political or religious views. Maybe you come from different sides of the tracks. Maybe there's no good reason, you just rub each other the wrong way.

Whatever it is, it's enough to kill a lot of small groups. So what do you do if you're in a group with That Guy? Because the reality is, if you really take the Scriptures' call to do Church from the ground up, to connect at this basic level, then eventually (probably sooner rather than later) you're going to be in a group with That Lady.

And since you can never control what anyone else does, since you can only be responsible for yourself and for your own actions and responses, today we're going to talk about how to thrive in a group with That Guy or That Lady.

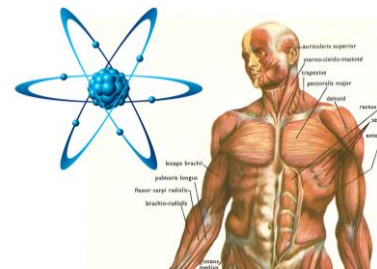
Not how to leave the group gracefully. Today's not about exit strategies.

Today, we're going to explore how you can embrace That Guy. Because you NEED him to thrive.

That's not what you want to hear. It's not what I want to say. What we *want* is to introduce some compatibility tests before we do sign ups, to make sure that we're all in groups with people we just get along with perfectly. Sort of a "Birds of a Feather flock together" mentality - we want to get into groups with people with like plumage.

But remember: we're not Atomic. We're a body. So let's consider how Paul describes the Church in 1 Corinthians, ask what it has to do with us and That Guy:

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part... and God has put each part just where he wants it.



How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." -- 1 Corinthians 12:12-21 (NLT)

According to Paul, our desire to have that group that's perfectly pre-selected for us, conflict-free and full of people just like us? That's Atomic thinking. It's really still Individualism all dressed up like Community. It's just as wrong and just as stunting as being alone.

Paul describes it like a body comprised of all one part. Imagine a body made of all eyes: gruesome and totally impractical. In fact, the only reason the eye works is because of all the other parts that also work together.



So it is with us. We *think* that a Church, a group, without That Guy in it would be better, but we'd be missing out. Remember: we weren't created to be alone. It's still the same principle. We actually don't have a full, thriving life without That Guy. Believe it or not, he brings something to the group, to the Church, to the Body of Christ that you don't. And you *need* him to be who God designed you to be. You can't say to That Guy "I don't need you." That's like the eye claiming it doesn't need the hand.

You *need* That Guy. I *need* That Guy.

We don't want to hear that.

I know.

We *want* to hear that we are special and unique and *right* and that Jesus loves me *more* than That Guy because... well isn't it obvious?! Have you *met* That Guy?

The problem is, Jesus expects us to not just tolerate That Guy, but actually to *embrace* him. To do Church with him. To worship and minister with him. To be friends with him. Seriously. It's Jesus' idea. That's been his MO since he was here.

Luke 6 tells the story of Jesus calling his disciples. This was Jesus was forming his first Church - the first small group of people who would carry his mission into the world, he chose specific persons out of the large group of disciples following him. I want to look at this list with you and call your attention to a couple of things:

One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. Here are their names: Simon (whom he named Peter), Andrew (Peter's brother), James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (who was called the zealot), Judas (son of James), Judas Iscariot (who later betrayed him)." -- Luke 6:12-16 (NLT)

Two guys are particularly interesting for our discussion: Matthew and Simon called the Zealot.

Something we need to know about the world Jesus lived in: he and his friends were Jewish, God's chosen people, living in their Promised Land. But the Promised Land had been occupied by the Evil Empire of the day - Rome - for about three generations by Jesus' day. As you can imagine, the Jewish people of the day were divided about the occupation (you think the Health Care Debate is bad).

We know from other scriptures that Matthew is a Tax Collector. Specifically, this means he works *for* the Roman occupation. He takes money from the Jewish people that goes to pay for the Roman soldiers to stay in their land. AND tax collectors got paid by adding a "collectors fee" on top of whatever the tax was. Rome didn't regulate this very hard - they only cared that they got paid, so tax collectors were often pretty rich at the expense of their own people. Needless to say, they were pretty Pro-Rome.

Simon, on the other hand, is called a Zealot. The Zealots were sort of like a political party (though we're not sure exactly how organized they really were). The Zealots *hated* Rome - many of them advocated revolution - expelling Rome from Israel through any means necessary.



Now, can you imagine the first campfire that night? You know who's on opposite sides of the fire, right? Matthew the pro-Rome tax collector and Simon the Rome-and-friends-of-Rome-hating Zealot. Sitting across from each other. Eyeballing each other. Sort of leaning in, just waiting for the other to say something.

The other disciples all awkwardly sitting around... whispering *Don't mention Rome!*

And let's not even mention Judas the betrayer, right?

Or all the personality conflicts... Peter the loudmouth who always speaks up first. James and John the hotheads, always arguing. Andrew and Phillip, the nice guys you can't quite figure out if they're brown nosing or just really really nice.

How's *that* for a small group meeting? How's *that* for your core Church leadership? We don't want to go *there*. We'll tolerate (maybe) people who disagree with us here - in a room this big where we don't really talk to each other, certainly don't compare voting ballots or other such potentially inflammatory topics. But when we get into small groups, when we have the potential to actually get some *real* community happening, to *really* connect with other people, we don't want That Guy there. We only want the people who are like us. Eyes with eyes. Hands with hands. All that.

But Jesus warns us in the Sermon on the Mount that when we try to do Church like that, we're not actually doing Church at all. In Matthew 5:43 he says this:

You have heard the law that says, "Love your neighbor" and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that." -- Matthew 5:43-47 (NLT)

If you only love those who love you, big deal! Even criminals do that. If you're only kind to people you already like, how are you any different from anyone else in the world?

See, according to Jesus, God loves us whether we love God or not. God gives to us whether we're friends with God or enemies. God doesn't only serve and love and bless those who love God.

In other words, God doesn't just hang with people who are like God. In fact, that's the heart of the Gospel - when we turned away from God, when we said, "Thanks, but no thanks," God didn't leave us to the consequences of our rebellion. Instead, God rescued us. While we were still rebellious. While we still considered ourselves God's enemies. That's what Paul tells us in Romans 5:

God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners... Our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies." -- Romans 5:8, 10 (NLT)

Not "God waited for us to get our act together. Not God saved everyone but That Guy.

Because the reality is, to God, we were *all* That Guy. And, while we're at it, we'd probably better admit an uncomfortable truth: We all know "That Guy", but we're all also "That Guy" to someone else.

Anyone in here *never* been disliked by someone else?

Of course not. We've all been outsiders. We've all been the victim of someone else's dirty look. Or eye-roll. Or back-handed complement.

And we all hated it. We all want to be accepted. To be loved for who we are. To be loved despite our rough edges.

Not just tolerated. That's what people hear when they hear this kind of message: "Oh, he's preaching diversity and tolerance. How trendy and relevant." I'm not talking about tolerance. This is much bigger, much harder than tolerance.

Because have you ever said, "You know, in the core of my soul, what I really long for is someone who will *tolerate* me. I don't really need acceptance or love. I don't want welcome or to be celebrated, to feel useful and valued. What I *really really* want is for someone to tolerate me with all their heart."



No one has ever said that. We don't *want* to be tolerated. We want to be loved, welcomed, celebrated, accepted, embraced. As we are. For who we are. Without judgment. Without condemnation. Rough-edges included.

So why don't we extend that same love and acceptance to our brothers and sisters? Why is it so hard to embrace That Guy?

Can we stop expecting that Church is the place where everyone is exactly like everyone else? Where we admit that we all have rough edges, that we're all That Guy or That Girl to someone? That none of us is perfect and that's the real beauty of it all?

Can we confess that we all *need* each other, that it's actually *good* that we're not all the same. In a sense, it's exciting that That Guy gets on my nerves because that's proof that I need him. Proof that we belong in the same group, the same Church. Proof that God is doing something real and miraculous because this is a place where Matthew and Simon are *in the same groups*.

If we could confess that, then maybe we can become like the God we gather to worship. The God who doesn't play favorites. The God who welcomes and accepts everyone, the God who doesn't just *tolerate* us, but embraces us, loves us.

If we could keep that before us, maybe we could learn how to embrace That Guy. For his good and for ours.

### **Examine**

We're going to close our time together today with an imaginative prayer exercise. If you've never done this before, it might be a little bit strange, but that's okay.

To begin, hold in your mind a picture of That Guy or That Girl for you – maybe a family member, coworker or someone who's a part of your Church family.

First, remember how you usually feel about them – the anger, the annoyance. The disgust or snark.

Now, imagine that you're at the foot of the cross as Jesus dies. You've listened as he struggles for the last bits of life. You hear him cry out – Father forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. Realize that his forgiveness covers you.

Now imagine that you look to the side and see That Guy or That Girl. They're kneeling near you. Jesus words cover them, too.

You are the same body. They're different from you. That's obvious. You're not both eyes. Or hands or whatever. You're different.

But you need each other. Imagine embracing That Person as a sibling in Christ.

*Prayer.*