

Welcome

Philosopher Jean-Paul Sarte concludes his famous play *No Exit* with the line, “Hell is other people.” Leave it to Mike Schur - the creator of *Parks & Recreation* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, as well as a writer on *The Office*, to update Sarte’s philosophy for our modern world.

Easily my favorite sit-com of the last decade was the four-season run of *The Good Place*. The first season introduced us to Eleanor Shellstrop, a self-proclaimed Arizona trashbag of a human who through an accounting glitch ended up in Heaven (the good place) instead of the Bad Place. She forms friendships with her soulmate Chidi, a moral philosophy professor, Tahani, an Indian philanthropist, and Jason Mendoza, a hair-brained dancer slash minor criminal from Jacksonville, FL.

At the end of the first season, Eleanor figures out that it’s all a lie - The Good Place is actually the Bad Place, designed by arch-demon Michael for these four humans to torture each other. Hell is other people.

After that revelation, the next three seasons of the show ask this important question: is it possible for us to change?

That’s a question vital for us to ask together: is genuine transformation something we can really experience?

This is the goal of every self-help book on the market: here are 7 simple steps to change your habits. Here’s a guide, a diet, a mantra, a mindset that will help you become someone other, something other than what we are.

Is it possible, if we’re an angry person, to become gentle?

Is it possible, if we’re selfish, to become selfless?

Is it possible, if we’re prideful, to become humble and helpful?

Is it possible, if we’re afraid, to become confident?

Is it possible, if we’re evil, to become good?

The Good Place’s surprising answer is yes. Yes, we can become better. Who we are is not who we must be. For *The Good Place*, the vehicle of our transformation is *other people*.

In other words, *The Good Place* flips Sarte on his head. It’s possible for Other people to be Hell for us, but the opposite is true as well. Other people may hold the key to genuine transformation.

Heaven is other people, too. God created us to be in community with each other. God created us to *need* each other. So let's begin by singing together and enjoying the reality that when we are together, we bring a little bit of Heaven to earth!

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're going to explore some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith. We began with WandaVision, a show about learning to see past our self-deceptions and be honest with ourselves.

Last week, we explored reality TV as our desire for authenticity.

Today, we're going to the afterlife with *The Good Place*. The Good Place is all about relationships, and whether they help or hurt us. The six characters at the core of the good place are all broken and flawed.

Eleanor is selfish.

Tahani is proud.

Jason doesn't consider the consequences of his actions.

Chidi lives in fear.

Janet was created not to be a person, but a tool.

And Michael is a literal demon.

Michael's plan works, at first. The four humans torture each other, driving each other crazy. Eleanor can't handle anyone thinking they're better than she is, and Tahani thinks she's better than everyone. Jason never thinks about anything he does, and Chidi imagines every possible worst-case scenario for every single decision he makes. And so on, and so on.

It illustrates a painful truth we all know: relationships are hard work. Hell often is other people. We all have that person - that family member or co-worker or neighbor who just seems perfectly designed to push every button we have.

No wonder our tendency is to settle for superficial relationships rather than press into the awkwardness of authenticity. It's a lot easier to deal with people who aren't much like us if we just keep them at arm's length.

If you've been around Catalyst long, then you've likely seen M. Scott Peck's stages of authentic community. This is something Sue Sweeney first introduced to me, and I've found it profoundly helpful in considering how community changes us - if we'll let it.

[Peck 1] According to Dr. Peck, every community begins in what he calls Pseudo-Community. It's that superficial, arm's length community.

Pseudo-community isn't inherently bad. For one thing, we're not capable of being in deep, authentic community with every single person we meet. Jesus had a few more than 12 people he was intimate with, and he interacted with thousands during his ministry.

For another thing, every relationship we have starts in Pseudo-community.

[Peck 2] But, as Dr. Peck observes, we weren't created to exist in superficial community. We long for deep, authentic relationships. So every group will eventually move into Chaos. It's what happens when someone gets tired of being shallow and decides to reveal more of their true self.

Maybe they let a controversial political opinion fly. Or comment on someone else's habit that annoys them. Whatever it is, we break that unspoken rule of Pseudo-community - we quit being fake!

Peck calls this stage Chaos because this is where groups tend to explode. *This* is what Sartre was talking about when he said Hell is other people. We *can't* exist merely as the images and stereotypes others create for us. That's torture. So we explode into chaos.

[Peck 3] And most of the time, after the explosion, we return to Pseudo-Community. We say, "Look what happens when you're honest. This is why we don't do things like that."

Do that enough times and you experience what Peck describes as Burnout, when a community dissolves.

That's a pretty depressing cycle, isn't it? It feels *sad* to imagine all we have before us is shallow relationships, chaos and burnout?

Fortunately, according to both *The Good Place* and Scripture, deep, authentic relationships are not only possible, they're *vital*. Other people are our key to transformation. We can't afford to keep everyone at arm's length - that's the real hell.

Turn with us to [Romans 15](#).

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at some verses from a few chapters earlier in Romans. Romans is a letter Paul wrote to a church he didn't plant, and it's a church that was working really hard to blend different cultures - Jewish and Gentile. The major theme of the letter is how people who don't have a lot in common can live as a real family - not just superficial

relationships. So let's look at how Paul instructs us to live together given the fact that we're all different:

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. Remember that Christ came as a servant to the Jews to show that God is true to the promises he made to their ancestors. He also came so that the Gentiles might give glory to God for his mercies to them... -- [Romans 15:5–9 NLT](#)

Accept each other just as Christ has accepted you.

[Peck 4] According to Dr. Peck, the path out of the Burnout cycle is something he calls Emptiness. It's where we set down our preconceived ideas about what everyone else should be or do and we receive them as they *are*.

It's what Paul says - accept each other exactly as we are. Because Jesus came for the Jews as Jews. Jesus came for the Gentiles as Gentiles.

Jesus came for all of us regardless of what gender we are.

Jesus came for all of us regardless of what race we are.

Jesus came for all of us regardless of our background or how much money we make.

Jesus came for all of us regardless of how our brains work.

And we don't have to change who we are to be welcomed into the spiritual family of the Church. Quite the opposite. God has made room for each of us as we are. So if we want to be God's people, we have to accept each other *as we are*.

Now, it's important to recognize that acceptance - what Peck calls Emptiness - is only a first step on the road to true community. After all, Eleanor, Chidi and all the others were pretty terrible (Michael is a literal demon!).

Because of the way they lived, the choices they made, they did real harm to other people and to the world around them. So saying, "They're okay just as they are," isn't sufficient because that authorizes the real harm they did. And that's not okay.

In other words, there's a difference between you accepting me just as I am and believing everything I do, say and think is good.

We all need to be transformed. We all need healing.

But that only happens in True Community, when we feel cared for and supported, when we feel safe enough to let our guard down.

Turn with us to [Galatians 6](#).

Galatians is another letter Paul wrote. This was to a group of churches who were mostly Gentile, and it was closer to the beginning of Paul's ministry than Romans. But we see the same sort of instruction: a church is a group of people who needs each other. We are to be part of each others' transformation:

Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important. -- [Galatians 6:1–3 NLT](#)

If you think you're too important to help, you're fooling yourself. You're not that important.

Wow, Paul. Vicious! But it's true. We need each other. And it's only when we commit to deep, authentic community with each other that we really become new.

As *The Good Place* unfolds, we see that each of these characters grows and changes. Eleanor becomes a leader, often sacrificing her own happiness for the good of her friends.

Chidi becomes bold, willing to make impossible decisions for the good of those he loves.

Tahani learns humility and love for these people who turn out to be the first real friends she's ever had.

Jason learns to wait, to question that voice in his head that suggests every impulse should be obeyed.

Janet learns to care about herself, not just other people.

And Michael learns how to be truly good.

Every character changes for the better. Precisely *because* of the other people on the show, people who become friends, real community. Family.

Friends, this is God's desire for us: that we would reject the false safety of pseudo-community, empty ourselves and become a real family capable of speaking truth to each other and truly becoming new.

Communion + Examen

We all share the same table!

What relationships have sustained me during the pandemic?

What relationships have withered?

What relationship is God calling me to cultivate this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Who is your community? How can you practice emptying yourself and pursuing true community this week?

Heaven is other people.