

CommUNITY

So I was poking around on the internet and ran across this story about a man who was stranded on an island. Now the first thing that went through my head was to wonder why we never read stories of women getting stranded on islands? For 20 years this man was alone until finally he was found. As the man was leaving the island his rescuers asked him a few questions about what they saw while they were there. They asked what the large building by the lagoon was, and he told them that was his home. The rescuers asked him what the building with the tall spire was, and the man told them that was his church. Looking puzzled they asked him what the other building with the tall spire was and the man told them that was his old church, he had to leave it because he didn't like the people.

Even in a congregation of 1 unity is important. This lesson can be learned through the book of Judges. The book is crazy! It starts with the people of Israel looking to God for help to continue to subdue the land God had given them and ends with the tribes being fractured and fighting amongst themselves. The last verse of the book chapter 21:25, "In those days Israel had no king, so the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes." That verse can be taken as comedic. I think the writer wrote that with a strong note of sarcasm. Israel had a king. That king was God and the people were choosing to ignore that king. Things got so bad in Israel that the people of Israel felt it necessary to wipe out the tribe of Benjamin after being incited to war by a man who shoved his concubine out the door of the house he was staying in to be murdered so that he could escape from that same fate. So the country rallies around this coward to avenge the

death of this women and the battle all but wipes out an entire tribe. After the fighting was over the attackers felt bad about almost wiping out the tribe so they went and found wives for the few Benjimites who were left. Now they didn't run personal ads, they went and killed the inhabitants of an entire town, kidnapping the girls that would make suitable wives. Turns out they couldn't find enough women to give away so they told the men who didn't have a wife to go hide in a vineyard and when a fine young woman wanders by kidnap her and make her your wife. Verse 22 is priceless "And when their fathers and brothers come to us in protest, we will tell them, 'Please be understanding. Let them have your daughters, for we didn't find enough wives for them when we destroyed Jabesh-gilead.'" Are you kidding!! Can you see how verse 25 should be taken sarcastically? How did this community get so off track that they collectively couldn't do right.

First of all the people of Israel went from being a community to an association. In the beginning of the book the people asked God who should be helped first. The people of Israel were looking to God to show them how to put someone before themselves. That is community. In community we lose our individualism which is very hard for us americans. We have fought wars to keep our right, and to give other people the right to be free to make the choices that we each feel is right for ourselves, but that is not what the church was called to do. Paul talked about this in 1 Corinthians. He calls the church out over their insistence in aligning with one person or the other. The church was still there. They were an association united in their desire to worship God, but they

were losing their community as they tried to put personal preference over the good of the body of believers.

Secondly, their long term thinking was all messed up. At the beginning of the book of Judges the Israelites were looking to God to plan the long term success of the nation. By the end of the book their long term solutions involved murder and kidnapping. The challenge in youth ministry is to try to not look at each school year individually, and not look for things that will have an immediate payoff. None of the students who will be in the Mid-High group in September were in the mid-high group when I started here. It is so hard to look back and not panic about how quickly that went. It makes me want to get things done immediately. The problem is that so many short term gains end up as long term losses. Any plan that was in place to specifically target those mid-highers would have to be scrapped in favor of a new specific plan to target these new mid-highers. Long term thinking is a little more natural when looking at the congregation at large. This building did not go up without a considerable amount of long term thinking. We did not ask Paul to be our head pastor without considerable long term thinking. I want to bring that kind of long term thinking to the youth ministry.

When I stood up here and was recognized for my first year of service I could feel the collective breaths of the parents being held knowing that the second year has been problematic for our youth directors in recent history. When I was recognized for my second anniversary I could feel some of those breaths being let out. Now that we have just past my third anniversary here and with the addition of Paul it is kind of strange not

the new guy anymore. A lot of the tension of wondering if I was going to work out could have been lessened if we had a plan for long term sustainability in the youth program. Over the past two school years I have been meeting with parents who have kids in the program, going to have kids in the program, and who have kids who have moved through the program to read a book by Mark Devries called sustainable youth ministry. We are now ready to chart a course for our youth ministries that will be in step with the congregation at large and will return ownership of the ministry to the congregation. Church work is strange work. On one hand I need to be a strong leader, while on the other hand I need to be a humble servant. A clear vision and an articulated set of value statements will help me be both. This summer our goal is to craft a vision statement and a group of value statements that will help us all be on the same page as far as how we are going to develop programs for growth in the future. If you filled out a survey during our self study at the beginning of our search for Paul your input will be noted and taken into account. If you did not fill out that survey, or your opinion has changed in the last couple years feel free to send me an e-mail or schedule an appointment to come in and talk to me. What I found so encouraging was that the responses to the survey showed that our congregation is truly passionate about wanting the best for our kids.

A third issue the Israelites had at the end of the book of Judges is that the community tended to make impersonal, institutional responses to deeply personal issues. I feel fairly confident that I could increase the number of students in church if I bought a bunch of Xboxs, linked them all together and ran gaming tournaments each week. I have seen it done and it works, but I am convinced that real spiritual growth comes from

being involved in a community that is concerned about each individual, not just the group at large. I want to quote Paul Miller from *Evangelical Quarterly*, “The Christian community's role, now as much as ever, is to strengthen the commitments which reinforce openness to the activity of God in history. That role is carried out by teaching and celebrating the narratives of God's dealings with God's people, and by being counterculturally attentive to the practices of worship, prayer, fellowship and charity which, while appearing to be socially trivial, are the foundation of the Christian character and virtue.”¹ That hit me hard when I read it. That is the church I desire, and I want our youth ministry to be a reflection of that. After we craft our values statements we will be able to filter our programs through them. We will have a better understanding of what is being done to promote those values, what is taking away from those values, and where we need to ask for help to achieve those values. There is a time and a place for Xbox and sometimes the church can be the place, but it will never be a focus. I have a friend who is a youth pastor in Troy that has all kinds of gaming systems and the students love it, he also has a pop machine, and a slurpee machine. The youth room is some kind of strange cross between a 7-11 and an arcade, but the kids do not come out to play the games and see who can get drink the most slurpee in 60 seconds. They come out to be part of a community where they know they will be treated as God's creation, and they come to find a place where they know others will be looking out for them. I know we value those things. It is time to get it on paper and make intentional plans to gain those things. Congregation we are in this together and I covet your prayers as we look to make the right framework for us to hang our plans for the future on. We have already

¹Paul Miller, “Moral Formation and the Book of Judges,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (April 2003): 114.

started down that road to building community. We are building a new Wednesday night tradition, we have a string of meaningful mission trips, and we have a group of confirmands who I feel truly understand the value of community and I trust they will take the experiences of this last school year with them as they join the High School group.

Sources Used

Miller, Paul. "Moral Formation and the Book of Judges," *Evangelical Quarterly* 75 (April 2003): 99-115.

Story about the man on the island from www.sermoncentral.com. Contributed by Jason Freeman.