

## Long Story Short May 2010

Community is a hot topic at Tri-Lakes Chapel. There's a big difference between the ideal and the real thing.

I grew up a dozen miles outside a tiny ranching town in western New Mexico. We had real community but no one ever mentioned it. Neighbors got together to help each other brand calves in the spring and gather them for sale in the fall. When one man fell from the roof of his barn and broke his back, other ranchers from as far as 50 miles away took turns feeding his cows one winter. I remember neighbors uniting to fight fires, add on a room to someone's house, and raise money for someone else's cancer treatment.

Through it all we ate together, laughed together, grieved together, and fought together. It would be a lie to say we all loved each other. We needed each other, it was as simple as that.

I've asked a lot of people to define what they mean when they say they "long for authentic community." The following comments are only slightly exaggerated!

"I want long, meaningful conversations about theology, philosophy and the great works of literature and art while enjoying a fine glass of Cabernet."

"I want to be surrounded with people who are my intellectual, cultural, and spiritual peers."

"I want a place where we always speak to one another in love, always expect the best from one another, and where others will invest in me."

Seriously? If that's our standard, then I'm afraid that real community, even among the redeemed, won't ever measure up to our expectations. There's a gap between what we desire and reality.

Real community feels pretty ordinary when you're in it. It's like the old myth of "quality time" parenting. Significant relational connections only happen in the midst of large quantities of time. Real community involves people I wouldn't necessarily choose. Henri Nouwen said, "Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives." God will use that person to work out the rough spots on your heart. You need some people who are wiser than you, and some people who are in different life stages from you. That's pretty tough to do in a group where everyone's just like you.

Real community is messy. It's costly. It's contrary to what our selfish desires cry for. It demands we give more than we will ever receive. Even in biblical community, you'll feel misunderstood, taken advantage of, and on certain days, surrounded by whiners. I think that's part of what God had in mind when he inspired Paul to write, "do not give up meeting together..."

So we all have to choose between holding out for the ideal and choosing to find meaning in the real, believing that somehow, God will do something significant in me, and them, even through our imperfection.