

1 | Character Through Community

Two questions...

Is it important for us to see God? I would say so. We are called to follow him, to worship him, and to know him. Our world is full of suffering, confusion and evil that would be greatly alleviated if people would catch a glimpse of God.

Is it possible for us to see God? My first answer is yes. Jesus promised, “blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8). But I have been studying this other verse that says, “No one has ever seen God” (1 John 4:12). This strikes me as a problem. A problem that is foundational to all the other problems we experience. We need to see God.

1 John 4:12 doesn't leave us with the daunting problem that “no one has ever seen God”. It points us to an incredible solution when it says, “if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.”

Scripture teaches the principle that in the actions of love we see God. I call this *character through community*. God's ***character*** can be revealed through loving ***community***.

I spent 6 days in the village of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. I was there to speak at a wellness workshop to help people deal with their fear. I spent Friday at the school. The students asked if I was going to the dance. I had no idea what they were talking about but I followed the crowd into the school gym. There was a row of 8 chairs set up in the center of the court. Men sat in them with handheld drums that I later learned were made from Walrus stomach. I sat on the bleachers with the students, staff and dozens of people who came in from the community. There was no word of introduction or welcome. The men just started drumming and chanting. Everyone knew what to do. After each song began people, mostly women and girls, would walk out onto the floor and dance. The dances were all choreographed so that everyone's motions were in sync. The more experienced dancers would face the crowd and teach the motions to a less experienced dancer who would have their back to the crowd. The song would end. The dancers would sit down. Then another song would begin and the dancers would come back out onto the floor. This continued for 30 minutes with no public address to explain what was happening. I learned that the dance happens this way every Friday.

They planned for another dance for Saturday night. It was to be the conclusion of our workshop. It was held in the Presbyterian Church. As I shared my presentation, people trickled in until the place was full. They came for the dance. It is something really special in their culture. But that night I learned more of the spiritual significance when one of the leaders in the Presbyterian Church went to the microphone. She gave a speech of dedication for the drums and dance. The Presbyterian Church had been recently built, and this was the first time they had drums and dance in that church building. She read scripture of dedication and spoke of how the drums and dance were to give glory to God. Then she called some of the spiritual leaders in the community up and she surprised me by calling me up with them. I followed their lead as we took oil and anointed the drummers and the drums to play for the glory of God. Even with my limited exposure to the significance of the drums and dance it was obvious that this was sacred.

The drumming and dancing went on from about 8:30pm to 11:00pm. It was worship. It was healing. It brought the community together and did something meaningful within the people.

I had never drummed or danced to the glory of God before. But they do. Do you know why? Why is it that they all experienced God that way, but it was strange to me? It is because our view of God's

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character is shaped by our community. The major determining factor in our understanding of God and our practice of worship is community.

This is a powerful spiritual reality, character through community. Yes, we are called to have a personal relationship with God. Yes, we learn of him through his Word. But for all of us, our view of God's character has been shaped by how our community has portrayed him.

In the practice of drumming and dancing, I feel that God's character has been portrayed in a beautiful and appropriate way. What I experienced there is something I believe honors God. However, it works both ways. Community can shape our view of God's character for good or for bad. It can give us an accurate or inaccurate view of God. The power of character through community can be used for good or evil.

The verse says, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." When God's character is displayed inaccurately by a community it is still true that no one has seen God. But the dangerous part is that we think we have. This condition is worse than the first. If we had not seen a version of the character of God, we would know that we have not seen God. But when we see an inaccurate display of God's character there is a risk that we will believe it and see God in the wrong way he was portrayed.

I have never brought offerings or burnt incense for my deceased relatives. I have never felt fear of the disapproval of a loved one who has passed. But that is the experience of over 1 billion people worldwide who belong to religious communities that worship their ancestors. Why? Our view of God's character is shaped by our community.

Hang with me for a few minutes as I reflect on some ugly ways that community has reflected God's character.

I have never thought of throwing a baby into a river or a fire. But that is what many cultures throughout history have done, and some continue to do, in an effort to appease their god. Why? Our view of God's character is shaped by our community.

I have never stockpiled weapons for religious war, taken multiple wives, claimed to be the Messiah, led my church in a mass suicide, and I certainly wouldn't believe that this was for the glory of God. But that is the basic tragic storyline for many cult movements. Why? Our view of God's character is shaped by our community.

I have never walked away from God or the church. But that is what millions, if not billions, of people have done and many in our own church family because they saw the whole thing as harsh, hypocritical, unloving, egotistical, unfair, irrelevant, intolerant, boring, oppressive, dead, or joyless. Why? Our view of God's character is shaped by our community.

There are people who don't trust God because their abusive father shaped their image of God.

There are people who prefer the bar over the church because it wasn't safe to bring their brokenness to church. And they concluded that God wouldn't welcome them as they were either.

There are judgmental and condemning Christians damaging other people because their community gave them a picture of a God who is judgmental and condemning.

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There is power for good and for evil in the truth that we learn of God's character through community.

This concept lights a fire in me. I am a part of a church community. I certainly don't want for my community to shape someone's view of God in an ugly way. I want to do the opposite. I want my church community to reflect the character of God in a way that redeems, that restores, and that draw people into a love relationship with Jesus.

We actually don't have a choice of whether or not to reflect God's character through our church community. We will reflect an image of God no matter what. The choice we have is whether or not the image we reflect is accurate, if it models lifegiving truth or outlines a false narrative.

There are a lot of words you might use to describe our church. The two that I hope are the most familiar are character and community. Our vision statement describes our church as "A community striving to intentionally reflect the character of God".

The problem in 1 John 4:12 is that nobody has ever seen God. We can do something about that problem. The text continues, "if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." Do you see the teaching of character through community in that text? God reveals himself relationally, as we show love to one another. As a community we can reflect something of the character of God that we will never be able to see apart from community.

At PalmerSDA.org under the "about us" page you will find the following words:

The Palmer Seventh-day Adventist Church exists to build a community that reflects the character of God. The values of community and character motivate everything we do.

Being a Community: We love people! Our ministries connect people to build a faith community where we find belonging and support.

Reaching our Community: We are driven to neighbor well! Our faith community looks for ways to overflow abundantly in blessing to our broader community.

Pursuing God's Character: Loving God is our great obsession! We pursue His character in our Bible teaching and worship.

Reflecting God's Character: The character of God shapes the culture of our faith community! Individually and corporately, we want our character to reflect more of His!

We will follow through 1 John 4 alongside these four visionary aspirations of our church to explore a positive outworking of character through community.

Stretch your imagination to catch a vision of what this community could be. Imagine when you drive up to church on Sabbath morning your heart rate calms, your mind relaxes, because you know that you are coming to a safe place that enriches your life. The parking lot is full, not because you are late but because the community is thriving. As you walk to the door you are greeted in a way that leaves no question about your belonging. You feel at home. There is a fresh excitement to grow in this community. Everything you observe in the lobby speaks of a loving, active community. There are flyers that tell of service opportunities. There are people engaged in meaningful conversation, there are advertisements

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for opportunities to engage during the week. Connecting with this community is easy. You hear happy sounds of the children's ministry down the hall. You join a Sabbath School study. People share openly. They encourage each other. It is a time of learning, connection, and growth. The music lifts your heart to worship. The message lifts up God in a way that makes you love him even more.

Not everything is perfect. The church is a safe place for broken people. And you see brokenness, but you also see it being met with love.

You leave the worship service having met with Jesus and connected with your community. You are sent off ready to face another week in the Spirit of Jesus.

Maybe that is pretty close to how you feel about your current worship experience. Maybe it is far from it. This vision is not a program that we can vote on, it is a culture that we create.

I once sat with a leadership group in our church, and we discussed how to spread this culture. We thought of the idea of writing our own vision stories of the life of someone in our church from the time they were dedicated as a baby to the time they had their own baby dedicated in our church. Imagine the life joys and challenges we could journey through with someone one during that time. There are countless opportunities to fail or succeed in building community with that one person. Our church community could be damaging, it could be neutral, or it could be the greatest support factor in the lives of those who are a part of it.

Think, how does a first-time visitor experience our community? What about the elderly and those who can no longer get out? What about the family who sends their child to AGA? What is it like for children or the mother of young children? What is it like for the church leaders and the school staff? How is our church community supportive of those who are battling sickness or near the end of life? I know that there are outstanding examples of loving community in each of these areas. There are also examples of how our community has failed in these ways.

Can you get excited about this vision of what our community could be? It could be a community that helps all those involved to see the character of God more clearly and to love God more.

Being a Community: We love people! Our ministries connect people to build a faith community where we find belonging and support.

In the letter of 1 John, John used the word "love" 32 times in a span of 18 verses.

In love, God has given us ways to see him more fully now. One of these ways is community.

1 John 4:12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:20 If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

God is not visible. Community is visible. So our relational God has chosen to reveal his character through loving human community.

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The ministries of our church don't just use community as a hook for the gospel. We believe that loving community itself is sacred. We succeed when we build loving community.

We show our love for God by loving others.

Do you want to make the vision of a community that reflects the character of God a reality? Take action to build community. Come to the thanksgiving meal next week. Invite someone over. Volunteer with AGA. Join a small group. Build community.

Reaching our Community: We are driven to neighbor well! Our faith community looks for ways to overflow abundantly in blessing to our broader community.

The clearest way God's love is displayed to us is in the gift of Jesus.

1 John 4:9 In this the love of God was ***made manifest*** among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

Notice where Jesus was sent, to the world. He wasn't sent to a small group in the world but the whole world. His love doesn't stop with a few. It reaches out to all. If his love is in us it will reach out to our community.

This year our goal has been to neighbor well. There have been a lot of examples. I am so pleased with the way this church has prioritized our neighbors.

I will share just the most recent example. Last week we hosted a volleyball tournament. The sportsmanship was incredible. The hospitality was exceptional. We connected with the other teams and our own school families in fun ways. Most of the people were not part of our church community. But they felt our church community. Community was being built. And God's character was being displayed in it. That was a successful ministry.

Do you want to make the vision of a community that reflects the character of God a reality? Reach out. Join in our many efforts to connect with our community.

Pursuing God's Character: Loving God is our great obsession! We pursue His character in our Bible teaching and worship.

This is the root of it all. We don't want to reflect his character if his character is not beautiful. Twice in this section of 1 John we read this short summary of God's character "God is love" (1 John 4:8;16). It is an inexhaustible beauty. But just notice some of the highlights.

God's character of love is seen in him giving himself. God is selfless, generous, and life giving.

1 John 4:9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

1 John 4:14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

God's character of love promotes peace and not fear!

1 John 4:17-18 By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

The statement “no one has ever seen God” fuels our motivation to pursue God’s character. John says the same thing in John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”

As I try to make sense of this, I find some apparent contradictions. On one hand I remember how God told Moses, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” (Exodus 33:20). On the other hand, I remember that Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.” (Isaiah 6:1). I remember the experience of Samsons parents, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.” But they didn’t (Judges 13:22). I remember that Stephen declared, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” I think of the words of Jesus, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). I read that seeing God is the privilege of the pure to see God (Matthew 5:8) and of the experience Job had that he described like this, “I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee” (Job 42:5). But then I am confronted with the teachings of Paul that describe God as the one “who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.” (1 Timothy 6:16) and who describes Jesus as the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

The confusion is clarified in Paul’s words to the Corinthians, “For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:9-12). We do see God. But what we see is limited. And that limited vision can increase. But we don’t just leave it up to chance. We pursue it.

Do you want to make the vision of a community that reflects the character of God a reality? Pursue his character. In every sermon you hear, trial you face, joy you experience, book you read, doctrine you believe, ask yourself what it reveals about God’s character. Let’s be a people who are obsessed with discovering what God is like. Tune our ears and eyes to notice his character. This is the beginning of building a community that reflects the character of God.

Reflecting God’s Character: The character of God shapes the culture of our faith community!
Individually and corporately, we want our character to reflect more of His!

1 John 14:7-8 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 14:10-11 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 14:13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

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1 John 14:19 We love because he first loved us.

God's character initiates relationship with us, models what love is like, and motivates a response.

We will not reflect his character perfectly, but we are going to give it our best shot in the power of the Spirit. As we reflect God's character in our community, we make God visible. To reflect his character we must be concerned with more than believing the right stuff, we must treat each other in the right ways.

This is a vision that motivates what I do in this church. Catch the vision. Put your efforts toward building a community that reflects the character of God.