

How Things Happen: Is Wedgewood a reflection of its Pastor's warped personality or is it a well-thought out, defensible, model (among others) of what it means to be church?

John 13:34

Luke 79:12-14 (Goofed-up Bible Version)

And Jesus came upon a man born blind since birth and immediately formed a committee of the best disciples who had been with him the longest and directed the committee to investigate the man's background, including his work history, his medical records, his participation record in the temple and the local synagogue, and his children's school performance and attendance, and his parent's background, and other information deemed pertinent in the course of the investigation. Jesus, in as firm of a voice possible, told the committee: The last thing I want to do is be an enabler. I do not, if you will, want to kill him with kindness or love him to death. You know that sort of thing happens all the time.

Matthew 97:13-16

And closing in on Jerusalem, the Lord, full of the spirit, took the disciple he held in highest esteem aside and said, "Peter. I am going to be killed in Jerusalem. I need you to listen closely. You, of all the disciples are the smartest. You Peter, you are the Rock. But even you Peter are human and weak and dependent on others. I want you to be the Captain of the Ship, but I don't want you to do it all by yourself." -----Jesus, paused for a moment, and stared into Peter's eyes while placing his large hand firmly on Peter's shoulder.-----"After I die and am resurrected and ascended into heaven, I want you to organize four committees: a finance committee, a fundraising committee, a special events committee, and a real estate committee. We need to start looking for some prime real estate locations." "But what about a ministry committee?" Peter inquired. "Hang onto that thought. We'll get to that sooner or later, but for now set up these committees which are to meet weekly, and are to provide monthly reports to the entire disciple group, and each of them should have a budget proposal ready by Passover. Get a numbers person and make that budget as tight as possible. No fat in it. If there's fat in it I'll----Jesus sighed a deep sigh. There was a long deafening silence. And then the Master said, "I'm counting on you. I'm counting on you Peter because I can't count on the others who don't have your skills, your knowledge, your leadership, your relational skills." Before turning away, Jesus said it a third time, "Peter, I'm counting on you." And the cock crowed.

Skit

Narrator: Here we are gathered at the Pearly Gates with two people who died on the same day at the same hour, at the same minute, at the same exact second. They are here to be judged by Jesus. Who wants to go first. [Silence.]----
-----Somebody's got to go first.

Committed Church Person (saying confidently and proudly):

I'll be glad to go first. Let Jesus have the easy decision first.

Jesus: So why do you say the decision will be easy?

Committed Church Person:

I was chair of the deacons, not once but twice. I served on the building and grounds committee five times, the finance committee three times, the pulpit committee 20 times----yeah, we had to move those preachers in and out, the music committee 10 times, and-----

Jesus: What church was this?

Committed Church Person:

I went to the Church of the Surely Saved. Went there 50 years to be exact. Baptized when I was 14. Attended Sunday School, Sunday worship, choir practice, Sunday Night worship, Training Union, Midweek Bible study, Fall revivals, Spring revivals, and I always went to church while on vacation. Never took vacation without going to church. Don't believe in vacation from the church, vacation from God. Amen.

Jesus: Pretty impressive.

Committed Church Person:

I'm not finished. I probably saved my church, The Church of the Surely Saved, \$50,000. If we had done everything people proposed, we would have bankrupted the church, but I made sure we spent money only on that which was necessary. And we didn't spend money until the last second. We didn't get a new roof until we had to have one. We didn't get new tables until----until we had to have them. I made sure every idea, every proposal was slim and trim, good and clean. I hate it when the church wastes money.

Jesus (turning to Committed to poverty ministry person):

And what about you? What do you have to say about yourself?

Committed to poverty ministry person:

I didn't do very much by way of church committees. I, in fact, never set through one of those wonderful, long boring meetings in which they think of a thousand reasons not to do something and even if they do agree to do something by the time they finally get around to putting their holy, authoritative approval on it, I-----I just----I just didn't have the time or patience.

Jesus: So what did you do?

Committed to poverty ministry person:

I went down to the local homeless shelter every Sunday and handed out socks and toothbrushes and toothpaste and things like that.

Jesus: How did you pay for it?

Committed to poverty ministry person:

I used the money I would have given to the church had the church been the church.

Jesus: You didn't! You used your church money to help the poor!

Committed to poverty ministry person:

To be honest, I haven't given any money to the church in 20 years.

Jesus: Have you even been to church in 20 years?

Committed to poverty ministry person:

No. Yes. Yes, yes is right. Church was when I was with the poor. So yes. But no, if by church you mean something with a steeple.

Committed to Church Person:

Can we ah---can we move this along, speed it up. I'd like to get to my mansion located on a street of gold.

Jesus: Hold your horses. I've got a few more questions. (To Committed poverty ministry person) Did you miss not going to church?

Committed to poverty ministry person:

Yes, I did miss it, but---but it was just too many headaches, too much heartache. It took forever to get the people of the church to let me do something for you.

[Pause.]

Jesus (scratching his head):

You know what, that hymn is true. Amazing grace. I'm not here to judge you, I just wanted to find out what you did with it, it being your life. The two of you can go on in.

(But don't move yet.)

(Jesus pats the committed to poverty ministry person on the shoulder---[Jesus and committed ministry person turn and look at each other.]

Jesus: Thank you so much for giving me all those socks, all those toothbrushes, all that toothpaste.

Sermon

Is Wedgewood a reflection of its Pastor's warped personality or is it a well-thought out, defensible, model (among others) of what it means to be church?-----That's a question I have for you and for me, but the larger, more important question is this. Jesus said, "Love one another". How do you set up church so that----so that loving one another, so that loving the world as God loves the world, has the best chance of occurring?

"Love one another," Jesus says. We all know---let's be honest now---we all know loving some people is darn near impossible, and loving ourselves on some days is as much of a challenge as climbing Mt. Everest, so-----so how do you set up church to have the best odds of loving as many people as possible, including the difficult ones, like me, and how do you set up church when you know everybody is not going to love themselves on every Sunday and will come to church slightly edgy with all their personality quirks and psychodynamics raw and ready to be irritated, maybe even looking for a fight or waiting to be disappointed in everything and everybody? How do you set up church so people have to put up with as little church c-r-a-p as possible?

There is no one right way to be and do church. The model of church we are trying, experimenting with, at Wedgewood has its weakness and unfortunately, this model apparently drives some very nice Christians batty and bonkers because more than a few open and progressive and liberal Christians have visited Wedgewood and liked our openness and

progressiveness and liberalism but found that they couldn't tolerate the level of---I don't like this term but I'll use it anyway---they didn't like the informality of the worship service. They quickly packed their bags because, and this is how I do like to describe it,----they couldn't handle the "organized 'chaos'" of the church.

I can understand the "one and done-er's." "Organized 'chaos'" is not for everybody. People whose lives have been so chaotic may not be able to tolerate the organized chaos, the flexibility, the open-endedness of a congregation like Wedgewood. For some people, their lives have been so messy they will do anything to prevent even one ounce of disorder to enter their existence.

I also am aware there are people who like to organize their houses, their property----say gardens in the front and back yards, just to give an example, and individuals who like to organize people, even like to organize human beings who don't like to be organized, like, for instance, Baptists who are as hard to herd as-----cats.-----Some folk even live with the illusion they can organize a teenager. And that's why teenagers love to get their freedom and go off to college. Just to mention another example.

When I say "Organized Chaos," though, do not hear me saying "chaos". And when I say "organized chaos" do not hear me saying all forms and expressions of organization can inhibit us from loving one another.

Recently Wedgewood has been blessed with folk who have come in and identified some projects that needed to be organized and they have gone to town. Lord knows we needed that and we need more of it. Amen. That organization is absolutely wonderful! What is not welcome at Wedgewood is organization which leaves any Wedgewoodians out or any organization which is not flexible enough to include or adapt to others in the community. What can be destructive is if we organize everybody and expect that all Wedgewoodians will respond positively to our organization of them, and when they don't, what is harmful is when we judge or resent others for not doing what we used our good organizational skills to organize them to do. Have you ever noticed in churches how much time is spent judging others for what they do not do, do not show up for, do not participate in? That is a recipe for disaster. The last thing----the last thing the church needs is folk sitting on their posteriors, twiddling their thumbs, judging people, including judging people in the church. The last thing the church needs to do is beat up on people who already "black and blue."

A lot of Wedgewoodians decided to try to do church in a way that strongly discouraged judging others, especially judging other for their lack of commitment to the institutional church. Some Wedgewoodians also observed that in the traditional steeples rich people, the very people Jesus said have the most trouble understanding and embodying the kingdom----we noticed that the big bucks brothers in Christ ran the show. Isn't that right?-----And we got tired of people who had been in the church since the time of Moses sitting around in committee meetings, taking their sweet little time, with their supposed superior wisdom, determining who was the best person to do this or that, and who could or couldn't do this or that, as if the Bible didn't reveal a God who had a pattern of picking the worst possible people for jobs. Read the Bible. I'm not making this up.

Many Wedgewoodians also noticed that, strangely, ironically----that if you wanted to get in trouble in the steeples, the best way to do it was to be like Jesus. Isn't that crazy! Furthermore, more than a few Wedgewoodians discovered that if you want to love the world as God loved the world, the church will think of a thousand things that can go wrong, it will complain about spending any money, and even if they do approve something, by the time it is approved you either are in a nursing home or----or the church has you so depressed you have lost your enthusiasm to be Jesus-like.

And so we tried to do church differently. Have you figured out how things work around here? One Sunday somebody notices a certain person was having trouble parking their vehicle in the church parking lot. It was determined that their parking skills had not been altered by----How shall I say it?-----nobody accused them of having communion with the real McCoy before coming to church. In this person's defense, there weren't any lines on the parking spaces. So this parking lot observing Wedgewoodian says, "Hey Preacher Creature, I'll fork out the money to have the parking spaces painted so----so nobody gets killed in the parking lot. And presto, in record church time, the task is completed.

Another time another Wedgewoodian came up to me and said, "Preacher, sometimes when you are preaching those long sermons folk can't wait and they need to go to the throne. What if we convert one of the rooms on top sanctuary floor to a unisex bathroom? And----and I'll pick up the tab."

Knowing, or at least thinking I know the congregation and that this is a no brainer, I said "Get 'er done." Presto, a bathroom problem of 20 or so years is solved.

Still yet another Wedgewoodian----O.K, I'll say the name, it's me, notices Micheal Hall is hauling tables from his home to the church so we will have enough tables for Room In The Inn and other activities. Using my full brain capacity and analytical skills I determine Wedgewood might need some more tables. About this same time, my wife, Victoria, says she needs some tables for the wonderful children to use when she takes them out of worship to go downstairs and teach them about Jesus. Amazing that same week the Lord reveals to me that I need a photo scanner at home which means-----which means the old office set up is not working anymore and that I need a table and so----and so I send out an email asking if folk want to help pay for some tables.

They'll be here in about a month. They are paid for.

You want to know how things work?-----Delbridge Narron designs a wonderful Wedgewood car magnet that has the message which is on our church marquee. Delbridge brings a drawing to church and everything. I know some folk who love the church marquee sign and so I ask if they have any interest in providing some dinero for said project. Bingo. The car magnets are here.

I'm not saying we do every idea or meet every need that is brought up but we come close. We come close! Rather than make it hard for people to do something, we try to make it almost impossible for individuals to prevent others from doing something for Jesus.

At Wedgewood somebody comes up with an idea. The idea is shared with others. An email is sent out. Then we sit back and wait. We either hear a deafening silence or we get just enough nibbles to keep the idea going, meaning a few folk want to do it and it's something the others do not object to but it's just not their thing and they aren't going to offer money, but they aren't going to get in the way of what other Wedgewoodians want to do for Jesus. If a large amount of money is required and Wedgewoodians have not personally offered to contribute, then a vote of the church is required. But typically, we have only the congregational meetings and votes that are absolutely required because----when there are votes a lot of somebody feels disenfranchised.

Generally speaking, at Wedgewood we avoid getting excited about budgets and buildings because we know Christians have a bad habit of confusing churchianity with Christianity. In this congregation we avoid being sour pusses because church can get so dang complicated people who just barely have one foot in the church door can end p saying adios. In this neck of the woods we try to keep it simple because----because we might not know what the person sitting beside us in the sanctuary has been through in the past or is currently facing. Life is hard enough without making church hard, without turning following Jesus into a migraine headache.

“Love one another,” Jesus says. How do you set up church to encourage people to love each other and love the world as God loves the world?

Sermon: That Was Easy

[Note: Three people in the congregation along with me have a Staples Easy Button which when pushed says “That was easy.” At the appropriate times we hit the buttons in a sequence.]

You would like to sing a solo during today's worship service? Well, the holy bulletin [act out holy bulletin coming down from heaven]----the holy bulletin is just a guide. What if we put you right after the first scripture lesson?

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button and hear voice saying “That was easy!, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

You would like to sing a solo during today's worship service? Hey, I've got a crazy skit in today's service and a goofed-up Bible version reading and we've already got a choir anthem and a duet for today and these are liberal Baptists and if the services goes too long----let's just say you don't want to know what they will do. Would you mind if I put you down for next Sunday, nothing has been revealed for that worship service? Super!

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

You would like to be one of the many people who preach at Wedgewood? Are you crazy? Have it, but consider your self warned. I've got you down to preach the 2nd Sunday of next month.

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

You want to be on the property committee. You are on the committee. Any time of the year, any month, any day of the year you can decide you want to be on any committee. God has a way of using the worst possible people to get stuff done, not that we think you are the worst possible person for the job, but we just don't get into qualifications. If you want to do something for Jesus, that alone qualifies you.

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

You want to be president of the Pastor Fan club. Well, there are forty other people who have already asked and are waiting in line-----actually, you can do it.

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

You need to stop being a deacon. You just don't have the time you thought you were going to have. We'll take you off. We understand.

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

You feel like God is calling you to do a ministry at Wedgewood we currently don't have. You want to do a prison ministry. Super duper. Would you mind standing up during worship and telling everybody what you have in mind and send me an email to put out on the Wedgewood email list and we'll see if anybody wants to help you or wants to throw some cash your way for the ministry.

[Push Staples That Was Easy Button, Button 2, Button 3, Button 4]

That was easy. Why do churches and Christians complicate it?

I want to close with a story which I hope will transform your understanding of church, and cause you to make sure being church does not get in the way of following Jesus, but not only that, I hope the story motivates us as church not only to not get in the way, but actually encourages us to pave the way for others to be Jesus for a world that desperately needs as many Jesuses as it can get.

Fred Craddock was a Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta and it is Fred's story I'm hoping shakes us up.

Fred writes:

I think I was twenty years old when I read Albert Schweitzer's Quest for the Historical Jesus. I found his Christology woefully lacking---more water than wine. I marked it up, wrote in the margins, and raised questions of all kinds. And one day, one day I read in the Knoxville News-Sentinel that Albert Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland, Ohio, to play the dedicatory concert for a big organ in a big church up there. According to the article he would remain afterward in the fellowship hall for conversation and refreshment.

Craddock continues:

I bought a Greyhound bus ticket and went to Cleveland. All the way up there I worked on this Quest for the historical Jesus. I laid out my questions. I had my questions on a separate sheet of

paper, but I made references to the pages. “You said. . .[on page 144. You wrote on page 245 . . .]” because I figured, if there was conversation in the fellowship hall, there’d be room for a question or two [from me].

I went there; I heard the concert; I rushed into the fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row, and waited with my lap of questions. After a while he came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and seventy-five years old. He had played a marvelous concert. You know he was a master organist, medical doctor, philosopher, biblical scholar, lecturer, writer, everything.

He came in with a cup of tea and some refreshments and stood in front of the group, and there I was, close. Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: “You’ve been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying and I have to go. We have a medical station at Lambarene. If there’s anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?”

Craddock comments, I looked down at my questions: they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be Christian and had hopes that I could be that someday.

That’s the story I wanted you to hear. And what I’m saying is this: If there is an Albert Schweitzer in this church, if there is anybody at all wanting to do any good for any human being, if there is a Wedgewoodian here today or any day wanting to do something Jesus-like, we must, at a minimum, we must not be a roadblock. But I hope it would be more than that. Yes, we don’t all have to do the same thing. And yes, one Savior of the world was enough. But if we are serious about following Jesus, we not only will set up church to give us the best chance to love one another-----if we are serious about being Jesus we will go somewhere, maybe not Africa, but moved by compassion, stirred by empathy, shaken up by the pains and heartaches and injustices of real live human beings, we will go somewhere and we will do something. And neither the gates of hell or the bureaucracy of a church will stymie the good we feel called to do.

If there’s anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you?