



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Great God, small screen,
perfect family?
Episode 3*

Selected Scriptures from John 15 & Acts

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This summer we have taken a slight detour—instead of *God at the Movies*, we've been looking at *God on the Small Screen*, especially in the context of family life. The first week, we identified that God desires us to be in families and families come in all shapes and sizes. Last week, we looked at a dysfunctional family, in scripture of all places! Going all the way back to Genesis, we noted the breakdown in Joseph's family.

This morning we're looking at the church as family. And I instantly thought of one of my favorite TV shows from the BBC—*The Vicar of Dibley*. The series is set in the small fictional Oxfordshire village of Dibley. In the opening scene, the very elderly village priest, after decades of service, literally dies in the pulpit—every preachers nightmare. And so the powers-that-be assign a new priest or vicar to the village.

The vicar arrives on a very soggy, rainy night and is received by the members of the parish—that faithful remnant...of four souls—who are just waiting for new life in their church family. And their hopes lie in the new vicar—no pressure there.

The good news is that the villagers come to love this new Vicar, who indeed does bring new life, and many adventures, to the parish. And the congregation grows, from a few faithful to a packed house! Over the many seasons, this always diverse, and often quirky crew, encounter the day-to-day challenges and joy of the journey together as a church family.

I love the image of church as family. It's part of our heritage. The very early Brethren (don't miss that use of familial language) embraced what they called *Gemeinschaft*, a German word depicting a sense of familial community: sisters and brothers living together in mutually supportive fellowship. It suggests intimacy in conversing, sharing and relating with one another and with God. And we still see it today, as we refer to each other Brother and Sister.

And the scriptures are full of descriptions of the church and instruction on what it means for us to be church and how we relate to one another—to be family together.

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- In John 15, Jesus describes the church in a memorable metaphor: *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing.* The image implies that our connection to the vine also connects to all of the other branches. Case in point—just verses later Jesus tells his disciples: *Love one another as I have loved you.* This vine image is a description of a community full of love for God, Jesus and each other.
- And there are many others: I Peter speaks of a royal priesthood...God's own people.
- In the book of Acts, just after Pentecost, the church is pictured as one where spiritual growth is nurtured, faith is deepened, significant relationships are formed, and all belongings are shared....sounds like family to me.
- And Paul understands the church as a body...the body of Christ—a complex, diverse group of people united in Christ.

The New and Old Testaments are full of descriptions of the church as it was ideally imagined, as well as, the way it was actually experienced. Sometimes, in order to understand the church better, it's helpful to look at specific ways in which it failed to be what God intended it to be.

- Consider the story of Ananias and Saphira as recorded in the book of Acts. To say that they are severely punished for lying to the church is an understatement—they paid with their lives. Here we learn that church is to be a community of openness and honesty and integrity.
- And there is much more: divisions in the church at Corinth, favoritism toward the wealthy as articulated in the books of James, the complacency that plagued the churches in the book of Revelation and more.

We can be encouraged by seeing how our imperfect spiritual ancestors still managed to pass on the faith to us, these many centuries later. That gives us hope.

Perhaps like the folks in Dibley, we are a bit of a quirky crew! But we are in this together as the family of God. And there's something, and someone, who calls us to this place—whether we are lifelong, dyed-in-the-wool members of Etown church of the Brethren—or better yet, Church of the sisters and brethren. Or if we are ready to take that step this morning, to join this quirky crew on the journey of Jesus' way. And there are others outside these walls, who have yet to hear that call, but will hear it, and will come because we will invite and embrace them.

This church family is a place of love, where we love one another as God loves, and we carry that love with us, from this place out into a world hungry for a word of hope and a gesture of love.

