

This past weekend I took my father-in-law to his faith community – Nelsonville Wesleyan Church. My family and I had been part of this congregation 1997-99 after we had moved to Athens. My visit there this past weekend brought me a few very unexpected blessings. I hope you will visit sometime and maybe become part of their community.

First, you will notice, that this is a truly Appalachian Church. I do not say this derogatorily. It is a compliment. You will not find many from outside the area involved in this community. These are people from southeast Ohio who have lived here all their lives. But what is so unique is it is a congregation of 150-200 people gathering on a Sunday morning, not a small backwoods church. I would surmise that most people would not enjoy this congregation who are not from around here. For them, contemporary music is 1985 and they are pretty content with these songs. But for them, the age of the music is not nearly as important as encountering the Lord in meaningful ways. They will share their faith in testimony, honestly expressing a deep trust in the Lord, though in a very uncontemporary style. They don't care. They love their pastor, Rev. Mike Thomas, and he will pray for you as many times as you need him to, every week if you want, No problem there. There is not much "slick" going on here in worship, but they don't need it.

But there is something even more significant that I noticed that I did not pick up on when I was there. They do not have a "ministry to the poor." The poor are among them. This is not a rich church, but there are many who are economically stable. However, they have so embraced people from economically unstable backgrounds that you cannot tell that they are not a part of the congregation. Any Appalachian person would find themselves quite comfortable among this people, regardless of their economic situation. They won't stand out and feel out of place. They will be a welcomed part of this community.

I think this is a faith community that has successfully broken down the superficial barriers that separate people due to the economic and social labels we put on one another. Have you considered how derogatory our labels are toward people – helping the needy, serving the poor, visiting the sick – and it is true that we should be doing these things. But aren't we looking not at them, but at what has happened to them and defining them by what they have become. We no longer identify with them as a friend but rather as a sick person who needs to be visited, a needy person

who needs me to give them something, a poor person who needs me to do something for them.

It was refreshing to see these barriers broken down in a worship event that brought people together for who they are not what they have become. May God give us, give me, new eyes to see people as he sees them – His beloved children redeemed and being redeemed, restored and being restored to their created glory.