

WE ARE THE CHAMPIONS-2008

Keep On Loving One Another

SCRIPTURE TEXT: PETER 4:8-11 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
August 17, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

A Family Meeting:

A couple years ago I preached a sermon entitled “We Are The Champions.” The idea then, as with today, was to encourage this church to be people who will own and become champions for the ministries the Lord calls us to. We read the story of the men who lowered their paralyzed friend down through a roof to get him to the feet of Jesus, that Jesus might heal him. This is a great image of being a champion for someone—doing for them what they can’t, compensating for what they lack, owning their deepest needs as our own heartfelt desire.

Ever since that first “We Are The Champions” sermon, we’ve revisited this idea that the people of the church must be the champions for the ministries in the church. I like to spend time here on the Sunday before Vision Sunday because Vision Sunday in many ways marks the start of the new year in the life of Oak Hills. And we dream about what we hope to be as a local congregation and about where the Lord might take us. If next week is Oak Hills’ public manifesto that we long to be a church God uses to know and make known His astonishing grace, then this week is a family meeting to remember what He has called us to in order that He might glorify His name through us.

At the heart of this message is the conviction from God’s word that there is a way we were meant to live as members of the Body of Christ. After the service we’re having our annual ministry fair, giving you an opportunity to explore the various ministries of the church and see where you might plug in to serve or perhaps have a need of your own met.

We have this ministry fair every year because the church is a dynamic organism, always changing, always needing people to serve. So it helps us all to see who to talk to about various ministries, and how to get information about activities going on in the life of the church. But more importantly, we believe part of what it means to be a Christian is that we are contributing members of a local body. Our text comes from 1 Peter 4. We’ll spend two weeks here, but today we’ll unpack the foundational call before all others in the church, the call to love.

1 Peter 4:8-11

⁸Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: ¹¹whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Catapult Into Summer:

Summer is over. Are you ready? I grew up in a small town with one of the best community pools ever. Every Memorial Day weekend, mom would give me \$30 and I’d buy my season pass—which came with a number you’d provide at the gate. The passes were numbered according to the order in which they were purchased. My first year, I got a number in the 60’s. But the year after that I got number 3, which to me was the equivalent of coming in third among all my peers. Not bad at all.

This pool didn’t have any of the fancy slides, or lazy rivers you see today. What set it apart was its abundantly springy high dive towering ten

feet above the deep end. On opening day, in my brand new trunks I’d climb to the top of that high dive, edge my way to the end of the board as the line grew, and I’d peer down into the dark blue below. Was I sure I wanted to do this? Oh yes. I’d retreat to the ladder, get a running start and catapult myself into summer. In no time, shoulders blistered and hair bleached from chlorine, I transformed from a pasty countryboy to a pool rat.

My business in those days was to keep air in the tires of my bike and remember the number 3. Everything else just sort of worked itself out. If I had glory days, they were my boyhood summers. It was a routine interrupted only by the county fair. Do you have glory days? Or let me ask it another way, does anyone here believe they are in their glory days right now?

I’ve been thinking about that high dive because as this summer draws to a close, I recognize that there has been a shift in my thinking. If you were to tell me that next summer you were going to require me to ride my bike to the pool five days a week and jump off the high dive at least 20 times a day, I’d admire your enthusiasm and find your innocence charming. Then I’d tell you I’d like to see you try and make me.

Love and Proximity:

As much as I loved those carefree summer days, I know I’ll never return to them. In fact, I’d go so far as to say it would be grossly irresponsible of me if I did. My wife and kids need me to move on from those days. They weren’t bad. They were great. But they’re over. We all have seasons like this. One thing we learn from them is that our lives rarely stay the same very long.

This truth presents Christians with a unique challenge. There are things we are meant to hold with an open hand which we must be willing to release. Sometimes we walk a season in someone’s path but then our paths diverge. We move to a new city. We switch offices. We graduate. And all of the sudden that proximity which so greatly facilitated our relationship is gone. And we can drive ourselves crazy with guilt here feeling like bad friends, but the reality is often without that proximity, there is no practical way to remain close. This is a fact of life.



On the other hand, there are things Christians are called to embrace which have no season because they're inherent to the Christian life. Chief among them is the call to love one another in here our local church, and to demonstrate that love through serving one another. The question I keep coming back to is, what does this look like for a church where all of our lives are constantly changing, but by nature of our being part of the same fellowship, our proximity to one another does not?

I love the nuance in Peter's words to the church in our text. He doesn't simply say, "Love one another." He says "Keep on loving one another." And he's touching on something most of us know too well. When we first come to love someone, we're loving the person we're discovering for the first time. Someone new comes to the church. You have lunch together and think to yourself, "I like this person. Have I found a new friend here?"

Do you know the feeling? It's the feeling that when this person first walks into your life, they're holding a missing piece to the puzzle that you are. They answer a question you didn't even know you were asking. They fill a void you didn't know was empty, not until they came along. And they usually have no idea they're doing this for you. But you're grateful to God for them.

But in time the inevitable occurs. Wonderful, mysterious and shiny new friends become flawed, known and ordinary old friends. You begin to suspect it's going to take work to keep on loving this person you developed such an easy affection for when you first met. And they discover the same about you.

Sometimes this is because you discover things you simply couldn't see at first—traits, fears, quirks, particularities, even flaws, addictions and wounds. They were hardly secret, just beneath that first layer. You knew they were flawed people like everyone else, you just didn't know what their particular relational sins were. But as you get to know them and as they get to know you, you begin to see one another more clearly.

Sometimes it's much more innocent—our lives just change mid-relationship. Work picks up, babies are born, teenagers leave the nest or go through a crisis which consumes a parent's attentions and affections, and they don't seem as connected as they used to be. Some come into wealth while others suffer great loss. Some go from happy-go-lucky to depressed, from well compensated to out of a job, from senior year to entry-level grunt. We get in over our heads and don't see it coming.

And while all this is going on, we remain a church with a mission to know and make known the astonishing grace of God. The harder question isn't "How do we love one another?" It's, "How do we **keep on loving one another over the long haul**? How do we allow for change, transition or hardship; for maturing spiritually and relationally? How do we stay in each other's lives so that when we see someone we love slipping into a dark place, we have a voice to put a caring hand on their shoulder and say, "You alright?" And how can we love so that we don't doubt the sincerity of the question when it's being asked of us?

One person recently said of Oak Hills, "We do crisis pretty well. But I wonder how well we do with the 'everyday.'" How do we disappoint one another, which we're going to do, without kicking each other to the curb? How do you embrace the changes God brings to your life without the guilt of feeling like a horrible friend? How do you give grace when a friend tells you they miss having you in their lives, and you can tell they're hurt by your absence? When change is constant, but so is our proximity to one another as members of the same church, how do we remain unified as a family? And why is this important?

Keep On Loving Earnestly: (vs. 8)

Loving one another well is vitally important for the reason Peter elaborates on in verses 9-11 of our text—the church exists to bring glory to God the Father through Jesus Christ. Christ means to use His church on earth to show gracious hospitality to the outcast, to use the gifts He has given to serve the world in which we live, to communicate the burden of His love to a people who doubt it—all by the strength God supplies. A major reason the church exists is to champion the causes that bring joy to the heart of God. And it's not that He **needs** to use us for this; it's that He's pleased to use us for this.

But what hope is there for us when we grasp the fact that we are all guilty of a multitude of sin, and that the more we are known, the more we are known to be imperfect? Our hope is that earnest love can handle it. This is the beauty of loving genuinely—it covers a multitude of sin, something all of us needs because there is such a multitude in each of us.

Does this mean we love with our eyes closed, never confronting, correcting, pursuing or repenting? Certainly not. That isn't love. Peter says we're to "**keep on loving one another earnestly.**" This is an explosively active expression. Earnest love does not cover sins in the sense that it sweeps them under the rug. It covers them in the sense of being a refuge—an umbrella of grace where our sins are brought in, known and we are loved regardless. The effect of this kind of love is that it enables fellowship in spite of our shortcomings. This is what Peter is calling us to. He doesn't say "Love **easily.**" He says "Love **earnestly.**" Pursuing love forgives. It is gracious in the face of change, merciful in the face of brokenness, relentless in the face of impenitence, and humble in the face of reproof.

Don't Give Up On Each Other:

On a day like this when we invite people to get involved in various ministries in the church, or even to become a champion for something new, it would be tempting to only hear in this a call to work. But serving the church is also one of the primary ways you get to know people, and come to be known. And this is where the multitude of our complexities, fears, quirks, flaws, addictions and wounds come to light. And this is also where we come to experience love covering a multitude of sins.

So as we prepare to begin another year in the life of this church with all the changes in our lives, but constant needs in the life of this body, I implore you: Don't give up on each other. The work of the church needs to be done by the people of the church. We need everyone to serve this body well, not because otherwise programs won't be sustainable or budgets won't be met, but because part of what it means to love in an ongoing way is to live in service to one another as unto the Lord.

Give each other grace. Don't give up on each other. I found out this week that the high dive of my youth was torn down—gone forever. I will never return. We cannot hang on to any era. We cannot expect our friends' lives to stay the same. We cannot presume the hurting ought to be healed by now, or the strong ought never to become weak. All we can do is ask the Lord to so work in our lives that we become people who love and keep on loving each other well, unto the end our text highlights—"that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."