



Catalog No. 7309

1 Peter 4:8-11

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September 9, 2012

LOVING EACH OTHER DEEPLY

MINISTRY CONNECTIONS SUNDAY

I love a good story. I think we all do, don't we? I read lots of books, and the ones I like best have developed characters, drama, humor, and mystery...and of course a plot-line filled with surprising twists and turns that somehow come together in a very satisfying and fulfilling ending.

Today is our Ministry Connections Sunday where we all get a glimpse of the story that God is revealing among us here at PBCC. Before I send you out to explore the various ministries set-up outside, it is important we take a few minutes to remind ourselves of three very important truths.

1. We love because God first loved us

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!... This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him...Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love because he first loved us. (1 John 3:1; 4:9,11,19)

The greatest story of all time is that God loves each and every one of us. While we were yet sinners, he sent his Son Jesus Christ to die for us and cleanse us from our sins that we might live through him. God has given us his Spirit to dwell within us, transforming us into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.

We are not our own, we are bought with a price. We love because God first loved us. We are like him because his presence is within us. God is love, so we love. God is light, so we are children of light. Our God has a mission, and we join him in that mission. We are his ambassadors to people near and far, telling with our words and our actions the story of God's redeeming love.

And so we worship and obey Him, we enter into ministry, not out of guilt or compulsion or to try and earn his love, but out of tremendous freedom and the desire to share with others the love of God that over-flows within us. Everything we do is motivated by love. We love because God first loved us.

So that's the first thing. Second...

2. Every one of us is vital in telling the story of God's love

Every single one of us has an important part to play. No-one is left out. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus,

Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. From him the whole body, joined

and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-13,16)

The Spirit of God is alive and active within each of us. Every Christian is uniquely blessed with spiritual gifts to help the church grow and mature unto the "fullness of Christ". Each of us is vitally important to the health and maturity of the whole body. Today is the first Sunday of professional football, and some people have it in their head that church is kind of like a football game... where the pastors and staff do all the important work down on the field while the congregation sits up in the stands watching the action either cheering or booing depending on whether or not they like what they see.

I'm so glad our church is not like that. We have a deep conviction and strong history in relying upon the gifts and passions of each individual member of our church body. Many ministries of our church did not start as an idea of a pastor or elder, but a person like you with the passion, vision, and faith to love others in your own unique way.

God is not calling us to be like the church down the road. We are purposefully unique to this time and place. God is gathering us and forming us in this setting, with our particular assembly of individuals and gifts, to be his salt and light in this community in a way that no other group of people is called to be.

I like the way Henry Nouwen puts it,

Our individual ability to serve is quite limited. As soon as we speak in terms of we, however, the picture changes. As a community we can transcend our individual limitations and become a concrete realization of the self-emptying way of Christ. In community, the particular gifts of each member become like the little stones that form a great mosaic. Each part contributes to an image much greater than itself. With increasing clarity, we can see the beauty in each other and call it forth.¹

When I look at our brochure, and walk around seeing all the ministry tables, I can't help but see the beauty of God at work. There are ministries to infants, toddlers, grade-schoolers, junior highers, high schoolers, college, singles, married, parents, divorced, widowed, empty-nesters, Mandarin-speakers...I could go on and on. We have opportunities to minister locally in our own community as well as internationally in places like Mexico, Romania, India, Russia, and Africa.

There will always be more people we can reach, and more that can be done, but let us rejoice for it is obvious our God is alive and actively at work in and through this church body drawing to himself those near and far ... glorifying his name for all eternity.

The beauty of a healthy and vibrant Christian community is that your story affects my story, and my story impacts your story, and together we tell the story of Jesus in a way that we could not express alone.

Every one of us is vital in telling the story of God's love. That is the second point.

Now the third thing...

3. Authentic love is up close and personal

God does not love us from a distance. He sent his Son to be with us and placed his Spirit within us. He could not get more intimate. This is the way we are called to love one another as well. True love is not accidental or shallow, it is purposeful and deep.

As the Apostle Peter says,

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:8-11)

How do we "love each other deeply"? We express the gifts God has given us not only in large assemblies, but also in small group settings of hospitality that allow for more up close and personal expressions of love.

Without the smaller, more intimate settings of encouragement we can quickly lose heart. As Henry Nouwen says,

We are able to do many hard things, tolerate many conflicts, overcome many obstacles, and persevere under many pressures, but when we no longer experience ourselves as part of a caring, supporting, praying community, we easily and quickly lose faith. This is because faith in God's compassionate presence can never be separated from experiencing God's presence in community to which we belong. Apart from a vital relationship with a caring community a vital relationship with Christ is not possible.²

Strong and wise words.

It is not always easy to feel connected, to give and receive love, in our large Sunday morning assembly. This is why we offer a wide variety of small group gathering. We have small groups for men and for women throughout the week, both in the morning and in the evening.

We also have a variety of home fellowship groups that offer you a more intimate setting to grow and mature in your walk with the Lord and connect with others from our church body. These small groups gather together for conversation, study, reflection, worship, and prayer. It is a way to continue and deepen the community and hospitality that gets started every Sunday morning.

I want you to know that we have a place for you! If you are not currently involved in a small group I can't urge you strongly enough to make your first stop our home fellowship table and let us know you want to join a group. We will find a group that is a good fit for you.

We also want to create new groups so that more people can be involved. We provide training and support for home fellowship leaders, so if you are willing to host or lead a small group let us know that too.

I want you consider these questions, "Who and what is your passion? Where do you sense the Lord is calling you to express your love for him and your love for others? Where do you feel led to initiate spiritual friendships, and to be a catalyst for change?"

If you don't know what your spiritual gifts are yet, don't worry about it. The best way to discover our God-given gifts is by getting involved in the lives of others. Don't be afraid to try new things. Take advantage of the opportunities God opens up for you to help others. As you serve, pay attention (and ask those around you to pay attention) to the specific ways you demonstrate love to others and build up the body of Christ. Enjoy the process of discovery!

Let me encourage you to let the Lord, through your passion, motivate and move you. If God is in it, there is no ministry too big or too small. Some of our established PBCC ministries are already moving in the area of your passion. I encourage you to connect with the ministry leader and find out about the various ways in which you can help. If we do not have an established ministry in the area of your passion, then make an appointment with me because I would like to listen to you, encourage you, equip you, pray with you, and help guide you in any way I can.

As you step out in faith, communicate your passion with others and who knows...maybe others with the similar passion directed by the Spirit of the Lord will gather around you and join you in moving forward and reaching out. Whatever we do, we do it all for God's glory.

As you move around the tables and talk with various individuals you will get a sense of the story being told by God in and through our congregation. May we find joy in the way he is inviting each and every one of us to live out his life and his love in our church, our community, and in our world.

1. Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: a reflection on the Christian life* (Doubleday, U.S.A., 1982), 56, 79

2. Henri Nouwen, 59