

TAKE COMMUNITY SERIOUSLY!
Romans 15:1-7

I. INTRO

- A. Lori and I recently watched a great live concert on TV by James Taylor. Anyone remember him? I can't say I've been his fan—but it was outstanding. One of the songs that I **loved** was called, **My Traveling Star**. Let me play just a little of it for you (CD).
-The song is about a guy who just can't settle down. He **longs** for home—but he's always looking over the next hill—new sights, new experiences. He experienced love—and said, "I knew I should stay, I knew I would go—run, run, runaway boy." I thought, "Why does this grab me so deeply?" Then I realized; he's talking about life on the road as a traveling musician.
-I tasted that. I spent a year on the road with a group called **Sound Alliance**. I lived out of a suitcase. Every day was something, someplace new—a group of people waiting for you to come. Sad to see you go. And this stuff gets into your blood. I would've traveled for another year if I had the choice! But **everything** is in the suitcase. Including your heart. Now—do you get the picture of this song?

-Listen to the very next son from the concert: **You've Got a Friend! (CD)**
"You just call out my name and you know wherever I am, I'll come running, oh yeah baby, to see you again.

-Do you see the irony? Traveling Star. Place to place to place—then—**You've Got a Friend!** I will always, **always** be there for you!

2. Ambivalence. We experience it through life. As toddlers. "I want to be free!!" "Mommy! Where are you?" Single guy, "I want to settle down...I want to play the field...I want to settle down." We have a craving in our hearts for roots. For **real** friends. We call—they're there. Then when **we're** needed? Well, that's not very exciting. If they get **too** close, they'll find out that I'm not a star. I'm average!" Sometimes we're strange, **strange** people!

- B. What do you think Jesus calls us to? I mean, Jesus could've been the traveling star. Show up. Heal. Do miracles. Feed the crowd. Teach. And then leave. **See ya!** But the people he left behind knew how to love. Knew how to be the "I'll be there" kind of friends. They knew intimacy—how to do life together! They called each other "brother" and "sister"—and it wasn't some corny religious lingo.

1. Now, here's the irony. Sometimes the gatherings of Jesus' people—like this one—can be the loneliest place on earth. People come to find hope and love and a sense of belonging—and spend an hour looking at the back of someone else's head--and leave--unconnected, unloved, and unnoticed.
2. Three weeks ago, Paul Penelton gave an excellent message on loneliness in a world jammed with people. He said that to find the sense of belonging our hearts crave, we need to make great decisions at three crossroads:

***I can choose to walk alone or with others**

***I can choose to pretend or be real**

***I can choose the shortcut or the long haul**

-What I want to do this morning is flesh out how Jesus intended love to work. How we can give the kind of love that ends aloneness.

-What's my part in that? See, the love and community and belonging Jesus talked about is not passive. We are not called to just go limp while someone else does "love and belonging" to us. You have to engage. So, we're going to talk about how to give **and** receive community. Okay?

II. COMMUNITY IS OUR DESTINY

- A. There's something you need to know about living in a community. Belonging. Needing others—others needing you. This isn't some religious fad we're going through. This is not an accessory to life; loving and belonging is something, we neglect at the risk of our spiritual and emotional health.
- And that's why the Bible is full of the **one anothers**. 59 of them. Let me give you a for instance: **We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this. We must not just please ourselves. We should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord. For even Christ didn't live to please himself. May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus.**
- Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. (Romans 15:1-3, 5-7 NLT)**
1. When Jesus came—it was clear from everything He did and said that **God** was a community—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We were quite surprised to find out that God isn't this isolated Being who created humans because He was lonely and needed friends. When we were created in God's image—we were created with the capacity to enjoy one of the most meaningful experiences humans have. Deep. Close. Friendship.
 2. And Jesus didn't just talk about community. That's how He lived. Read the biographies. His followers who started the church simply carried on what Jesus had been doing for them.

-Was Jesus small group perfect? **Was it?** Of course not. They had squabbles, power plays, back-biting. Some even betrayed Him. But it absolutely transformed their lives. And they offered the gift to the world that Jesus had given them. And the world has never been the same.
- B. Listen to what Jesus said the night before He died:

I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” (John 13:34-35 NLT)

This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. (John 15:12-13 NLT).

-Life on the road has been exciting, but you're not traveling stars. Stop. Be friends. Offer friendship with God to the world. They'll get it if you are their friends—and true friends with each other.

1. We are called to love. To belong to each other and to God—and help others belong. To love **one another**.

-The question that **always** gets raised is...**HOW?** Jesus got pretty specific when he told us to love and treat others like we would like to be loved and treated. I've grouped these into three different categories. **Accept. Serve. Encourage.**

2. Acceptance is a huge part of love. Anyone here who's ever been rejected by someone—but still felt loved? Doesn't happen very often.

Accept one another--just like Christ accepts you. Think about that. How many of you would agree that, in some ways, you're a little weird? How many of you think you're pretty normal, but the person *next* to you looks a little suspect? The truth about Christ is that He knows the most embarrassing, scummy things about me--and you! Yet...He accepts us.

- a. Know what this is saying? It's saying that we may have to get close enough to people to get a little irritated by their weirdness. Making any relationship work means accepting someone—warts and all. Knowing them—even their kookier side—and still not pushing them away.

-And **that** is the hardest part about love. Accepting. Having the grace to see someone's strange side—and not critique them, talk about them behind their back, push them away—but love them, receive them, and defend them!

- b. Acceptance is sincere love. Peter, one of Jesus closest friends, says: **You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. (1 Peter 1:22 NLT)**

In other words—don't surface dance. Don't play games. Don't fake it.

- b. Another surprising fact. You might *like* this one another. The Bible occasionally tells us to greet one another with a holy kiss. Now, obviously, it's a cultural thing. Kiss the wrong person in this culture and you might get decked—or sued. This is simply saying that love **must** get beyond talk into genuine warmth. Around here, we sometimes hug each other. Genuine warmth doesn't have to be expressed by hugging—but there **needs** to be genuine warmth. Know why? Cause God is not cold and distant!
- c. Let me tell you about the "one another" that really raises the hair on the back of people's necks. The Bible urges us to **confess our sins to one another**. This isn't about going around and spilling your guts to everyone—even a small group. This is what Paul Penelton talked about a few weeks ago; it's about being a real person. Some churches create cultures where the only way to fit is to either totally have your act together—or fake it. The Bible calls faking it—hypocrisy. So, how about it. Anyone here totally have your act together? So...let's be real.

-Let me read the passage:

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave

you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:12-14 NLT).

-Friends, it's very simple. This is really important to understand, okay! Followers of Jesus are called to simply be real and sometimes vulnerable.

-What do you do when you know someone's faults? Start making phone calls? Remind them occasionally of their failure? Save it up for ammo? No. Be real. "I can identify with that!" When you're surrounded by tenderhearted, gentle, forgiving people, you don't have to be afraid to be real!

2. There's another cluster of *one anothers* that could be clustered under the title, **SERVE ONE ANOTHER**. It's hard to remember in a consumer culture that the goal of life, according to Jesus, is to **serve**, NOT **consume**.
 - a. Jesus modeled this to his little community by stripping down to his underwear to do the filthy job they refused to do: washing one another's feet. Then he said, "Okay—you've seen me do this—now **you** do it!" He humbled Himself to do that. Humility is the key to servanthood..
 - b. And, in serving each other, we are to **carry one another's burdens**. I couple of years ago, I had to put up a whole pile of drywall in a project in our home. Anyone here ever done that? It's a *messy* job. That stuff is heavy!

-Sheets of drywall come in 4X8, 4X10, and 4X12 sheets. I'm a proud, stubborn, arrogant and sometimes stupid person—and I found out that you can't put 4X12 sheets of drywall on the ceiling by yourself. Gary Carmichael, a good friend, came to my rescue!

-There are some messy jobs in life that you have to do alone. But there are some that, if you don't get the help of others—you'll probably hurt yourself and ruin what you're trying to accomplish! We as the people of Jesus need to be close enough to help share each other's load!

- c. And then we are told to serve others by doing something that no one else will do for them in this world. *Pray* for them.

-Every other week or so, our small group—we call them **Roots Groups here--** meets. We laugh, we eat, we study—but one of the most moving things we do is pray for each other. We've laughed together until we've cried. And we've **cried** together. In the past few years, five of us have lost one or both parents. We've prayed through job crises, family crises—illness. And that creates history! By the way, who prays for you?
3. There's third group of **one anothers**: Listen to these words.

...Encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11 NLT)

The word "encourage" here has a couple of different aspects to it. One is to **exhort** each other.

- a. That is, if we see someone in our circle headed down a dead-end detour, we're to gently and earnestly warn them. Do you have someone who loves you enough—and is close enough--to tell you the truth? Even when you **really** don't want to hear it?
- b. Another aspect is uplifting one another. Building courage into one another. Life gets dis-couraging. Your courage tank gets holes poked in it. When we encourage someone, we patch their tank and fill it. Listen to this:

And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near. (Hebrews 10:25 NLT)

You can make a huge difference in someone's life—but you have to be close enough to do that!
How do **you** do that?
- c. Friends, these **one anothers** are powerful. Jesus told us to love one another—that love is on the final exam. That love is the one essential in life that **every** follower of Jesus is called to. The **one anothers** tell us **how** to love. Accept. Help. Embrace. Acknowledge your faults. Be real! Pray. Encourage. Be hospitable. Value one another enough to take the time to do that. But you'll need a smaller gathering. You can't do that with 700 people. And you can't do it flying at mach 3—hair on fire. You have to make space and build it into your life.
Make sure you don't miss one of God's best gifts to us!

III. NO ONE STANDS ALONE

- A. I've tried to envision what this kind of *one another love* might look like here at The Olive Branch if it truly became part of our DNA—spread out to every cell; if it became the most consistent part of our life together. I thought, "You know, it might look like home." Not necessarily a perfect home--but a real home.
 -A place where people struggle, sometimes fight, but still love. Stick up for each other. A place of safety. You may get beaten up and humiliated outside--but *at home*, you're accepted and loved. You're family. I want to take you on a visual trip to the home I grew up in. Think about *your* home.

 -As a kid, we lived in several houses, but the one I remember best was in Erie. 247 E. 29th Street. It was an old yellow frame 2 story house with brown trim, creaky floors, a big front porch, and an old wooden 1 car garage in the back that kinda leaned to one side. The Hudson's lived on one side, and the Pfeiffers on the other.
 1. I remember the old porch with the peeling gray paint—cause I had to scrub it! There was the screen door that banged--and then this old wooden door. I went through it on lots of occasions--some good, some bad. I hid behind that door when riots broke out in our high school after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I went out through that door on my first date--and came floating back. I sulked behind the door when I got turned down by girls I liked. Behind that door, I learned to lift weights--and play a violin. I walked through that door stunned, in shock when a girl I was very close friends with was accidentally shot and killed—hoping my parents could make some sense of it.

- a. On the other side of that door was the place where I belonged for the first 24 years of my life. Officially, I belonged to Clyde and Betty Lou Davis—now gone. In a stranger sense, I also belonged to my brother and sister, Clyde Jr. and Beverly.
-Belonging had it's privileges--and responsibilities. Our dog Skippy belonged to us--which meant cleaning up his messes in the back yard, feeding him, and throwing water on him in the night when he howled. I actually belonged to him. And I belonged to my little pet snapping turtle, Joe. I was responsible to feed him flies, little pieces of hamburger and lunch meat.
- b. Truthfully, I didn't always feel good about belonging. Belonging had privileges and responsibilities. Like when it came time to do the dishes or clean up the basement—or be held accountable for something I'd wrecked. But I sure wanted to belong when it was time to use the car, go on vacation, get my allowance, or have my broken heart soothed—or be told that I was **okay**..
- c. When I left for college in my 65 aqua-marine Rambler station wagon, the independence initially felt *awesome!* But over the next months this intense, homing pigeon instinct grabbed me by the throat. At Thanksgiving and Christmas--it was almost unbearable.
-You know, our houses were never that great, that fancy or spacious. I found it really didn't matter--because it **WHO** I belonged to.
The *people*. **Belonging** was far more important than I'd ever dreamed!
2. I've found something out over the years. Belonging involves **both** the perks—and the responsibilities. You don't get one without the other. I found that belonging is a **verb**; you actually do **belonging** kinds of things.
-I also found out something else. As I look back on it. I found out that maturity--that truly growing up--is not related to growing chest hair, learning to drive, going on dates, choosing your own bedtime, or even getting schoolwork done. It means, at the very core, learning to **welcome!** Learning to think about someone besides yourself. *That* is specifically what takes you into the emotional and spiritual double-digits.
3. I've thought about this sense of belonging--belonging to God, and belonging to others. What I've realized is that, if is truly going to be happen, it has to be **mutual**. Like a home.
- a. If you want to *feel* the sense that God belongs to you--to call on, ask for help, feel the power of His love--*you* have to fully belong to Him--lock, stock and barrel. He's not like an errand boy—or personal genie. It's a Father/Child relationship.
- b. And if *you* want to feel a sense of belonging in a group of Christ-followers--*they* need to belong to you, and *you* need to **BELONG TO THEM**. **That** was Jesus dream for his people—that they would love just like that!

- B. Now, I could talk to you more about how living in this kind of loving context builds your heart and brings joy.

I could tell you that if you're intent on growing--that's where you need to be. I could go into detail about why we've given the name **ROOTS** to that part of The Olive Branch. How roots nourish you--keep you alive, keep you standing when the storms hit. But I think, deep down, you know all that.

1. But I want to talk in closing about the biggest barrier we face in our culture when it comes to giving and receiving love and community. Paul Penelton talked about **busyness** and that's huge. But another big one is **consumerism**. We North American's have been brainwashed into becoming the *best consumers in the world*. The constant message from the world system is to expect to be served well—and to complain if you aren't.

-But that doesn't work in relationships. And true spirituality is, at the core, relational.

-The danger we face is bringing the same consumerism our world thrives on right into the church. To act and operate like consumers in a place intended to create **servants**. To think that our main obligation as a follower of Jesus is to consume as many **God-products** as possible.

-And if we're not careful, our first tendency in a place like this can be to kinda look around—waiting for people to serve us. Meet our needs and expectations. And that's ultimately a set up for disappointment. Know why? Because the church is, at heart, a mission—not Wal-Mart or the Tim Horton's drive-through window. The imagery Jesus chose to describe his people a **family**.

2. I talked about my home; how **belonging** ultimately created some expectations for me. Not at first, of course. A baby coming into a family comes with expectations that others will take care of it. Totally! Anyone here whose baby, at 3 months, mowed the lawn and cleaned up the dishes? Shoot—some still aren't doing that at 20! When a baby is born, at first everyone **serves** the baby. Carries, feeds, changes, dresses, entertains. And that's a good thing!

-But over time that stuff decreases--hopefully! What if that stuff—like carrying, or changing is still going on when the baby is 15? Or 20? That sometimes happens, but it's not normal, is it? Growing up, learning to love, learning gratitude, learning to be part of a household is good. Normal! Expected!

-The point of a family, remember, the point of growing up, maturing--is *learning to contribute meaningfully and consistently*. It's a **part** of belonging! How many of you have children. How many of you have more than one child?

If you do—who belongs more—the oldest or the youngest? Neither, right? Same here. If you've been attending one month—you belong here as much as those who helped start The Olive Branch five years ago. And I **mean** that sincerely. Cause, see, we're a family with **lots** of kids!

3. Please listen carefully to me, okay. If you don't take anything else home, take *this* home. Love, acceptance, belonging—community is, at heart, **a gift you give to others—not a consumer product you receive**.

-Life is not set up to take. You make yourself the center of a friendship, a marriage, a job--*anything*—and you will kill it. And this is especially true among

the followers of Jesus. The goal is to become like Jesus—who didn't come to be served, but to serve and give his life for others.

-Remember Jesus words? **Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back. (Luke 6:38 NLT)**

-He said this in the context of forgiving others. That when you are a forgiving person, you will find forgiveness. The same is true about love, acceptance, service, kindness and helping others belong. When you obey Jesus in this area, you find what your own heart craves. Pressed down. Running over! love, acceptance.

-By the way, living in community isn't an optional part of following Jesus. It's how He calls us to live! In fact, according to Jesus—it's on the final exam. Learning how to love Jesus' way is one of the most **meaningful, powerful** things you can do.

IV. **WILL YOU CHOOSE TO LOVE AND BELONG?**

- A. There's one more barrier I know of when it comes to the one another. Knowing and being known, loving and being loved, accepting and being accepted. It's the fear of rejection. Anyone ever felt rejection?

-Steve Shore, my first best friend as a kid, was the first person where I really felt connected at the heart. We did everything together—fishing, camping out, sharing our dreams—everything. One day Steve told me that he wanted to have other friends, too.

What *I* heard was, "I don't want you as my best friend anymore." I remember walking home from his house that sunny Spring morning thinking, "I will never get that close to anyone again."

-Now, that's kind of a dumb, immature example, but what I ultimately found out is that to build a great marriage, a great friendship, a sense of belonging—to even grow as a person—you have to walk toward that fear, the fear of rejection. Do you get hurt? Of **course** you do! To be human is to get hurt! But if you never get out of your comfort zone and you never face your fears—well, you never find what your heart craves most; a sense of **belonging**.

- B. I wouldn't be at all surprised if some of you need to face some fears and hang-ups that are robbing you of community. A fear that it won't work. A fear of loving—and being loved. Fear of setting aside some of your busyness and building time for community into your year. Will you take one step this morning toward community? Will you decide to at least check out the opportunities? Will you open your heart—maybe even open your home—and give love a chance? Will you do it? That's the question. Will you **choose** to love, accept and belong to God and others?

You've gotta take action—walk toward it!