

Series: LIVING BEYOND MYSELF—November 5, 2006

**ON THE BENCH...OR IN THE GAME?
Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12**

I. INTRO

A. You need to know that, even though I'm wearing this uniform, I have never played hockey in my life. But I sometimes wonder if I could have been a hockey player.

1. Some of you have had hockey in your face all your lives. I didn't. I was raised in Pennsylvania. When I was about 9, the city of Erie where I lived built something innovative. A rink where you could skate year round. I **loved** to roller skate—so I taught myself how to ice skate. No one ever showed me how to stop--which was a problem.

-I went skating every Saturday--but there was no hockey. I played baseball and some football--but hockey? I didn't even know anyone who played.

2. As I thought about this, I thought, "What if 'the great one' Wayne Gretzky had been born in Erie about the same time as me--and he never really discovered what he was great **at** because he never had the chance to even try?"

B. I know something about you this morning—something, in fact may not even know. I know that you have a calling in life—something we talked about last week. I also know that God hasn't just given you talents; if you're His child, He has given you supernatural abilities and unique opportunities to do something eternal.

Something that will fill your heart with meaning, bring joy to God and others, and make a difference in this world. You **will** want in on this one!

1. But there **is** a conspiracy. Anyone here like conspiracy theories? You know, that the CIA had Kennedy killed, or, my personal favorite, that modern art is a conspiracy between artists and rich people to make regular people look stupid?

-The conspiracy in the realm we can't see is to keep you out of the game when it comes to your God-given mission in life. The conspiracy is to keep you in the dark, uninvolved—too busy, really, to use God's best gifts to you—your spiritual gifts and passions and opportunities.

-The conspiracy is to make you feel inadequate and small and incapable of serving God and others in magnificent ways. The conspiracy is to make what God is doing in this world seem small, shabby and boring. The conspiracy is to keep you so crazy chasing money or popularity or the next conquest—or just **stuff** in general that you burn down through your life and never even **think** about your ultimate calling in life.

2. So, today, I'm going to do my best to quickly expose the conspiracy—and then fill you in on God's brilliant plan to transform this world through ordinary-looking people like you and me—one life at a time.

II. SOME HISTORY

A. The Bible is very clear about one thing before Jesus came on the scene: Only special people called **priests** could approach God.

They **alone** were the mediators between God and ordinary people. The priests were the ones with the red phone on their desks with the direct hot line to Heaven. And everything was narrowed way down to a being from a special tribe and approaching God at a special place—the temple—and at special times.

1. Something else. In the Old Testament, God's Spirit only worked through a few people of God's choosing—typically prophets and leaders. I.e., **special** people. But everyone knew that when the Spirit came on them, amazing things happened—power, insight, unusual ability.
2. Enter Jesus. When He shows up on the scene, He starts making statements that turn the whole religious hierarchy on their ears. He calls God **Abba**, or **Dad**, and then teaches people to pray, "Our Father in Heaven." **Nobody called God "Dad" or "Father!"** He started talking to ordinary people—saying, "You...you're the light of the world!"
 - a. He not only heals and casts out demons, he sends first 12, then 72 ordinary people out to do the same thing. And he did this right in front of the special people, the priests and other religious officials. And they were **really** upset cause, see, these common people were doing things even **they** couldn't do with all their training and ceremonies and robes!
 - b. So, they killed the ringleader--Jesus. But that didn't stop him! He rose from the dead. When he ascended to the Father, he gave his followers specific instructions. He said, "**You're** going to be my witnesses; **you're** going to start a movement that will eventually impact the world! But don't try this on your own. Wait! Wait until the Holy Spirit comes.
 - c. Jesus followers had all gathered on a special Jewish feast day, Pentecost—praying and waiting--when the Spirit came. When He did, flames of fire, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, rested on **everyone's** head, not just Peter, or the other disciples.
 - d. The difference was dramatic. These people—no training, apart from what Jesus had given, no robes, no handbook of prayers and rituals and theology—just went public with their story and their praise to God. 3000 people joined them—and that was just the beginning. Within about 300 years, 56% of the Roman Empire had become followers of Jesus!
3. I'll tell you what made the difference. If this had been left up to **special people**, this would've never happened. But when everyone had the power of God's Spirit—the difference was incredible! In fact, Peter, the one Jesus asked to lead the disciples, said this:

But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted (1 Peter 2:9-10 Msg).

 - a. Peter had been central to the disciples and to all the events on Pentecost. Peter was the one who took Jesus' movement to the Gentiles—and led the way through the controversy that followed.

-But does he say, "I'm really special, God's chosen, come to me and I will bless you?" NO! **You** are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work...God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him.

- b. Do you get what he's saying? You don't need a priest to represent you to God, hear your confession, to connect you with God. No one has the red phone—we all do. No one is on the inside track—we all are. We don't need a special place, special rituals or special words. There aren't special people who get to do the really cool things, the really important things—We **all** have the Spirit of God—the most powerful force in the universe—inside us. He's waiting and ready to kick us loose and give us power to do things we never thought we could do!

-Everyone gets to be a player! **Everyone** gets to be used by God and feel the direction of the Holy Spirit. **Everyone** gets to feel the thrill of being part of an immense, difference-making team that has world-wide impact!

- B. Now, the question that comes up is—**what happened!** By the 1900s, it was like the church had reverted to the Old Testament system. In most gatherings, there were rituals to follow, specially trained priests or ministers did the important stuff, and the red phone was back on the desk of these special people called **reverend**, or **pastor**, or **father**.

-If you needed healing, or counsel or someone to talk to or communion or just about anything to do with God—you went to them. In some traditions, about the best you could expect was to stick out your tongue and get a wafer. But Peter—the first leader of the church, said, “Now **everyone's** a priest! Everyone's a player! Everyone carries the message!”

1. I'm not sure where things went off the rails—and why they stayed off the rails. Maybe it was a power-takeover. Maybe some people were **glad** to have someone else take on the pressure of Jesus' mission. Maybe people's egos got all tangled up in the pomp and circumstance. I'm not sure.

-And I'm not sure how the church, the most radical, cutting edge movement on the planet got relegated to the status of “ho-hum—**bo-o-oring!**” I'm not sure where engaging in God's mission to redeem the people on this planet got reduced to the status of “church work”—but it makes me sick.

-Let me tell you where I believe the heart of the problem lies. In Romans 12:1ff, Paul is urging believers to present themselves whole-heartedly, unreservedly to God as an act of worship—and have the power of the Spirit transform the way they think so they can know and do God's will.

-Right after that, he says these words:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you (Rom.12:3 TNIV).

- a. Some people did exactly what Paul warned against. They began to get an inflated opinion of their own ability and significance. I know that, because I did it. I thought I was super-pastor—I mean, I should have had a cape and a tight-fitting T-shirt with a big **S** on it. And I was trained and groomed for it through education and ordination and mummification. Hatch, match, and dispatch. When someone was in trouble, **Here I come to save the da-a-ay!**

-I planned agendas, led the elders, the Governing Board, baptized, served communion, visited, prayed, counseled, led all the worship—Heck, I even mowed the lawn sometimes! I thought I was **supposed** to do all that stuff.

b. And it wasn't necessarily because I had this wonderful servant heart. I remember one Saturday before Easter, I took a break from working on a message to check in on two guys were there working on this massive ark thing for the children's musical. When I asked if there was anything I could do, one friend said, "Yeah. Could you go get us a pizza?" So, with teeth clenched I did. I thought, "Do I look like the Dominos pizza delivery boy." I brought the pizza in and threw it on the bench in the lobby. I have since repented of my pizza sin—but you get the picture.

c. Truth about me is that when it came to **not thinking of myself more highly than I ought**, I was WAY off base.

-And, this morning, I need to apologize to you—on my own behalf and on behalf of the others who, down through the past 1900 years, have unwittingly been part of the conspiracy to keep people out of the game.

-Pastors like myself were called to **equip** others to do the work; but we've **dominated** the work. We've stood in front of people wearing special garb, using special **God** language--acting like we're the only ones who can do it.

-And I'm deeply, deeply sorry for the damage it's done to the Kingdom Jesus intended to be a **whole KINGDOM of priests**. And **now** friends, it's time for us **all** to think of ourselves with **sober judgment**.

2. The title of this message is: On the Bench...or In the Game? Maybe it would be better stated, **On the Bleachers...or In the Game?** Now, think about something for a minute. Let's get back to hockey. Imagine you're at a Leafs game at the Air Canada Centre.

-What would keep you from saying, "I think I'm gonna suit up and play!" What do they have that I don't have? Well, size, experience—I mean, we would all certainly be humiliated—and maybe killed. I've watched the Leafs slam someone into the barriers. I know **I'd** be dead.

-That's precisely what makes God's Kingdom—what **He's** up to in this world--different. What do I have as a minister that you don't have? There's no red phone on my desk!

Sometimes when I'm at some kind of outdoor thing—people look at me as if to say, "Why don't you **do** something!" And I tell them, "Hey, I'm in publicity, not management!"

a. You need to understand that when people have been around the church for a while, they do get to know things; they get a little more experience when they pray and help others. **But that doesn't mean that God is more with them—or that they're more important to Him!** In fact, if we're not careful, knowledge can create pride and self-importance.

b. The Bible says that if you belong to Jesus, the same One who raised Jesus from the dead, the Holy Spirit, lives in you. And when He came, He brought gifts and power with him that mesh with your passions, your talents, your heart.

- c. God's plan is to use everyone. It's like a football team—just because you don't play quarterback doesn't mean you're not important! Everyone is important!
- It reminds me of a story I heard about this football game between the big animals and the little animals. And, as you can imagine, the big animals were just cleaning up on the small animals.
 - They would kick off to the rhino, he'd receive the ball in the end zone and then thunder down the field—splattering squirrels and butterflies and chipmunks—blast through every defense for a touchdown. At the end of the first half, it's like 77 to nothing, large animals.
 - To make it worse, the small animals had lost the coin toss at the beginning of the game, so they had to kick off again to the big animals. Well, the elephant receives the ball in the end zone, and he starts to gallop down the field when, **Bam!** He's stopped dead in his tracks on the five yard line. Well, the rhinoceros gets the hand-off for the second down—he runs off—**Bam!** He goes down. The lion takes the hand off—**Bam!** Straight down. They realize they're not going to run the ball, so the gorilla takes the hand-off and goes back into their end zone to make a pass; he gets slammed, the ball goes loose—and there's this mad scramble to recover it.
 - The referees are picking these animals off the pile, big animals and small animals. And finally, on top of the ball is this tiny centipede. Touchdown! Small animals. And so the other players said to him, "Wow! Was that you who hit the elephant and took him down?" He said, "Yeah, that was me." And who stopped the rhino? "Me too." And was that you that took out the lion and the gorilla? "Yep! That was me!"
 - So they said, "Man! Where were you in the first half?" He said, "I was getting my ankles taped!"
- d. This is my point—and there *is* a point. There is no such thing as a small, insignificant player on God's team or in God's eyes. All of us are important and significant. And this game is for keeps. It's your calling, and it is one of the most important things you will ever do. So, will you be a player? Will you use the gifts, passions and opportunities God has given you to make the difference you were created to make?

III. THE PLAN

- A. You need to know that God's plan for the transformation of this planet is brilliant. Here's the deal. He takes ordinary, struggling, sometimes weak people, He gives them supernatural power to make a difference, and then he engages them in doing something they're passionate about, challenged by and good at. And they get to do this with people they enjoy being with.

-He hands out supernatural abilities on every level. He has created the church and given it the capability to be led with excellence by leaders, to be administrated by administrators, to be taught by teachers, to be cared for by people with gifts of mercy and pastoring, to be helped by helpers. There are supernatural abilities to counsel, to study new things and come up with new ideas—even special abilities to be entrepreneurs, to

learn new languages and speak new languages, to do expert craftsmanship. It is an astounding plan—and behind it all is a master plan, a template God is working with to lovingly draw all people to Himself and redeem this planet.

-And then know what He's done? He's put his Spirit in everyone's heart so that the whole thing will be coordinated and unified. And right now He is managing this plan sovereignly—and coordinating it around the whole globe! And He's poured out love, patience, joy, kindness, goodness, gentleness and humility in abundance so that His team will get along.

1. How many of you think that's a **good** plan? How many of you think that, if what I've said is true, it might be a fun, meaningful thing to be a part of it?

-Another **different** question. How many of you have ever had, even the fleeting thought, "If I tell God I'll join His team and do anything He wants me to do, He'll either turn me into some kind of weirdo who scares off my friends—or ask me to do something I hate!" Anyone ever thought something like that? I have.

-Well, before you go too far down that trail, at least check out His plan. Is that fair? His plan is probably explained most completely in a book written by Paul to a group of Christ-followers in Corinth. I just want to take a few minutes and explain the core of what it says.

-The first words are these: **Now about spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant (1 Cor. 12:1 TNIV).**

-Think about that for a minute. If you won a 42" plasma TV in the **r-roll up the r-rim to win**, you'd want to know, wouldn't you?

-Paul, in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, is saying, "This is not drudgery! This is not God squeezing you like a sponge! This is your purpose! You will **want to know about this!**

-So, what is a spiritual gift? Well, a spiritual gift is a **supernatural ability God gives, through his Spirit, to every person who chooses Jesus as their Forgiver and Leader. It's an ability that makes them part of the team God is using to change and redeem the world.**

2. And then he proceeds to tell about how this amazing plan of God works. First, it involves almost endless variety, in the number of gifts, in the ways they're expressed, and in how they serve the church and the people of this world. And God is involved in all the nuances of this, in one massive, comprehensive plan. The Bible says:

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful (1 Cor. 12:6-7 Msg).

- a. Let me give you a for instance. One of the gifts God gives is administration—the ability to organize and manage. This gift can get used in lots of different ways. Nancy Vamvakas, who, by the way, is a volunteer, serves as Executive Director. Well, she gives organizational oversight to the entire ministry of The Olive Branch. Debbie Grainger, one of our GB members, gave up a chunk of her life using this gift to help manage the renovation of this building, along with Dave Chalmers. See how it works?

The spiritual gift is organization—but it branches out into the realms of interest, talent and passion—and the Spirit of God is behind it all.

- b. And *who you are* figures into this. Do we have any extroverts—flaming people person's here? Anyone here who is not so keen about people being around all the time. I mean, you don't **hate** people—but you need your space.

How many of you would consider yourself thinkers. How many of you rarely think? Any feelers—people who like to hug?

-Do we have any fix-it people here? You just **love** to fix things. "Give me a pair of pliers, some wire, and some Durabond, and I can fix **anything!**" How many of you don't know what Durabond is? How many of you are a little fuzzy on what pliers are. See, there are all kinds!

-God takes that all into consideration in where He calls you. If you hate bugs and snakes, he won't call you to the jungle. If you hate cement and city life—he probably won't call you to the inner city. If you can't figure out how to put a kid's tricycle together on Christmas Eve, He probably won't call you to be a plane mechanic in the Amazon.

- c. Something else really cool. With God—**absolutely nothing goes to waste!** Especially pain. When I was leading the church in Pennsylvania, we had this big hulking bald-headed guy who ran a drag-line at a strip mine. I really didn't know Bill that well—except that he was a Vietnam vet. One Sunday, I was doing a message on spiritual warfare—and so, I asked if we could meet and talk about the battlefield.

-Little did I know that I was tapping into an area of pain that Bill didn't talk to **anyone** about—not even his wife. He had been among the special forces in Vietnam and saw horrible things.

Well, he got up that next Sunday and told about how the enemy got to a friend fallen on the battle field before he did and butchered him. You could've heard a pin drop. **Nobody** talked about Vietnam. But Bill started an outreach to Vietnam vets in our area called Pointman Ministries—and last I'd heard, they had outposts in about 15 different communities. Bill could talk to guys I could **never** talk to, and a lot of these guys put their faith in Jesus because of Bill.

-God is brilliant; he doesn't waste any experience you've had, any pain you've been through.

3. Something else you need to know about God's plan besides the variety. **God** chooses who gets **which** gift—not us! Listen to this:
All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when (1 Cor. 12:11 Msg).
 -Jesus doesn't lead us into some giant spiritual gift Wal-Mart and say, "Pick a gift—**any** gift!" Know why He doesn't give us a choice? Because He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows where we'll be, the people we'll be with—and **He sees the big picture!** We might ask for a gift just because it looks

cool and will make us feel more important—and that misses the whole point of the gift! It's not about us!

4. The image the Bible consistently uses to describe how this whole amazing plan of God works is the human body.

Probably because it's something everyone can relate to. Anyone here **not** have a body? See! The Body is this incredible, coordinated collection of cells and parts—all with the same DNA. The human brain controls the whole thing—and when every part is working, it's a beautiful thing. Right?

-You eat a piece of fudge: the legs get you to the table, your eyes guide you, your conscience says, "Don't do it!" Your taste buds say, "The **heck** with the diet!" your arm and shoulder gets your hand within range—coordinated by your eyes, your fingers grab it—and stuff it in your greedy little mouth—teeth chew, esophagus carries it down, stomach starts digesting—you get the picture. We won't go farther. Eventually your blood stream picks up on the caffeine and sugar, carries it to your brain—which goes **WOW! ME WANT MORE!!!**

a. But if all the body parts aren't working right—well, then you've got a problem! I had that happen once with an appendix. It rebelled, pouted and blew up—shooting the poison everywhere. My wisdom teeth rebelled and had to go. Shoot, I've had problems with wisdom ever since!

b. The point the Bible makes is that **everyone** makes up a part of Christ's body. And if you aren't doing your part in the Body, it affects everyone. And it affects Jesus mission to redeem everyone. So, what's **your** part? Do you **know**—and are you doing it?

- B. You might be thinking to yourself right now, "Ken, I respect what you're saying—but this is all **really** foggy—and I don't have a clue where to even start when it comes to gifts!"

1. Well, we're going to talk about that more next week—but let me use one final analogy. One that I think almost everyone can relate to. Anyone here ever been a child—at Christmas? By the time you're about 2 or 3, you know **precisely** what to do with a gift when your parents give you one. First you **open it!** You find out what it is.

-Anyone know what comes next? You **use** it. I mean, that's why your parents gave it to you. Not to store in your closet—or put on a shelf somewhere. You use it. Have fun with it. Get it dented and scratched. Cause, see, when you **use** it, it means you **like** it!

2. It's Christmas morning—quite literally. God's Son came and gave gifts. The first gift he gave, of course, was his own life so we could find life. Through Him comes another gift to us—His Spirit. His Spirit gives us hope in hopeless situations, gives us power to say yes when we need to say yes—and power to say no when we need to say no. He changes our hearts—and the whole course of our lives.

-And then the Spirit gives us gifts—and a mission to accomplish. These gifts are imperceptible—kinda like the DNA in a baby when it's born. You have no idea what's in there—I mean, most babies look the same. But as they grow—you find out what potential has been placed in their brains and arms and fingers and eyes and feet and hearts. And it's absolutely amazing to watch.

-I can tell you with absolute certainty that the Spirit has given you at least one gift—probably several of them. But you have to **open** them--take the time to figure out what they are—because those gifts come from a God who's good, generous and ingenious. They're **good gifts**--gifts you will **want** to know about—and find!

3. And when you find those gifts, you'll want to **use** them, whatever they are. Know why? Because using them is the key to a significant part of what God wants you to do on this planet. And, truth is, they don't really belong to you in the broad sense. **My** gifts and **your** gifts belong to the church. And if we don't use our gifts—someone gets ripped off. And everyone loses. You lose, the church loses, and the world God has called us to love and redeem loses.

-One of the most incredible things that happens in our lives is when we have the chance to make an eternal difference in someone else's life. That's what The Olive Branch is all about--changing our world one life at a time. The stakes are unbelievably high, time is limited, and it will take **all** of us to make that happen.

4. How? How do you find your gifts? Well, I'll tell you how I found mine. I actually sensed my calling to serve first—then I got some training, and I engaged. I didn't really even know what gifts I had for sure. I'll tell you one thing; I didn't think I had the gift of teaching. Or leadership. But as I read, engaged, stumbled along, tried, failed, tried, screwed up, tried—I got better.

And over time—I realized that God **had** given me the gifts of leadership, teaching, faith, and encouragement.

-And that's the **only** reason I can even remotely do this—and the jury's still out on that. I need to say this. I don't do what I do because it's the only thing I'm qualified or talented to do. I do what I do because it is the most meaningful thing in the world—even when it's tough. Even when my heart gets broken—and it has. I do what I do because God has called me to do it—and the thrill of seeing people change for eternity is the most incredible experience in the world! It **never** gets old!

-My job—our job, as staff, if we do it right, is to give **you** what you need to become the minister God has called you to be!

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. Wouldn't it be cool if, someday, everyone here knew what God was asking them to do—whether it's loving and teaching children, or helping build AIDS orphanages, or giving meals to the homeless, or leading a small group of computer geeks, or organizing music groups to visit care homes and make sick, elderly people feel wanted and alive...or leading groups in neighborhoods all over the city on How To Drug Proof Your Kids...or giving leadership to the 25 divorce care groups we eventually run all over York region...or leading one of the satellite churches we have by then all over the GTA!
- B. But it starts with you! Will you leave the bleachers—and come onto the field? Will you find the gift God thought up just for you—will you open it—and will you use it for the most important mission going on right now in this world?