

**Better Together: Get in the Game**  
**Sermon 6-17-18**  
**By Pastor Curtis Dehmey**

**Romans 15:1-13**

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup>Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. <sup>3</sup>For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” <sup>4</sup>For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

<sup>5</sup>May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup>For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup>and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; <sup>10</sup>and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; <sup>11</sup>and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; <sup>12</sup>and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

<sup>13</sup>May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Romans 14:1**

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

**Galatians 6:2-3**

<sup>2</sup>Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.

## **Message:**

I'm about to share with you a story from Henri Nouwen's book, "In the Name of Jesus." This book is originally intended for leaders, but I think it generally applies. For those of you who don't know Henri Nouwen, he was a renowned theologian and author who passed in 1996. Best known for his book, "The Wounded Healer." Nouwen was a graduate of Harvard and was a Dutch Catholic Priest. In this story, it is related, to his work at L'Arche community, a disability community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. "Let me tell you about an experience that came out of my move from Harvard to L'Arche. It was the experience of shared ministry. I was educated in a seminary that made me believe that ministry was essentially an individual affair. I had to be well-trained and well-formed, and after six years of training and formation, I was considered well-equipped to preach, administer the sacraments, counsel, and run a parish. I was made to feel like a man sent on a long, long hike with a huge backpack containing all the things necessary to help people I would meet on the road. Questions had answers, problems had solutions, and pains had their medicines. Just be sure that you know with which one of the three you are dealing. Over the years, I realized that things were not as simple as that, but my basic individualistic approach to ministry did not change. When I became a teacher I was even more encouraged to do my own thing. I could choose my own subject, my own method, and sometimes even my own students. Nobody would even question my way of doing things. And when I left the classroom I was completely free to do whatever I saw fit. After all, everyone has a right to live his private life privately!

When I went to L'Arche, however, this individualism was radically challenged. There I was one of many people who tried to live faithfully with handicapped people, and the fact that I was a priest was not a license to do things on my own. Suddenly everyone wanted to know my whereabouts from hour to hour, and every movement I made was subject to accountability. One member of the community was appointed to accompany me; a small group was formed to help me decide which invitations to accept and which to decline; and the question most asked by the handicapped people with whom I live was, 'Are you home tonight?' Once, when I had left on a trip without saying good-bye to Trevor, one of the handicapped people with whom I live, the first phone call I received when I had reached my destination was a tearful call from Trevor, saying, 'Henri, why did you leave us? We miss you so. Please come back.'

Living in a community with very wounded people, I came to see that I had lived most of my life as a tightrope artist trying to walk on a high, thin cable from one tower to the other, always waiting for the applause when I had not fallen off and broken my leg...When you look at today's church, it is easy to see the

prevalence of individualism among [people]. Not too many of us have a vast repertoire of skills to be proud of, but most of us still feel that, if we have at all to show, it is something we have to do solo. You could say that many of us feel like failed tightrope walkers who discovered that we did not have the power to draw thousands of people, that we could not make many conversions, that we did not have the talents to create beautiful liturgies, that we were not as popular with the youth, the young adults, or the elderly as we had hoped, and that we were not as able to respond to the needs of our people as we had expected. But most of us feel that, ideally, we should have been able to do it all and do it successfully. Stardom and individual heroism, which are such obvious aspects of our competitive society, are not at all alien to the Church. There too the dominant images that of the self-made man or woman who can do it all alone.

...Ministry is not only a communal experience, it is also a mutual experience. Jesus, speaking about his own shepherding ministry, says, 'I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep.' (John 10:14-15). As Jesus ministers, so he wants us to minister. He wants Peter to feed his sheep and care for them, not as 'professionals' who know their clients' problems and take care of them, but as vulnerable brothers and sisters who know and are known, who care and are cared for, who forgive and are being forgiven, who love and are being loved."

What Nouwen illustrates is that it's easy to run our lives from our little corner and do "our own thing." It's easy to live this independent and individualistic life because that's what our society encourages. But as Nouwen illustrates, even in an individualistic society, we all crave for connectedness and community. We get so used to doing "our own thing," that we forget about the other. In the case of Romans, Paul is speaking to an overarching conflict within His letter to the Romans: Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians aren't getting along. Jewish Christians believed that Gentile Christians weren't fully Christian until they were circumcised. Gentile Christians believed that Jewish Christians hang-on too much to the law and that's their weakness. There is a perceived "weakness" in the other. And Paul responds by saying, "We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Paul is saying that it doesn't matter how each of us is weak. We all have our weakness. But that's where the body of believers can help each other. <sup>2</sup>Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. <sup>3</sup>For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' <sup>4</sup>For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup>May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in

harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul’s vision is that there wouldn’t be division in the Kingdom of God. And he has to assert this vision, because sometimes if we’re only focused on the problems of here and now, all we’re doing is putting fires out, reacting to the latest problem, rather than moving into something new. Something that is of God. Something that is of the Kingdom. The pinnacle point of Christian community, according to Paul, is all of God’s people worshiping together. When God’s people worship together, God is glorified. That we are not defined by differences. We are not defined by the others perceived weakness. But that we make efforts to compliment one another, encourage one another and build the Kingdom of God together.

In order to realize this vision of Paul’s, though, we can’t sit on the sidelines. So if you’ve tried over the past few weeks to simply show up early for the fellowship time and hoped for interaction with Abundant Life, but didn’t find it. First, I commend you for showing up because that’s a good first step. One that may take a lot of courage for you. But if you want to take it a step further, I would encourage you to walk across room and simply introduce yourself to someone you don’t know. One reason that you maybe have missed out on an interaction could be that you’re content staying on your side of the walkway. You’re content with letting them walk by. You’re content waiting for them to interact with you. It’s similar to being on a sports team and being content with not playing. To sit on the bench on the sideline. There is a lack of investment or willingness to get involved. To risk something. To form something new. Imagine, if every team member wanted to sit on the bench. What if everyone was just content to observe. It wouldn’t be much a game. Similarly, no community will be built. In any relationship, if we’re not putting something at stake. If we’re not risking a part of ourselves, then we won’t gain anything. We won’t build anything. Another analogy is the whole idea of going to a Megachurch to be a “fly-on-the-wall.” In a sense, I get it. Sometimes we just want to blend in and fit in. I want that too sometimes. I see the appeal in going to a large worship service where all I have to do is show up. It doesn’t require much of me. I don’t have to sign-up for anything. I don’t have to get involved in any way other than showing up. But then, you scratch your head, “Wait a minute. I don’t know any of these people. They don’t know me.” And you conclude that it must be the size of the church that’s the problem. It’s not me. You wonder why you don’t have any meaningful relationships at your church. You wonder why you’re not growing much in your faith. You wonder why your faith is shallow. It’s because you haven’t invested anything. You haven’t risked anything. The return on your investment is minimal because you’ve only put in the minimum amount. We may not admit this, but there is some truth that we’re content with disunity in the church, big C Church,

because it preserves our little corner, our preferences, the way things are and the way we want them to always be. We stay within our circles because we're afraid. We're afraid of how the other will change us. We're afraid to walk across the room because forming something new threatens us. N.T. Wright puts it this way in his reflection on Romans 15, "[We] settle for comfortable disunity because that way we can 'be ourselves' and keep things the way we have always known them is to court disloyalty to the one Lord and failure in the church's mission to challenge the gospel to Caesar with the gospel of Jesus Christ." When Nouwen entered the L'Arche community, he took a bold step. He was comfortable in the Harvard community. He could keep things private. But keeping things private didn't match the reward of ministering to the "weakness" of the people of the L'Arche community. That's not to say that Nouwen is better or a stronger Christian because as he outlined, they ministered to his weakness. His weakness of being alone. But he had to give up his privacy, his individualism and even some of his preferences.

In Romans 14, Paul warns us of our intentions. "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions." So if your intention is to bring people in who are less spiritually mature than you. If your intention is to bring people "weaker" than you to assert your superiority and your own grandiosity, this is building community on false pretenses. You're not risking anything. You're not being vulnerable. You're not forming a new sense of trust. So "getting in" can't be motivated by selfish desires. As I talked about last week, it has to be motivated by the love relationship that you have with God. Paul gives the antidote to this mentality in Galatians 6:2-3, "<sup>2</sup>Bear one another's burdens..." This is a selfless act. Bearing another's burden is what builds trust. Going out of your way to help someone. Walking away from the people we know to meet someone new. Bear the burdens of our brothers and sisters in Christ. "...and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. <sup>3</sup>For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves." So if you're looking to sniff out the intentions of another, a mark of a mature faith, is a willingness to lay down their life and their desires to serve you. And vice versa.

You know, just to be a little real and vulnerable with you, I struggle with sharing that I'm a pastor with outsiders. I had a great time helping to coach youth soccer this past year. At tournaments and games, I had some informal time to hang-out with parents and the kids. I was hesitant to share that I'm a pastor because I fear the rejection. I fear that these people will all of a sudden stop talking normally to me. That they will have this stereotype in their mind that they need to straighten up in front of a pastor. When I want them to feel free to be themselves. But at the same time, I wonder what would happen if I had the courage to share that I'm a pastor? I wonder if people would feel comfortable to open up to me? I wonder if they would experience the love and light of Christ? I

wonder if ministry opportunities would present themselves? But, here's the thing, if I never take the risk of sharing, I'll never know the answers to those questions.

Andy Stanley summarizes really well what it looks like to be in Christian community. "Jesus designed Christian community to be the place we find wholeness, a congruency between who we are in public and who we are in private. He wants us to live together honestly and transparently. Not so we can be resigned to our brokenness, but so that we can begin to grow out of it, becoming more and more like him. Jesus wants us to live abundantly. In John 10:10, he says, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.' He didn't come to take from us or to harm us. He came to release us from sin so we could connect with God and to show us how to live meaningfully in community with one another. A full, free life begins with a trusting relationship with God and expands outward into trusting relationships with other people." And the way we form these trusting relationships is, again, with time and transparency. To give the time to be here. To give the time to a new person that you don't know. To simply introduce yourself to someone else. To have both structured time with Abundant Life and to have unstructured, informal time. Just hanging out without any agenda. And transparency. I want to encourage to share something about yourself with this new person that you greet. It can be as simple as your vacation plans for the summer. It can be as simple as what you do for a living. But I want to encourage us to build this new harmony with a new set of people. That we would compliment one another and glorify the Kingdom of God.

For the past few years, we've really felt this sense of call, as a church, to be a blessing to others. What better way to be a blessing, than to simply open up a conversation and join in on building something new? I know, they have their weakness and so do we. But, "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor." We have an incredible opportunity to build-up the Kingdom of God. "...to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." But these things can't happen if we choose to sit on the sidelines. If we choose not to join in on the game. So, I implore you, Providence Church, that just as Jesus Christ decided to "get in the game" by joining us here on earth, that, you too, will decide to "get in the game" by engaging and interacting with the people of Abundant Life. Folks, we're building something new here. Something that has the potential to be magnificent. It has the potential to bless the Kingdom of God in miraculous and wonderful ways. By engaging in this Kingdom-sized vision, you will have the great pleasure of ministering to another believers' weakness and they too will have the pleasure of ministering to

your weakness. And that by doing so together, we glorify the majesty of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.