

“Called to Love”

Last year, in an effort to reach out to new home owners in the area, we started mailing out postcards advertising our congregation. There are literally hundreds of new homeowners within a 10-mile radius of Hope and we wanted them to know that if they were looking for a church, we were here. Our first postcard, as you can see, asks the question “**new to town?** There are plenty of wonderful churches in Wake Forest and Rolesville...why try Hope?”

Our first answer was that Hope is **visitor-friendly**...no arm-twisting, no pressure, no question too weird, no story too wacky. Is that a good reason to try a new church? I think so.

Our second answer was that Hope is **Christ-centered**...our central teaching is salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone, and our non-legalistic worship celebrates God’s grace in our lives. Good reason? Absolutely!

Our third answer was that Hope is **community-minded**. We have at least 17 ministries aimed at community needs! Good reason? Of course it is!

And our fourth answer to the question of why try Hope? Hope is **family focused**. We are a young church with a huge focus on children and youth! You think that would sound appealing to someone with kids who is new to the area? No doubt!

But what do you think the reaction of those new home-owners would have been if we added this fifth answer? Why try Hope? Because **church is hard**. We are God’s children, and as members of His family, we are to model our behavior and our values after what He says, and that’s really hard. Think that answer would draw in the visitors? My guess is no.

But Church is hard. We might not think it is or even expect it to be....I mean in our own description we say that at Hope there is no pressure. That doesn't sound hard.

Reaching out to the community takes commitment and organization, but it isn't that hard. Neither is focusing on families. And on the surface, it even looks like our central teaching of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone isn't that hard either. We do nothing but believe in Jesus...sounds easy enough right? Sign me up. And while salvation through faith **is** all it takes, this grace doesn't mean that our only duty as Christians is to leave the world for an hour or so on Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that our sins are forgiven. That's what's known as cheap grace because it assumes everything can remain as it was before. And living in that space is a lot easier than following Jesus!

But God's grace for each of us was not attained the easy way. It cost God the life of his Son. A life that was sacrificed but rose again...a life that is now the basis of our new life. And that grace calls us to follow Jesus, **which means we actually are to do what God tells us to do.** We walk that path with a limp (because of sin), but we are called to walk it nonetheless. It's all part of belonging to the Church. Yes, it's hard. In fact it's a real challenge, but it's something we can't ignore.

So in an effort to increase our understanding of Church, over the next four weeks we are going to look at several challenging CHURCH-themed verses from 1 Peter. In this letter, Peter calls his audience to embrace the gift of life they have been given. Their faith and hope are in God, who through the precious blood of Christ raised him from the dead, and they are to actually live out that faith with total commitment. And we are kicking off the series today focusing on a whopper from Chapter 1. In verse 22 Peter writes, "***love one another earnestly from a pure heart.***"

Challenging enough for you? I mean this sounds almost impossible. Love one another earnestly from a pure heart? To give this a little context, in the passage just before this text, Peter urges Christians to be holy because God is holy. God calls us by the Gospel to saving faith and living hope and He empowers us to do our best against what the world deems as normal. Our reading today describes what holiness looks like in human form and everyday life. Christians must set aside the social norms and love each other earnestly and without hypocrisy. Now it sounds even *more* challenging doesn't it?

The truth, whether we like it or not is that the Church, not just Hope, but the total of all believers in Christ in all places, **is called to love.** And this love is not just a human impulse because if that's all it is, we would fail miserably. No, the only way to love the way Peter describes it is to first be loved. We have been born again. We are now possessed by the love of Jesus Christ and that love empowers us to go out and love

one another. And we are to actually do it. It's hard; it's a challenge; it can often be painful, but this is Church.

We are to love eagerly, with outstretched hands, not hiding in the background, but throwing ourselves enthusiastically into the hard work of active love for each other. Let me be clear here. Lots of you are doing just that. But if you're not quite sure what to do or how to start, I have some suggestions. These are from a wonderful book called *Loved & Sent*, written by a Lutheran Pastor named Jeff Cloeter. Pastor Puls and I had the privilege of hearing him speak about the book at a conference a couple of months ago. His simple gospel-center approach to love was well received, so much so, that I want to share with you what Pastor Cloeter calls *habits of love*.<sup>1</sup>

The first habit of love is **Presence**. It might sound simple, but to love others we must be present with them. We can't remain hidden in our homes! Love calls us to the active spaces of life like our yards, sidewalks, stores, restaurants and schools.

The second habit of love is **Listening**. To love your neighbor, even those neighbors right here in the pews, you have to know them. And to get to know them, you have to ask questions. Where are you from? Where did you go to high school? What do you do for a living?

The third habit of love is **sacrifice**. You can love by giving up something for someone else. That could be something tangible or something intangible like your time.

The fourth habit of love is **risk**. Loving others is risky. It could all backfire. You could even get hurt. But we belong to a God who risked everything saving us don't we? Think about that.

The final habit of love is **prayer**. Love leads us to call on God our Father with the needs and concerns of others.

Aren't those simple ways to love but power way? So I ask you, as Pastor Cloeter asks in his book, where is that person who needs you? What are the greatest needs that person has? What are you willing to give up for that person? What risks will you take in loving them? What needs of theirs are you praying for?<sup>2</sup> That person just might be

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<sup>1</sup>Jeff Cloeter, *Loved & Sent* (Elgin IL:Tenth Power Publishing 2016), 136-140

<sup>2</sup> Cloeter, 142

sitting here today. It's a challenge, but as those united by faith in Christ Jesus, loving others earnestly is what God calls us to do. **Amen.**