

Real Community

1 Peter 1:13-2:3

Today I want to talk about real community. We're taking this month to think together about what it means for us as Westgate to *be* the church, as opposed to just go to church. And one of the consistent marks of the church throughout the New Testament is *real community*. Genuine relationships with one another. To belong to each other, the way a family belongs together. To share life in meaningful ways, going below the surface, beyond the posturing and mask-wearing that drive me to manage my image—to put on a good show, like I've got it together. To show you the best parts of me, and to hide from you the parts that I'm ashamed of, or that I think will cause you to dislike me or reject me. That's not real or genuine; that's fake. And we don't want that. Most of us can see right through it. We want the kind of relationships that are secure enough to be honest about who we are, but loving enough to not necessarily leave us where we are. We want real community.

According to the Bible, this is what the church is supposed to be. But sadly, it's not always what our experience of church is known for. Most of us learn from a young age that we're supposed to put on a good show when we go to church. Whether we intend to send that message to our kids or not, that's often what they hear. And so we learn from our earliest experience of church how to manage perceptions. To look good when people are watching, and to be yourself when they're not.

This was my experience growing up in church. Clear back in elementary, I knew how to impress the teacher with my compliance, and then to impress my friends with my goofiness when the teacher wasn't looking. When I went through Confirmation in middle school, I remember looking down on one kid who was so unruly and noncompliant that he was kicked out of Confirmation class, while I secretly cheated on my Confirmation exam. When I was in high school, I would show up for Sunday School with my parents, and then sneak off with a friend to go drive around town chewing tobacco with him, but be back in time to go to service.

I was good at managing perceptions. To be honest, I'm still pretty good at it. We all are. For some of us, it's our pride. We promote ourselves, because think of ourselves more highly and more often than we ought. For others, it's about survival. Protecting ourselves, hiding our sin and our shame, because we don't feel any place for that kind of messiness here. We fear that others will think of us as lowly as we think of ourselves.

And so we hide and we perform. We wear our Sunday best, not just with our clothing but on our faces. But there's nothing real about that kind of community. It feels much more like hypocrisy. And it looks like hypocrisy, to one another and to the watching world—whether it's the show we put on when we go to church, or the massive gap between how we act there and what we do the

rest of the week. In a recent survey, 85% of young people outside the church, and 47% of young people inside the church, have come to the conclusion that Christianity is hypocritical.¹

And yet, according to the Bible, the church is the *only* place where real, lasting community is actually possible. It's the only relational context that is secure enough for us to be honest about who we really are, but loving enough not to necessarily leave us where we are. It's the only relational bond on earth strong enough to withstand death and decay and to last for eternity.

So what do we do with the disconnect between what real community is supposed to look like, and what so many of us actually experience? How do we cultivate genuine community in the life of the church? That's what 1 Peter is going to help us think about this morning.

We read 1:13-2:3 earlier, but I want to focus specifically on 1 Peter 1:22-2:3, and the call to sincere family love among the people of God. A real community, which is a fruit of the gospel.

Real Community

As I mentioned last week, the book of 1 Peter is written to a people living out their faith in the margins of society. They were chosen by God to be his people, according to his saving work in Christ. A people marked by God-centered, gospel-saturated, salvation-forming, biblically-shaped faith. Yet they were exiles, rejected by the world. A people whose lives and beliefs were out of sync with the dominant culture in which they lived, not unlike the church in New England today.

When we come to v. 13, Peter now builds off the foundation he laid in vv. 1-12 and begins to instruct us on how to live in light of our salvation—in hope of our future inheritance, in view of the grace that will be revealed to us when Christ returns—despite whatever opposition we may face in the meantime. He calls us to holiness, to reverence, to love, to pure desires. But what's interesting is that he frames each of these instructions in the context of *family*. In v. 14, he calls us to pursue holiness “as obedient children.” In v. 17, he calls to reverence those who “call on [God] as Father.” In v. 23 he calls us to love one another because we have been “born again,” and in ch. 2:2, he compares our desire to “newborn infants.” The church is a family. We live out our faith as a family. And vv. 22 – 2:3 help us understand more specifically what our relationship as family should look like, namely, sincere family love.

If we look first at vv. 22-25, the central command in these verses is at the end of v. 22: “love one another earnestly from a pure heart.” The first thing I want to do this morning is talk about what that means. What is sincere family love? But Peter says something leading into that command, and then he says something coming out it, both of which help us understand how this kind of sincere family love is possible. That's the second thing we'll look at—the basis for sincere family love. Then finally we'll take a look at ch. 2:1-3, which tell us how to cultivate that kind of genuine love among us.

¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity... and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007). Kindle Edition.

The Nature of Sincere Family Love

So first, what kind of love does God call us to within the church? What kind of love should mark our experience of real community? Verse 22: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart.” Peter describes love here in three different ways, each of which is pointing to the same basic idea: love must be *genuine*. Sincere. Earnest. From the heart. Or to translate the word for sincere more rigidly, “unhypocritical.” Our love for one another should be without hypocrisy. That problem that plagues so much of what passes as Christian community—hypocrisy—that’s the opposite of what our love is called to be. So what does the Bible mean by “unhypocritical” love?

First, an unhyprocritical love is not forced or fake. We all know what forced love looks like. It’s when children are fighting, and you *make* them apologize and ask for forgiveness. “Say I’m sorry.” “I’m sorry...” And neither of them mean it. Or it’s the difference between being invited by your friend to go watch his favorite team, and actually being a fan of the team. If the Patriots game is just something you go to, you cheer for the team because you’re there and that’s what you’re supposed to do. But then you leave and turn it off. Not unlike what love looks like if church is just something you go to. But if you’re a real fan—it’s not just what you go to, it’s who you are—then your affection for the team is not surface only. It’s painted on your face because it’s bleeding out of your heart. It’s not just a Monday night thing; it’s a lifestyle. You wear it on your sleeve and the bumper of your car. It finds its way into your daily conversation. You *are* a Patriots fan. So it is that sincere love isn’t forced or fake; it’s not surface only. It comes from the heart. To love each other not because you’re supposed to, but because you actually do.

Second, unhyprocritical love is not self-serving; it’s self-giving. Hypocritical love is all about what I get out of this relationship. It’s pretending to care, or caring in a superficial way, not because of the good I can give, but the good I can get. In the name of love we end up using people for to fulfill our selfish desires, or avoiding people to protect our self-insecurities. And if you get in the way our self-prioritizing love, then we turn to what ch. 2:1 warns against: malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander. We put ourselves at the center of everything.

Unhyprocritical love gives of self. It places the good of the other above the good of myself, often at the expense of self. This is the hardest part for me. It’s a daily battle. When Carissa and I are lying in bed, and we both hear one of the kids crying, it’s like an old western stand-off. Nobody moves. If you so much as twitch, the other one will know you heard that kid, and you’ve got to go get her. My flesh says, ‘Lie still; she’ll get her. You need your sleep.’ The Spirit says, ‘Get your bottom out of bed and love your wife.’ Sincere love is sacrificial love—a love that follows that pattern of Christ. 1 John 3:16 says, “By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”

Third, unhyprocritical love is God-oriented. It’s God-oriented, which is what helps us know what it means to seek the good of the other, putting their good above ours. Their good is to know, love, and enjoy God. There’s nothing better.

Sincere love is not an “anything goes” kind of love. A “whatever makes you happy” love. Sometimes we think that unless we affirm everything about someone we’re somehow being unloving. We can’t get in the way of them asserting their individuality. But if something is not

good for them, it's actually unloving to encourage it, or to not guard or protect them against it. When Chloe climbs onto the open dishwasher door and tries to play with steak knives, I will stifle the assertion of her individuality to the end of the day in order to protect her. It would be unloving not to. And so it is that sincere love looks out for what is best for each other. And what is best is to point them to God. Real love is God-oriented. It accords to God's Word, his standards. It recognizes what Peter says earlier in our passage, that we are called to holiness because our God is holy; we are called to reverence because our loving Father is also our judge.

Finally, unhypocritical love is unconditional. It's not based on performance, it's based on grace. We don't hold up conditional standards before one another—'if you do this, then we'll love you.' Our love is not based on our performance, but on Christ's performance in our place. Which gives us freedom to throw away the mask and be honest about who we are, in all our insecurities, insufficiencies, and failures. Because our acceptance isn't based on our works, but our union with Christ. And because in Christ, we have what we need to deal with our sin and brokenness and insufficiencies—the grace of God and the power of the Spirit.

God calls his people to an unhypocritical love. It's neither forced nor fake. It's self-giving, not self-serving. It's God-oriented and it's grace-driven. *Which is a tall order for sinful people like us.* Tall and terrifying, because it implies a certain vulnerability with one another.

So what makes this kind of love possible? Only the gospel of Jesus. Sincere family love is a fruit of the gospel. That's its basis. Peter makes this point in two ways.

The Basis of Sincere Family Love

First he tells us that unhypocritical love is possible because *the gospel is actually designed to produce this kind of love.* When the seed of the gospel is planted, we should expect this kind of fruit. To love one another this way is one of the very reasons we've been saved. We see this in the words leading into Peter's command, v. 22 again: "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly . . ."

There are three parts to the phrase leading up to the command here. First, they have purified their souls, which sounds kind of funny because, isn't God the one who purifies us? How do we purify ourselves? The word Peter uses for "purify" here is a word that elsewhere refers to an act of ceremonial cleansing—the kind of washing that ancient Israel did when they went to the temple to prepare themselves for worship.² But here, it's not the outward washing that prepares us anymore, but instead (the second part of his phrase) it's our inward "obedience to the truth," namely, the truth of the gospel. What prepares us to know and worship God is trusting Jesus. Submitting to the truth of the gospel—the good news that Christ has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, by living a perfect life before his Father and giving his life for our sins on the cross. But notice the reason we have prepared our lives by our obedience to the truth—notice what the gospel is designed to do in us—the third part of his phrase: for sincere brotherly love. One of the reasons we have been saved is that we might love one another sincerely as family. It's according to God's design.

² E.g. Exod. 19:10; John 11:55; Acts 24:18. See Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2005), 123.

Our tendency is to ignore that design. We often make salvation in Christ a very individualistic, even private matter. Which also makes our view of church very individualistic—we go to consume, get what we want, and then we go home.

Now of course the gospel is very personal—every individual is called to trust in Christ personally. To turn away from their sin and to take hold of Jesus in faith. In fact, if you haven't done that, I urge you to do it. To put your faith in Christ; to no longer trust in yourself or your works before God, but to trust in Jesus and his death on the cross for your sin. Salvation is very personal.

But it's also very corporate. When we are saved we become part of God's family. As Tim Chester and Steve Timmis remind us, "The church, then, is not something additional or optional. It is at the very heart of God's purposes. Jesus came to create a people who would model what it means to live under his rule. It would be a glorious outpost of the kingdom of God, an embassy of heaven. This is where the world can see what it means to be truly human."³

The gospel is designed to produce real family love. When you plant an apple seed in the ground, you get an apple tree. You don't get an olive tree. If the gospel of Jesus is planted in our hearts, we should expect to see (among other fruit) sincere family love.

Peter makes a second point about how the gospel makes real love possible: *our new birth in Christ creates a bond that is greater and more lasting than anything else in this world*. Look at vv. 23-25, the words that flow out of Peter's command to love:

... since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;²⁴ for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever."

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

Sincere love is possible because our new birth in Christ creates a bond that is greater and more lasting than anything else in this world.

We've all heard the phrase "blood is thicker than water." The idea is that our loyalty to family is going to trump our loyalty to friends or acquaintances. But here, the blood of Christ is thicker than family blood. Our bond in our human families is formed by perishable seed—human procreation. And as strong and powerful and beautiful as the human family bond is, at the end of the day, like all flesh, it's but grass. "And all its glory like the flower of grace. The grass withers, and the flower falls, *but the word of the Lord abides forever*." Our new birth is not from perishable seed, but imperishable, the living and abiding word of God, the word that is the good news (the gospel) that was preached to you.

The gospel creates a bond among God's people that is greater and more lasting than anything else in this world. It's the only relational bond on earth strong enough to withstand death and decay and to last for eternity. And the extent to which we take that bond seriously, it will produce sincere family love among us. Think about it this way: if you belong to Jesus, then you belong to each other. And you're going to be sharing eternity together in his presence. So it's a good idea to learn to love each other genuinely now, isn't it? And he has supplied for us everything we need to do that through the gospel of Jesus Christ. To love one another without hypocrisy.

³ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 50.

Pastor and author Jared Wilson has said, “The gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ frees us from hypocrisy. It frees us to boldly own our inadequacies, our flaws, our failures, and especially our sins. . . . [It enables us to be] okay with owning our non-okayness.”⁴ How freeing is that in our relationships? Imagine being able to walk into church, or into each other’s homes, and when somebody asks you how you’re doing, you don’t have to smile and say, “Fine. Just fine.” Now maybe you really are fine; praise God! But if you’re not, that’s okay. Most of us aren’t. But we have a Savior who is. We have a Savior who is adequate in every way we’re inadequate. Who is secure in every way we’re insecure. Who offers wholeness for our brokenness and forgiveness for our sins. We have a Savior who loves us despite our unloveliness, but who loves us too much to let us stay in our unloveliness. And who teaches us to love each other in the same way.

The gospel supplies the only relational context that is secure enough for us to be honest about who we really are, but loving enough not to necessarily leave us where we are. It supplies the grace that frees us to speak into each other’s lives without fear of rejection. Our sin is covered in Christ. More than that, it sets an *expectation* that we *will* be speaking into each other’s lives. That we’re not satisfied to stay where we are in our sin or brokenness, nor to leave others where they are. It drives us to walk side-by-side in our pursuit of Christ. If we have tasted that God is good, we can’t help but long for more of him.

And that’s the last point I want to consider this morning, ch. 2:1-3, the fuel for sincere family love: pure spiritual nourishment in Christ.

The Fuel for Sincere Family Love

Chapter 2:1: “So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (2:1-3).

How do we cultivate unhypocritical love among us? How do you cultivate the growth of anything? You have to feed it the right stuff.

One of the reasons we don’t always see the genuine love the gospel is designed to produce, is because we nurse our community on poison. Malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander. Notice that this is not just a list of sins; these are sins that are committed against other people in community. It’s like putting Drain-o in a baby bottle and giving it to your kid—it will kill them from the inside out.

Peter calls us to long for *pure spiritual milk*. A lot of scholars debate what exactly Peter is referring to here. Most assume he’s talking about the Word of God (and some translations even supply that word here, e.g. NAS). But I think it’s more general. Peter is talking about the kind of nourishment that is appropriate to your new spiritual birth.⁵ Which certainly centers on the Word of God, but I think involves every means of grace God has given to his people—real fellowship, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the ministry of the Word and prayer—all that produces genuine spiritual growth in us, that helps us taste that the Lord is indeed good.

⁴ Jared C. Wilson, *The Pastor’s Justification* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 75-76.

⁵ See the compelling case that Jobes makes, 136-141.

In other words, the way we cultivate sincere family love is to feed ourselves on Christ. And to feed each other on Christ. To open God's Word together. To pray together. To speak the gospel of Jesus into each other's lives. And to do it often, as a family.

Here I want to think of a few applications for us at Westgate in our pursuit of real community.

First, *we need to take the gospel seriously*. Do we really believe, as Tim Keller has put it, that “we are more flawed and sinful than we ever dared believe, yet we are more loved and accepted than we ever dared hope at the same time”? Do we believe that for ourselves, and do we believe it for one another? Are we willing to take the gospel seriously and risk letting things get a bit messy here, as we're freed up to be honest about who we really are? To throw away the masks?

If we don't take the gospel seriously, that will never happen. We need to learn to speak the gospel of Jesus into each other's lives. Not to just say what we think the other person wants to hear, or try and rescue them from their situation, but point them to Jesus as Savior. To remind each other daily that his grace is sufficient. That it never runs out. To be in God's Word together, and to bring that Word to bear on our lives. To lift each other up in God-oriented prayer—prayer that takes seriously the truth and power of the gospel.

The gospel is what makes real community possible. We must continue to cultivate the centrality of the gospel in every aspect of our lives. Take the gospel seriously.

Second, *we need to take our identity as family seriously*. One of the reasons we don't always experience real community in the church is because we've slipped into the mindset that church is predominantly something we go to, as opposed to who we are. Chester and Timmis write, “We have a loose connection with Christians on a Sunday, but then largely we go back to living our everyday lives on our own. No wonder we struggle to thrive. Our faith is animated on Sunday mornings as we sing God's praise and hear his Word. But it limps along during the week when we live apart from the body of Christ.”⁶

Real community doesn't happen a couple hours a week on Sunday morning. Taking our identity as family seriously means finding ways of spending time together throughout the week—like a family does.

This is hard. Because we're a busy people. The last thing we need are more programs and meetings. Not only are we busy, we don't all live very close together. One of the unique challenges we face as a congregation is that we're pretty spread out. Let me put it this way: of the roughly 100 households that make up Westgate Church, we live in 26 different towns. You can do the math. We don't live that close to each other. If you put it on a map, it's a 40 mile span east to west, and nearly 30 miles north to south.

So does that mean we give up on the whole community thing; it's just unrealistic here? Or does it mean we think creatively and pray fervently for God to show us a way to share life around the gospel like family? It has to mean the latter, if we're going to take seriously our identity as family.

⁶ Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 53-54.

Now there are already several ways that people connect with each other midweek, and you should know about some of those ways if you don't. The winter/spring ministry guide is your best resource for that. But there are several people who gather to pray every Thursday morning at Bruce and Karen Daggett's home. Several women gather weekly at the building on Thursday mornings to open the Word and pray together; and men who do the same here on Friday mornings. There are half a dozen small groups (what we call Home Fellowships) that meet in different towns throughout the week that again, open the Word and pray together.

And we're exploring more ideas—especially ways that we can connect that aren't dependent on coming to a building, and that help us share life and serve together on mission right where we live and work, without necessarily adding a ton to our schedule, but instead making the most of what we're already doing by doing it together—in community, on mission. That's one of the reasons we're launching a Community Group Initiative this winter. We want to continue to create avenues to help us share life as family, around the gospel, on mission. And so basically, I'm looking for people who are interested in being trained to launch new groups for that purpose. We'll be talking about this more in the weeks ahead, but if that's something God is laying on your heart, please let me know. Let's talk.

This is also one of the reasons we're launching the Life on Mission Conference in March this year. We do an annual missions conference in the fall, where we celebrate what God is doing through the missionaries and agencies we support. The spring conference will focus on equipping *us* to be missionaries right here in the MetroWest. And to do it together, as family.

The gospel of Jesus makes us family. And taken seriously, it bears fruit among us in sincere, unhypocritical, family love. May God be pleased to deepen that bond among us and strengthen us to love one another earnestly from a pure heart.