



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### **Harvest it Home – Harvesting Bold Love**

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**By Rev. Matt Hook**

#### **Sometimes when you ask just the right question, it changes everything.**

Last year, I was in an amazing program called the Beeson Program at Asbury Seminary. It was the opportunity of a lifetime: to be one of 20 pastors to study with some of the most outstanding leaders in North American Christianity, attend conferences at outstanding, cutting edge churches, and work on my doctorate all paid for, with a stipend. It was an exclusive program. Some might have even called it exclusivist. But not last year, because a couple of us asked the right question....

The first time the 20 of us met was in California at a hotel near Saddleback Church, pastured by Rick Warren, who right now is topping the best seller charts with his book, "The Purpose Driven Life." When we were introducing ourselves, I could see some grandstanding as guys were telling all they had done and what churches they had planted from scratch, or had led in some fantastic new way, until Chris Carter, who was from Tennessee, stood to introduce himself and asked "What in the world am I doing here? Fellas, I'm in tall cotton." And it changed everything. It was a God moment. And from that point on, humility reigned, and we realized we hadn't done anything worth merit, but God had certainly done a lot.

During that weeklong trip, the first of many conferences, we got to have dinner with a few of the Beeson pastors from the year before... I sat across from a woman named Marilyn, and during the course of our conversation, I asked the right question: What would you tell us to watch out for? And she pointed out the fact that Beeson was seen as exclusivistic, snobby, and elitist, viewed as brats by much of the rest of the campus, because of the trips and all the perks. (And at a Christian seminary - can you imagine!)

Well, I tucked that little impression away.

A month and a half later, in our first meeting on campus with the Dean of the Beeson program, I had the chance in front of everyone to ask: "What can we do about this problem, that the rest of the campus views us with animosity? Let's fix this." And the rest of the class heard it. And so it began. Despite a horrendous schedule, we did our best as a class to be bold in our love toward the rest of the seminary students, staff, and community.

Taking time to talk with students in the gym, participating in the chapels, visiting with the folks in the weight room, encouraging those undergrads in the throes of their studies, Leigh and some of the wives working to build relationships and volunteer at the schools and with community kids' sports. Praying over our professors, the guest speakers, the pastors we visited, the bus drivers, and all the seminary staff. And all of sudden, it was gone. The animosity, the jealousy, and the attitude. And it changed everything, because we had expressed caring and concern in a humble way, and meant it. As I look back at it, I realize now that what happened last year was an incredible Harvest of Love. What a season!

What was the difference? Relationships. We invested in them. We created them. We nurtured them. We corrected them. We honored them. And we enjoyed them. What is the DNA of the relationship? Love.

Sometimes you just have to ask it in the right way. If I'd have asked "How can we have a love harvest this year?", the people would have thought I was a first class nutcake.

Paul asked the right question, when he wrote the group of troubled Christians in Corinth, Greece, in a letter that's been preserved as a part of the Bible called First Corinthians. He asked, "How can I show this church with all these problems a better way to live?" He didn't ask...How can prove I'm right? How can I prove my superiority?" And because he asked the right question, it changes everything...

How do I speak? How do I give? How do I serve? How do I have faith? How can I fix the problems in my life? How can I fix the problems in my marriage? What about my freedom? How can I straighten out my priorities? And what should the church be? How should people relate? How can we eliminate factions and "issues?" And Paul asked the right question: What is the thread that connects all these problems? And wrote this to the Christians:

*"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

*Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

*And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."*

We've heard it a thousand times, mostly at weddings. But when these words were not written to be beautiful poetry read (or sometimes butchered) at weddings. My first wedding involved a couple who were outside of the church. They didn't even remember the name of the church their grandparents stayed away from! They walked in to a tape playing "Can I have this dance for the rest of my life" and walked out to Clint Black's "I'm gonna love you forever and ever." But the most memorable one of the party was the best man. He too was a biker, with a dog collar and spikes on his wrists, and he looked like the identical twin of Alice Cooper. He also had strange skin, like it was either pockmarked or he was a burn victim. He read First Corinthians 13... And when he read "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." And then he looked up and said, "Oh, wow, man."

But that's the power of it: "Oh, wow, man." That best man realized love isn't just a word we use to sell songs. Love is powerful. You know how you can tell? Because when love goes wrong, or gets misused or abused, it is so terrible, the most painful thing we can bear. We are literally shaped by what we love. What do you love? Is whatever it is worth it, given that it shapes your life?

Life is all about love. Because God is love, he wants us to learn how to love, and harvest it in our lives and in his world. When we are loving, we are the most like God. Love is the foundation of every command he has given us: "The whole Law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love others as you love yourself.'" (Gal. 5:14)

Church, God wants his family to be known for its love more than anything else. Love should be your top priority. Love is not a good part of your life; it's the most important part. "Let love be your greatest aim" (1 Cor. 14:1).

Life without love is really worthless. No matter what I say, what I believe, or what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Because of the way our brains are built, we men in particular often act as if relationships are something to be squeezed into our schedule. We section love off into one little piece of the pie. But we've got to harvest it into more than that. Look at the 10 Commandments: The first 4 are about our relationship to God, the other 6 are about our relationships with each other, but all 10 are about relationships!

Last Sunday night Pastor Steve, Marcie, Leigh, and I closing down Macaroni Grill. We were having a ball, but we were also building relationships. There is love and support between us here. Loving attitudes and deeds are becoming standard fare here. The work of God at Dexter goes forward when we harvest love, acceptance, and grace. That's as it should be, and that's what we want.

**Bill Hybels asks the right question: What is the best thing you can give those around you? Bold love.** People are literally starving for love. Look at TV. Look at the internet. Even most of the products sold have some connection with that starvation and people's quest to fill it, whether or not the product has anything to do with relationships. Oreo Cookies ad campaign showing nothing but children sitting on the laps of grown ups eating Oreos, and their sales skyrocketed. Nothing compares with bold love among believers. An *expanded capacity to love* is the best gift you can give your church and family. It can revolutionize your life, your job, your time, your satisfaction level, and the amount of joy and fun you experience.

Bold Love has to be fundamentally what I am about and what the church is about. I need to continually increase my capacity to give and receive love. We need to harvest it right here. All of this means that since Jesus gave us the Great Commandment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we must increase our capacity to give and receive love. We need an intentional program for increasing love just as we need a workout regimen to be muscularly and cardiovascularly healthy. We need a plan to develop greater hearts of love toward people. With no plan, no planting, watering, weeding, and no work, there is no harvest.

If I asked you, "What is your plan for increasing your capacity to give and receive love," how would you answer? If love is the greatest, if love is what God wants more than anything else, and if the world needs more love – what is your workout plan to make it happen? What is your strategic plan to yield a harvest and increase love in your life and church?

### **Drink Often from the Fountain of God's Love**

If my capacity for giving and receiving love is to increase, I have to regularly drink from the fountain of the love of God. Remember the passage "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:19)? That teaches that I am never going to increase my love capacity until I increase my capacity to receive love from God. How can I drink more effectively from the fountain of the love of God, especially on those days when I'll be so overcommitted that I'm likely to be dangerous by 10 or 11am. My RPMs will be too high. I will be short with people. I'll let myself be distracted. When I'm supposed to be listening, I'm only thinking "Okay, get to the point." And I know that I will bruise people if I do it that way.

**So I try to start my day right.** Time with God, drinking from the fountain of his love. Worship songs, scripture, reading. Or I'll take the time to list everything I'm thankful for. Some folks have not expanded their capacity for love in years. What are you harvesting? When was the last time you "grew?" Many of us have not increased their ability to give and receive love. If that's you, I want to say there is not going to be an increase unless you drink more from the fountain of the love of God. You have to find a way to put yourself near that fountain so that you have a heart of love every day. And that changes everything.

**The starting point for deepening your spirit of love is to keep close to the fountain of God's love.**

## **Pray to be More Loving**

Try making your desire for an expanded capacity for bold love a focus of your prayer. The idea is to ask God to give you more love and to make you more loving. If we had a log of everyone's prayers, we would probably find requests for more comfort to come along, for problems to be solved, or for God to get them out of a problem. But I urge you to purposefully pray for more love.

Try praying for the results of God's Spirit to increase in your life, especially love. I pray every day for an increased capacity to give and receive love. I have learned that if I spend time each day with that prayer focus, it affects me so I am more loving throughout the entire day. The fruit (or results) of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 helps keep my prayer focused: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Simply the natural (supernatural) results of having the Holy Spirit in your life. What a list!

**Learn to Express Love.** Love is built on relationships. Love can't exist apart from relationship. Love unexpressed isn't love at all. This kind of love is a decision, a choice. The Greek word is "agape." Wanting the best for the other person. Selfless love.

You probably know how awkward this challenge can be from personal experience. Many of us feel love for others but do not feel comfortable or know how to express these feelings. One of my goals is to help people get their love out of their hearts into someone else's heart. To do that, I always start with myself.

Some of us think when we feel love for a family member or a friend, "I ought to express this love," or "I ought to do some loving deed." But for some strange reason, an automatic editing process takes place inside us, so our good intention gets choked off, and our voice is mute.

### **Why does it seem risky?**

"I'm not going to do that. I might express it wrongly. I might cause misunderstanding. I might create a monster I'm going to have to feed." When we fall into this skewed pattern of thinking, ask: Does expressed love ever hurt anybody? Of course, the answer is no.

Many of us grew up thinking "I don't want to be touchy-feely, nurturing, and all that stuff." I was so mixed up about expressing love that I actually convinced myself if I felt love for another person that was about the same as expressing it. Let's get realistic. If you feel love and do not express it, the other person is still walking around not knowing how you feel. He or she gains no benefit from unexpressed love.

### **Follow the Pattern of Jesus**

While studying the way Jesus expressed love, I finally crossed a line in my life, and changed. "I can no longer blame my background. I cannot blame my church. I cannot blame my family. This is my life. This is my spouse. These are my children. These are my friends. This is my staff. This is my church. I have to take responsibility for what I am doing with the unexpressed love I feel for them in my heart."

Sooner or later, you must decide if you are going to be an expresser of bold love. You must decide if you are going to deprive other people of the gift of the love of Christ you feel for them. Or are you going to take the plunge and increase the joy you give and the satisfaction you feel?

### **Make Our Church a Community of Bold Love**

Can you imagine what would happen if every leader in our church took personal responsibility to regularly drink from the fountain of the love of God? To regularly interact with loving people who could grow their heart and would pray every day, "God, increase my capacity to give and receive love"? Can you imagine if every leader in our church would double our capacity to give and receive bold love? Can you imagine what

would happen if people whose hearts are full of Christ were saying loving things and writing loving things to each other? Can you imagine the impact if all of us offered each other appropriate, loving touches, did acts of kindness, and freely entered into each others' joys and sorrows? What a church! What a harvest God would bring in, as we seek to be a regional equipping center for the unchurched thousands! People need to be taught how to share appropriate expressions of love, demonstrated by people who are sold out to the God of love.

Bold love is not going to cost more money. You do not have to attend conferences to begin. You don't have to negotiate or legislate. Just start. If we create loving communities like the one I have described, visitors will sniff it and say "I want in." Crusty old veteran believers whose hearts have shut down will warm up again. Arrogant people will have their pride melted. Love changes people. Love transforms churches. Love is the greatest force in the world and the most needed component in contemporary churches. Let us harvest love home in our congregation today.

**In the end, love manifests itself by sacrifice.** Jesus told us that the way the world will know that we are his disciples is if we love one another. (John 13:34). Jesus laid the foundation for the entire movement. Love is so central to the heart of God and the ethos of the New Testament church that without it we have no claim to be the disciples of Jesus Christ. We uphold it by our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service.

In John 15:13, Jesus gives us the practical expression of love. He says, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Jesus was speaking about his own death.

In a world of imitations, real love draws a crowd. It stands out. Jesus said we would be known by our love, but the greatest expression of love is when we lay our lives down for someone else. Until we are called to do that, it's a call to servanthood.

Love produces servanthood. Servanthood sees sacrifice as a privilege. It is to the servants that the master entrusts the work that must be done. When we are known by love, we are known for our servanthood.

You know, Jesus is love. You can substitute Jesus' name for the word "love." Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, not envious, or boastful, or proud, or rude...

When you ask the right question, it changes everything. I want you to harvest it home today with this set of questions. At the end of the day today, ask this:

Have I been patient? Have I been Kind? Have I been envious? Do I boast? Am I proud? Have I been rude and self-seeking, easily angered? Have I been keeping a record of wrongs done against me? Have I delighted in evil, and rejoiced with the truth? Do I protect, trust, hope, and persevere? It's the right question, and it makes all the difference as you and I continue seeking and working to harvest it home.