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Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

Rich Samek's Message

Selected Scriptures

September 3, 2017

Prayer: *Father, we just again thank you for your grace and your goodness. We thank you for this opportunity once again to come before you to again honor what you've done for us at the cross, to honor the love that you've bestowed on us and the gift of that love. And Lord, this morning as we are again approaching this your throne and approaching this your cross, we're going to be doing something a little bit different this morning and so I pray for your grace, I pray for your Holy Spirit's presence, I pray that you would be orchestrating as it were the events of our worship this morning so that you may be honored and glorified. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, as you know this is communion Sunday, and this is the day that we set aside and we set it aside to honor the Lord Jesus Christ and what he did for us on the cross. And the best way that we can do that is to honor what he has done and demonstrate it in going to the cross, and so we're going to do something a little bit different for communion Sunday this Sunday. We're going to break

with tradition as it were for a very specific reason, and that is for the last three weeks or so now I've been preaching on loving deeply, from the heart. And I've spoken about the love that God plants in our hearts at salvation, how it is primarily a love that God gives to us to give to those who won't, can't or don't love us back. And I said that God gives us this love in its incipient form, that is God gives it to us as an acorn and he expects us to grow it into an oak. And we pointed out how counterintuitive God's love is to those of us who've been raised in a world that basically says, "Do unto others before they get a chance to do unto you." That's the standard operating rules of the way the world works. And God's answer to that is *Matthew 5:43*, he says: "*You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*" And we pointed in the last couple of weeks to three specific areas that we can use to develop this counterintuitive type of love. We pointed to perspective, to patience, and to prayer. And this morning we're going to see how God used these three different aspects of his love in one particular couple's life.

As many of you know, last Friday Rich Samek died and his service took place this last Tuesday. What many of you don't know is the history that surrounds Rich, who many of you have never met but all of us here know Donna who is part of our church. And God did some

extraordinary things in the life of Rich and Donna particularly with regard to demonstrating the power of his love to conquer against really extraordinary odds. And so one of the things that I was thinking of is that, you know, I can teach at great length about the principles that are involved in loving deeply, from the heart, but one thing that God made clear to me in the time that I spent with Rich and Donna is that their lives are really serving as examples of how these principles work. And so I want to honor what God has given to Rich and Donna particularly in the last few weeks of Rich's life, and I want to be able to get you to see just how God miraculously uses the power of love and how to apply that love when it seems not just difficult but really impossible, and finally to see just what God can do when we follow his counterintuitive ways to love.

I first met Rich when we both served together as deacons at First Baptist and that was many, many, many years ago. And so I'm sharing with you this morning what Rich has given me permission to share. The bottom line, what is the core of all of this is that many, many years ago Rich left Donna in order to pursue a homosexual life-style. They were separated and divorced with little or no contact until Donna felt God telling her that her ex-husband who was now struggling with ALS needed desperately the love of Christ. She was convinced that God was calling her to love

someone who was not at all interested at the time in loving her back. And Donna, this is really your story, and so what we are going to do is Donna has agreed to invite us as a congregation into her life with Rich in a way that many people might be uncomfortable with. We all love our privacy and Donna loves hers as well but sometimes when God's grace floods into our private lives, it begs to be exposed to a greater audience just so they can see God's love at work. So in a couple minutes I'm going to invite Donna up here and I'm going to ask her a few questions about what God did in the life of Rich and Donna, particularly at the end. And at the end of that session we're going to participate in the bread. And after we participate in taking the bread, I'm going to deliver once again the same message that I delivered last Tuesday. I delivered it to a very different congregation then. It was a congregation made up of Rich's family, friends and colleagues, some of whom shared his former views and life-style. It was Rich's wish that these folks as well would hear the message of the power of God's love. And so my goal when this particular service is over is that you'll be fully aware of just what a miracle God did in Rich and Donna's life and that you might be inspired to live your life in a way that enables God to do these kinds of miracles in yours.

So Donna, if you would please come up here and I will conduct sort of an interview just to give you an opportunity to explain -- do

you need some water?

DONNA SAMEK: No. Tissues.

TOM MORTENSON: Okay. Tissues maybe but not water. We have tissues. I want to start out by first just asking, Donna, tell us about your marriage to Rich, take us from you being a newlywed to where the marriage had completely collapsed.

DONNA SAMEK: We were married in 1977. I thought I was marrying and was as it turned out a pillar of the church. I was newly saved probably six months and I didn't know very much about anything spiritually speaking. Rich had been saved as a child, grew up actually in my uncle's church, a Baptist church up in Binghamton, my favorite uncle by the way, and went to Christian college. All the friends that he introduced me to seemed like, you know, extraordinarily godly men, and I just thought that, oh, I have it made, you know, hadn't been -- hadn't been raised as a Christian, I just thought, well, this is going to work out very well. I was teaching up in the area where he grew up, Binghamton, and that's how we met, when he came home for vacation. And he was already established down here, so we moved down here to Port Jervis, and started a Bible study in our home actually and Tom and Jan and Elise I think was four years old and came to the Bible study and Sarah was in arms, and I remember that. I remember that very specifically. So, anyway, that was in the beginning. Things went on and we had three children in the 80's and one miscarriage

and I was very busy with them and I had my own issues fighting debilitating depression at times and I still do that, but it's better, it's much better because of a lot of different things. But things just weren't right. I -- there just wasn't a connection that I -- I knew things were not right. And it was shortly after -- Mary Grace is our youngest, it was shortly -- probably a year, 14 months after she was born that he confessed to me that he had this struggle. And at first compassion and all of those good things were -- they were in my heart and I extended them, and they -- you know, I was able to say, "Okay, we'll get through this." And then as time went on, I learned to know myself as I never knew myself, the rage and the anger, and the "how dare you" and all of that, and it just about ate me up for a while. And at that point a scripture in Hebrews -- I had to write it out this morning because I thought this is what -- this is what's going to happen if I don't deal with being sinned against and the proper response. *It's pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God.* And I thought I am not -- I am falling very short because I want to at times kill you, you know. *Lest any root of bitterness spring up to cause trouble and by this many become defiled.* Well that about, you know, put me in the grave 'cause when I read that and meditated on that, that's what was happening to me. I was going to church, we weren't at the First

Baptist any more at that point, we were actually at a Assembly of God church. So we skipped around through this trying to find help. But anyway, that verse just ate away at me. I could not get out from under that and I had no -- being sinned against in that way, still God was asking me what -- your response is just as sinful as what was done to you. Your response is no different. And that -- that was very hard to hear. I didn't want to hear that 'cause there were a lot of people that would come alongside and say, "You have every right, you know, to be how you are, naturally." But -- and then Psalm 51: Behold, that God does desire truth in the innermost parts and in the hidden place he will teach us wisdom. That -- what was my truth? What was -- you know, what was going on with me? What was the truth of my soul at this point and do I want that wisdom that he could teach me? So there were a lot of scriptures and the whole Psalm 51, just the sin and the contrition and the contrite heart and how do you get there, and then when you've gone through that, then you have a platform from which to share the gospel with someone else. And it holds -- read the Psalm. The whole thing is right there after David's confession about his sin.

So we were both raised in a very performance-oriented home, mine more so with perfectionism and those two things have to -- they have to die when you come to Christ, and it's taken a long time, the identity of them is very easy but then working out, not

going there, and not -- not building worth on those kinds of things, that's difficult. And he had much more practice of it than I did because, like I said, he was in the church since he was little. But there were deep, deep, deep, I think because of that, unmet -- legitimate unmet emotional needs of nurture -- and I don't know what else, how I would categorize it? -- that were never met in him. And I'm not saying that's true for every single person that stumbles upon homosexuality and finds it attractive, I'm not saying that, but I do know Rich, for Rich it was true. So towards the end especially he would talk about that, he would -- he would -- to me, he just wanted me to sit by him and "just touch my arm, hold my hand," he said, like a child, just hold my hand like a child, just be tender. And I did. And then those were some of the most precious times that we ever had. So, I don't know where I'm at.

TOM MORTENSON: Can I ask you this? Can you take us to the place where you just bought the house in Matamoros and your first contact with Rich who is now sick.

DONNA SAMEK: Okay. Rich had already bought a house in Matamoros and so he was living on the other side of the avenue. The house that I found was -- they were separated by the avenue. I did not choose the house because he was there. I -- it was the house that I believe God said that this is the house you're supposed to have. And that was in -- right at the time of

Hurricane Sandy, I believe. Our family house had to be sold, I couldn't keep living there by myself and so came into Pennsylvania for a lot of different reasons. That was in 2000- -- I have all the dates written down. Let me get that. I can't rely on my memory.

TOM MORTENSON: It's like that for all of us now.

DONNA SAMEK: Here we go. That was in 2012. Can I back up a little bit?

TOM MORTENSON: Sure, sure.

DONNA SAMEK: Okay. That's when he was -- okay. I just want you to hear these dates, all right? Rich moved out 2007. Okay. He had gone at my request and Pastor Tom suggested this, too, there were all kinds of live-in programs -- well, not all kinds but several live-in programs in the country and he had gone in August of that year for a month to one of those but came back and decided, no, I'm moving out. So he moved out in 2007. My dad died early in 2008. My mother moved in. Rich and I were out of contact from 2008 to 2012. Mary and Anthony got married in 2009. His sickness was diagnosed in 2012 right after or right -- months before he was going to retire he was diagnosed and we ran into each other in Price Chopper parking lot, and he was limping and he had a cane. And immediately, you know, I had compassion, I went up to him, and I asked him, "What's the matter?" And he told me and I couldn't believe it. I was like, "Oh, my goodness," you know, and I wept

with him at that point. But then there were contacts like that that God would plan. I would go somewhere, even to a restaurant after church on Sunday with a friend and there he would be at that point using his walker. So I would see him getting progressively worse. And then one night I was awakened -- this happened to me once, never happened to me again -- I was awakened from a very, very deep sleep, and I just -- I saw from the depths of my person for probably half an hour, I didn't know if I was going to make it through, and then as soon as it had started it was over and it was for him, it was for him, and that was from the Lord, I mean, I can't explain it any other way. I don't know.

TOM MORTENSON: What I want you to do is kind of take us through the initial times when you started -- you felt the Lord was telling you you really needed to reconnect with Rich --

DONNA SAMEK: I did.

TOM MORTENSON: -- and Rich was -- Rich had an acerbic wit when he was healthy and he could be -- he could be nasty.

DONNA SAMEK: Caustic.

TOM MORTENSON: Caustic. Caustic is a good word. Describe some of the interactions 'cause we're talking about loving people when they don't love you back --

DONNA SAMEK: Yeah.

TOM MORTENSON: -- and I think Rich oftentimes didn't love you back.

DONNA SAMEK: Yeah.

TOM MORTENSON: What was that like?

DONNA SAMEK: Well, when Mary had her brain surgery in Baltimore, of course we all went and that was very difficult sitting in the, you know, in the waiting room waiting for the doctors to come. And here he's sitting here and I'm sitting there, we're both parents but we're not -- both on pins and needles about her survival and all of that, and yes, he was difficult, he could -- but those were -- you know, I came to see that those were all self-protective responses and that I could do the same thing in different ways. I asked if I could come over one time and at that point he was still able to get around his backyard in the wheelchair, and I said, you know -- these aren't caustic things but these are things that are coming to mind.

TOM MORTENSON: That's fine, that's fine.

DONNA SAMEK: I never, you know, I told him, "I never stopped loving you," and he said, "I always loved you. It wasn't a case of that." And we would have like little conversations like that and then we'd look at each other and I'd walk away, what are we doing, okay? What are we doing? But as time went on and the disease progressed, it became very evident to me that I was to go over there once a week with food, foods that I knew that he liked because he was just eating, you know, freezer dinners that the caregivers would come and make for him. So I did that and those

were -- it almost seemed like we were dating again. It was very -- we were talking to each other like we cared, which we did, and then we weren't allowing a lot of the defenses to get in the way and, you know, dishes weren't flying any more. So I continued that and then there came a point when the whole family was together and he was in his caustic attitude towards one of the kids and of course mother hen that I am, I just -- that was it. You're not going to do this again. And that simmered and simmered, that feeling, and I went back over there that next week and I just really let him have it. And he ordered me out of the house and said, you know, "You're not welcome here again." And I thought that's it, I'll never see him again. And that was probably two years ago. It's hard. Everything just kind of -- I was trying to get dates right; they all just kind of mesh together.

And then the last seven weeks I was over there night and day. And I would no sooner get home, the phone would ring and the caregiver would say, "We can't do anything with him. He wants you." Okay. So -- and it wasn't -- how do I say this? It wasn't a burden -- I'd rather be there, you know, I would come home and I go now what do I do? I mean, I knew that I was doing something that I needed to do. And the connections that we had the last seven weeks were more glorious than any of the connections we had during our marriage. I mean, I think the real person was birthed in that time. And he kept talking, "I want to remarry you," and so

we had to work through all that, and I said I will remarry you for no monetary gain. I will remarry you only because that's what we know is the right thing before God. And that was his desire also. And so I kind of hedged on it. I didn't act on it when he first said it, I didn't call Tom or anything. I just like pondered it in my own heart by myself. What am I supposed to do with this, you know, and then I called Tom and he came in and he remarried us. So --

TOM MORTENSON: Yup.

DONNA SAMEK: He kept thinking he was going to get better. There were some days he would say, "My breathing's better." And what we know with ALS, you do not get better. You might have a good day here and there but he honestly thought, you know, well, maybe I am going to get better. The day before -- the day before he died, the night before, he did -- he had a BiPAP machine and it was -- he would have it on all night but he just used oxygen that night and the next morning he said, "I'm getting better. I can speak better. I'm getting better." And that was the day he died. And I was there. The caregiver called me to come over, she said, "He's turning, turning all different shades of gray and you need to get over here," and I was there. Thank God I was there. I don't know if I told you what you wanted to know.

TOM MORTENSON: There's a couple things that I just -- the three things that I have been talking about is what is involved in

this loving deeply, from the heart is perspective. And the first thing that you've showed us is the perspective that you had, the world would basically say, tell this guy to take a hike.

DONNA SAMEK: And lot of people in church told me that.

TOM MORTENSON: Yes. And the perspective that you have as you said, Psalm 51, the perspective that you had to be able to do this came from the word of God. If you went to the world, the world will tell you deep six this guy right now. So the first thing that we were talking about and speaking of is how counterintuitive God's word is, it goes directly against what everything else this world is going to tell you to do. It's going to tell you to minister the love of Christ to somebody who in many instances indicates that he doesn't even want it. And your memory is blotting over a whole bunch of times when I know Rich was less than kind to you and you were very, very unhappy and --

DONNA SAMEK: You know what I -- I don't know if it was the Lord's doing, and He does this with all his -- in the situation, He keeps showing me where I could have done more. He keeps showing me my depravity, and there's a -- teaching that balance of you call what is is, you have boundaries, but where do you extend Him to somebody who you know desperately needs that. And that's what He keeps -- so it's hard to resurrect all of the -- guess I didn't focus on that. He was just having me look at -- you know what I mean?

TOM MORTENSON: Yeah. Well, see, I think number one, the three things, you have the perspective, you had God's word. The second part I was talking about is patience and that kind of ties in with if you're not patient, you're going to find lots and lots of times, you know, I've said this many times, people are raised from infancy very comfortable with duking it out. Do unto others before they do unto you. That's what we understand, that's the baseline of how we live our life. And so we're very comfortable with that and I would suggest to you that Rich would have been very comfortable with you going in there with guns blazing because he's used to dealing with people who come in with their fists up. And when you come in not -- as Eli said, not just with your fists down but with your arms open, people don't know what to do with that. They look at something like that and they say I've got no defenses for this and oftentimes they lash out even more. Oftentimes they respond to that by just saying I know I can goad her into what I'm comfortable with and that's her putting her dukes up. And so this is where the perspective of the word of God and the patience of understanding that oftentimes you're not going to get a good result if you do it God's way.

DONNA SAMEK: Some of the -- I had very good conversations with some of the caregivers, especially one who's definitely a believer, and she would tell me that he would try those tactics with her and she -- she very clearly, we're not doing that. I'm here to care

for you, and we're going to, you know, work through this but it wasn't going to be this kind of adversarial relationship. And, yeah, he wasn't -- it's funny 'cause he didn't show that to me the last while. He was very -- I didn't know how to use a lot of the machinery and do -- I'm not a medical type person so I had to be taught, and sometimes in that he would get very, very frustrated but he would -- he never -- he was kind in his frustration, I guess.

TOM MORTENSON: I can attest to that. One of the times that I was coming in at the end, he had a C-PAP mask on and I approached him, he would talk very -- he couldn't talk very loud, and so he said as I walked up to him, he said, "I'm having a tough time, adjust the valve, adjust the valve." And I'm looking at him, I said, "What valve?" He said, "Adjust the valve. Just adjust the valve." "What valve?" Then he stopped and he goes, "I'm just pulling your leg." I said, "Thanks." But that's the kind of guy that he was. He would do stuff like that, I mean, this is a guy pretty much on his death bed.

DONNA SAMEK: Yeah. He could do nothing -- he could do nothing but talk, and toward the end very little of that.

TOM MORTENSON: Well, the two things -- the three things that we were talking about is perspective, patience. Can you tell us a little bit how prayer, what prayer did for you in terms of your own heart, in terms of Rich's response?

DONNA SAMEK: Yeah. The Psalms, the Psalms became very important to me and I didn't know they were extremely important to him till I started going over there, and he would -- I have my favorite Psalms, I shared 51 there with you, and then his -- he had 27 and he would ask me to read those every day, 27, 71, 91, and every morning -- I was there from 9:00 to 11:00 every morning after having a lot of times been there through the night and then somebody else would come from 7:00 to 9:00 and then I would be there because -- every day from 9:00 to 11:00. But what we did was read. We read the Psalms and I would sometimes think, "You're not listening." So I would stop and he would say, "Read that again," you know, "Read that last -- that last verse again" or he would repeat where I had stopped. "Why are you stopping?" So that was like -- that was really kind of something we shared together. And then John one night from the psalter sang the Psalms to him and that was really -- that was meaningful, that was meaningful to both of them. What did you ask me?

TOM MORTENSON: I was just saying that, you know, I think the role that prayer played in all of this and one of the things that I always say is that prayer changes your heart, you know, I mean there's no way that you can't have some kind of defensive anger towards the fact that you've been sinned against and you admit to that, that's for sure. Part of what we were saying is that when you pray, God does a number of things. First of all he changes

your own heart.

DONNA SAMEK: Right.

TOM MORTENSON: He -- it also takes away the enemy from the opportunity of strategically trying to just stoke up the bitterness in you just to get you wrapped around the axle constantly. If you're praying any time the enemy starts to stick your enemy's name or circumstance into your heart and turn around and every time that happens you're praying, well the enemy's going to start saying this is not working. So what prayer does, it changes you from the inside, it changes circumstances and just gives you wisdom as well.

DONNA SAMEK: And a lot of people praying for both of us, I know, I know that was true. But I didn't, like again I'm going to reiterate this, this whole process has been me seeing me and how my responses, and I'm certainly not putting -- please don't think I'm putting myself on a pedestal or something but you're put in a situation where you -- and we are every day, you've been sinned against. What is, you know, what is my response? Do I look at myself and see what God would, you know, what -- deal with the inner turmoil emotionally that's going on, do you want to thrash out, do you want to -- and you do. But then in doing that, then my soul separated from the One who -- the only One who loves me physically and continually and unconditionally. And that is what -- you know, I can't afford to -- I can't afford to go there.

TOM MORTENSON: No, no. Understand that. One final -- one

final question slash plug I wanted to put in here is POPS is a group where we meet the second Wednesday of every month and it's Parents of Prodigals, and it's people who meet to kind of share and kind of just go over what it's been like to try encourage other people who are praying for their prodigals, and you were part of that group for -- you were part of the group until we -- what we normally do is if somebody's -- we have a list of people that we've put up there that are prodigals for each of us, and if God chooses to move somebody, he goes from the left side of the board to the right side of the board, and that's people who have returned. And Rich went from the left side of the board to the right side of the board. And that was an incredible blessing for us because we actually saw God working through that, and we've been at it for about five years and it's been hard, it's been -- there's a lot of times where you see -- you pray and you pray and it seems like nothing's happened. In your case something spectacular happened. So I just would encourage folks who are thinking about praying for their prodigals just to continue to pray. Sometimes it takes years and just to never give up, I mean, God tells us over and over again not to give up and he gives us lots of examples of persistence being exactly what is pleasing to him even if it seems like we're pestering. And so you pestered God on behalf of Rich and God responded and that was a wonderful thing.

DONNA SAMEK: And in the prodigal story, I often said I was the

brother left behind.

TOM MORTENSON: The elder brother?

DONNA SAMEK: Yeah. I identified with him. Well, I did all this and I was here and -- what about me? So --

TOM MORTENSON: All right. Well, what we're going to do now is we're going to -- if the elders would come forward to distribute the bread. You can have a seat.

DONNA SAMEK: Yes, thank you. Gladly. Thank you.

I appreciate Donna sharing with us as she has. That's not easy and again, as the elders are distributing the bread, I just want us all to consider what Paul called the most excellent way. And the most excellent way is loving those who don't love you back. And as the elements are being given, let me give you the warning that I give each time the elements are brought out. This is from *1 Corinthians 11:28-32*: *But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.* And I share this each time, I say communion is extremely serious business and if you are not right with God, if you're not a child of God, if you still have

some kind of bitterness that is there with your brother, your sister or somebody else, then just pass the elements by when they come to you. It's something that we need to take extremely seriously because God takes it extremely seriously. And I also point out that on the other hand, you don't want to go to the other extreme of saying well, I'm not flawless so I'm not worthy of receiving communion, because being a child of God doesn't mean that you're flawless, it doesn't mean that you never sin and it means -- what it does mean is that you recognize that you are in the kingdom of God because of God's grace and God's grace only, and that when you do fail, you are aware of the fact that you failed because you're in the kingdom. And being in the kingdom means the Spirit of God lives inside you and the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is the one who convicts us of sin. And so we grieve because we are God's children and we realize that this is something that grieves him. And we recognize that God says in *1 John 1:9*: *If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* So again, as I've mentioned each time, we recognize that we are sinners but we also recognize that Christ is our advocate. And again *1 John 2:1*, it says: *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* And that's the reason why we are able to do this. Because we have Christ, the Righteous One, as our

Savior, we have an alien righteousness that belongs to us. It's not ours, it's his. Because we have his righteousness, we are free to eat from his table. And I repeat this every time, I say, he lived the life we were supposed to live and he died the death that we all deserved to die so that we could have the privilege of coming to his table.

So as the bread is being distributed, I want us to just take a moment to ask ourselves this morning about risk. Donna took a risk. It was a risk to reestablish a relationship that had been shattered and shattered in a way that the world would have told Donna, hey, you're fine, it's his bad. You're okay. And Donna had to kind of reestablish that and that took some doing. And so my question this morning and my question to ask is: Are you willing to take a risk and that's the risk to love somebody deeply, from the heart? Spend a moment or so thinking about that.

1 Corinthians the 11th chapter, 23rd verse says: For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." So take, and eat.

What I want to do now is I'm going to deliver the same message that

I delivered on Tuesday. As I said, it was a very different congregation that heard it on Tuesday. I'm going to repeat it to us this Sunday because I still think there is a blessing to be gained from it. So this is the message I delivered on Tuesday.

I said R-I-P. Did you ever think of those letters? I mean we see them, we hear of them all the time whether somebody has passed after a long illness or somebody is taken in an accident what the survivors say or what they express is summed up in those three letters: R-I-P. Rest in peace. And I think today the overwhelming assumption on the part of most people is that the only qualification for resting in peace is dying. I once saw a person on TV describe his friend's status after he had participated in a robbery in a shot-out that killed not only his friend but innocent bystanders as well, and the friend said, well, at least he was at peace. And I saw and I heard that and I thought to myself, really? Rich Samek is a man who is completely at peace. And I said that not because I hope this is the case but because I know it is the case, because Rich sought that peace from the only one who could ever give it. Jesus said in *John 14:27*: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.*" Rich understood what the peace of Christ was all about, more than many of his fellow Christians because for many, many years, Rich was at war with God. And I needed to tell you that, I need to tell

you some of the details of that warfare for two reasons. Number one, you can't really grasp the role that grace played in Rich's life unless you understand the nature of that warfare; and number two, Rich asked me to.

Rich left Donna and as many of you know, as all of you know now, he left to pursue the homosexual life-style and he pursued it for many years, and during that time I had very little contact with Rich. He was literally a sheep who had wandered far from the fold. And one day in the midst of his wandering he received a diagnosis of one of the worst diseases you could possibly get. It was a diagnosis that Rich would come to see in some way as a blessing. It was ALS and ALS did more than just paralyze Rich, it also forced him to re-examine his life and his sexuality in the light of God's word. And Rich knew that he had all kinds of options, he knew that he could choose to see his life-style as a biological predisposition, maybe as an expression of his own autonomy or as sin, as a turning away from God's best. And Rich began to see the choice as one of turning away from God's best, and by God's grace he determined once again to turn around. We call that turning around repentance. For Rich it meant literally returning home. You see, God had had his hand on Rich from before they even -- the foundations of the world had been established because Jesus had chosen Rich as one of his sheep. And Jesus says very clearly in

John 10:27: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand." See, Rich went out from the flock and he went out from the flock only to find out that the Good Shepherd, as he said, loses none of his sheep and that no one can snatch them out of his hand. Rich may have wandered into the far country but Jesus made it very clear what the Good Shepherd's intent was from the very beginning in a story that Jesus told in Luke 15, he said this, it says: Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

For many, many years Rich counted himself among those ninety-nine

who needed no repentance. That is a terrible place to be. You see, the sinners that the Pharisees were complaining so bitterly about actually had amongst themselves a great spiritual advantage. These were the folks who were the marginalized. These were the folks who were the outcasts. Society had passed its judgments and these people had all failed. I mean how dare Jesus even associate with these people? Well, in fact these sinners really had no idea how blessed they actually were. Jesus spent much, much more time among these people because they had no pretense of righteousness like the ninety-nine. They were sinners and they knew it. I mean the ninety-nine were sinners as well except they didn't know it. You see the great divide that separates the sheep from the goats is not a division among sinners and righteous. It is division among sinners who know they are sinners and sinners who don't. God tells us that all of us have sinned and all of us fall short of his glory. And as Dane Ortlund puts it and I quoted this: "In the kingdom of God the one thing that qualifies you is knowing that you don't qualify, and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." You see, when these sinners heard the gospel, they understood that their sins could be completely forgiven by placing their faith in the one perfect man who has ever walked this earth, and they readily became his sheep. You see, all of us are sinners and all of us are in need of this gift that God gives of repentance. And we serve a God who gave his life on the cross in

order to pay the price of our sin in order to purchase for us this gift of repentance. And the journey that takes us from the ninety-nine who have no need of repentance to the one who actually seeks it, well that's Rich's story as well. We serve a God who longs to forgive us but God makes it very clear that when it comes to forgiveness, when it comes to forgiving sin, his forgiveness is conditional. That is to say God does not make blanket pardons, and he doesn't forgive if his forgiveness is not asked for. He forgives those who seek forgiveness and not those who don't. See, there's a verse in the Bible in *1 John 1:9* that describes this conditional covenant that God has with his people. God says: *If, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Now the word "confess" in that statement is a Greek word made up of two words. One word is "homo" which means "same" and the other is "logeio" which means "to speak." The Greek word for "confess" is the word "homologeio" which means "to same speak." It literally means "to be on the same page with," "to agree with," "to speak the same language as." And what God is saying here is that the condition necessary to receive God's forgiveness is to agree with his Holy Spirit about the sin that we're asking forgiveness for. You see, when we same speak with God, when we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins on the basis of Christ's death on the cross. When we refuse to agree with God, when we are

unwilling to confess sin regardless the sin, it could be murder, it could be stealing a paper clip, well then we face the possibility of turning a forgivable sin into an unforgivable sin not because God is not going to forgive us but because we refuse to ask God for forgiveness. See, the ultimate sin against the Holy Spirit is to blaspheme the very one who is bringing you the gift of repentance by refusing to accept it. It's rejecting the very God who enables us to come under the conviction of sin. For many, many years, Rich was locked in this pattern of unforgivable sin, not because God wouldn't forgive him but because he simply refused to see his lifestyle as sinful. And then God brought Rich a severe mercy. And when God took away from him almost every single aspect of his physicality, he gave Rich the time and the space necessary to rethink God's conditional covenant and the need for repentance. God granted Rich the gift of repentance. God broke down Rich's resistance by demonstrating to him over and over again just how much he was loved by God and he did that first and foremost through Donna and her persistent and loving care for Rich. And as Donna has already told you, she'd be the very first one to say that there was enough blame to go around for everyone on every side for the dissolution of their marriage and she doesn't want you to think that she was some kind of angel up there playing her harp. But Donna did hear God's Holy Spirit telling her that she needed to minister to her ex-husband who had left her years ago and was now

very sick. And many's the time she would bring a meal or visit Rich and come away from the encounter saying, "That's it, I'm done, never again." I mean there was still anger and bitterness that they had to work through on both sides, but make no mistake about it, it was Donna's obedience to the Holy Spirit that eventually led to the breakthrough in her relationship with Rich. I mean Rich simply was no match for the love of Christ expressed directly to him through Donna. As I've said many, many times, Rich would have been very happy if Donna that came in with guns blazing and fists raised. He could not defend against the love of Christ, and that's what broke him.

I mean, I had the privilege of being with Rich toward the end, and I was able to ask him directly if he had repented of his sexual sins. Not only did he give me a resounding "Yes," he also insisted that I tell his story and give the hope that he found to anyone who is locked in any kind of sin. He also said that he wanted to renew his wedding vows with Donna, and I had the privilege of re marrying Rich and Donna two weeks ago. And this brings me back to the idea of rest in peace. You know, I understand that it's a great comfort to people who are in pain and I also have to insist at the same time that God says the way to peace is not simply by dying. The way to peace is through surrender. It's through laying down our arms and surrendering to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That's

something that Rich did once as a child and once again as a prodigal returning home. Rich became the one sheep that Jesus laid on his shoulders and walked back into the fold because no one snatches his sheep from his hands. And I don't think it's accurate to simply say, "Rich, rest in peace." I don't think Rich entered into some place of calm, quiet solitude that passes for peace for most people. My belief is that Rich actually entered into a party the likes of which you and I have never seen because Jesus says: *"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."* Rich was that one sheep who like all sheep needed the gift of repentance and God gave him that gift. Donna basically brought it to him and he accepted it. And as he lay on his bed towards the end, he confessed to me how sad he was about wasting a significant portion of his life and he also said that he wanted to be able to make a statement about the grace of God and the joy of repentance that's available to anyone who is locked in sin. This is that statement. I mean, I asked Rich how it felt to be sitting on the very edge of eternity, and he said he was frankly terrified of how the end would happen but he was extremely excited to see what was going to happen afterwards. Well, Rich has already gone through the terrifying end and God chose to bless him in that, it was remarkably peaceful. And now he's no longer just resting in peace, now he is enjoying the very presence of the God of the universe. He is rejoicing with

the saints that have gone on before him and he is anticipating an eternity stretched out before him full of grace, growth and the unique pleasure of being molded into the very image of God. So R-I-P, Richard Samek, rest eternally in the pleasure of the presence of God.

That was the message that I delivered on Tuesday. I'd be the very first one to tell you that it's very rare that these kind of circumstances get all neatly tied up in a bow in a nice storybook kind of way like we saw with Rich and Donna. It just happened to happen that way. And God doesn't guarantee the outcome of that because his view and his vision is far greater and deeper than ours, but he does guarantee the very best outlook there could be for our good and his glory. And what I want you to see most of all in all of this is what Paul refers to as the most excellent way. It is the power of love over the power of power. It's what drew Jesus to the cross and it needs to be the driving power behind all of our lives as believers in Christ.

So finally this morning as -- before we take up the cup which we can start to distribute right now, I want to ask us some questions. If the elders would distribute the cup. I would like to ask us some questions about perspective, patience, and prayer. This is my first question about the perspective of God's counterintuitive

love. And the question is this: Am I committed to going to God's word as the source of his wisdom and understanding, knowing that it goes against most of what this world has taught you from birth? You know, lots of times people hear what God is saying when he says that you are to love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, and they say that's crazy, that's nuts. I can't do that. There's no way. I hate this guy. I hate this woman. I hate what they did. And time and time again we have seen God has demonstrated that if you accept God's alternative way, his counterintuitive way of loving the unlovely, the first thing that it does is it's going to change you. It's going to change your heart, it's going to change the way you respond to these temptations. And as Donna has noted and I mentioned it a couple times that there was a person in my life that I was extremely bitter over and as I started to pray for him, my prayer for him simply was because I didn't want to get wrapped around the axle twenty times a day. I didn't want to hear this guy's name in my head and then suddenly find myself grinding my teeth and five minutes have passed and all I've been doing is playing the tapes of what -- quote -- "he did to me." And so the first reason why we pray for our enemies is not necessarily for our enemies, it's for us. So my standard recommendation to people all the time is when you have a bitter foe, when you have somebody that I call a designated enemy, what does Christ say? He says pray for those.

Pray for your enemies. So we start out praying for these people and it's not for their sake so much as it is for yours. So what I'm talking about is the idea of perspective. You don't get that perspective from the world. The world says if somebody does something to you, do it back to him twice as hard. You only get that perspective from the word of God, so our perspective comes from God's word. In Donna's case it was Psalm 51. God will speak to you in many, many different ways depending on what your need is and your circumstance is, but you've got to be in the word of God.

Secondly is: Am I waiting patiently for God's will to unfold? There were plenty of opportunities, I guarantee you, in Donna's interaction with Rich, she could have said, "Okay, I'm done," and really meant it, being done. Being patient is understanding that God is in this for the long haul, and that like I said, lots of times when you are approaching somebody with the love of Christ with the hands down love of Christ, without the dukes up, people don't know how to respond. They don't know what to do and very frequently they'll lash back out at you in an attempt to get you back to where they're comfortable with and that's you raising your dukes. So it requires not just a different perspective of the word of God, it requires patience, it requires allowing God's will to unfold and in Donna's case it was literally years.

And thirdly: Am I bathing all of these efforts in prayer? You know, recognizing that literally strategic prayer stops the enemy from using my own bitterness against me while it changes my heart and gives me the wisdom necessary to advance an agenda of loving as Christ loved. See, we have been given this extraordinary privilege. You go outside the door here and nobody has a clue of what I'm talking about. In fact what I'm talking about sounds like nonsense. It's crazy talk. And yet this is the power that God has given to us. It's the most excellent way, the power to love as Christ loves, and we've been given an example of what that is today. Literally the power of Christ broke Rich, brought the gift of repentance to Rich, and I'm convinced every one of us has people in our lives that we need to express the love of Christ to in a way that is not easy at all. We've been given this incredible privilege, we have wisdom that comes directly from God and the power of his Holy Spirit to put it into practice. And so I would like us to just take a moment to consider that before we take the cup.

1 Corinthians 11:25 says: In the same manner he also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." So take, and drink.

This is our head, hands and feet time, this is the time where we want to look for something practical in what it means to remember Christ. And if there's one thing that I want you to get from all of this is to understand that the gospel going forward always entails some kind of risk. And I just want to mention two different risks this morning. The gospel went forward in Rich's life because Donna was willing to take a risk, an existential risk if you will, just to kind of put her heart out there and just risk getting it squashed and smashed again. My question to all of us this morning is there somebody in your life that you hear God telling you you need to take a risk with this person? Is God speaking to you about somebody who may have hurt you or harmed you or did something in your life at some point that you need to bring before him and ask him how can I love this person with Christ's love? How can I just go ahead and go forward with what -- I mean God gave Donna an excellent opportunity. He gives all of us these opportunities but we have to be willing to take the risk to take them. So just take a moment to ask yourself, am I willing to take that risk to love somebody as Christ loves? And then I just want to -- also I have one other risk which has to do with next week, next week is our baptism picnic. And again, going forward in the waters of baptism is another risk. There's an awful lot of folks that say I don't want to get up there in front of everybody, I'll feel stupid and it's risky. But every time the gospel advances,

it's because somebody was willing to risk something. Being baptized is an opportunity to publicly declare your allegiance to King Jesus and the kingdom of God and it involves some risk. So I would like us to again take some time to think also not just about individuals in our life but if God is calling you to take the risk of baptism, seriously consider that. I mean as Donna's story shows us, the gospel is always going to involve some risk. For us it's strictly social. If you read *The Voice of the Martyrs* this month it was a story, one of the lead stories in there is about somebody would was in Yemen and he went and he publicly got baptized and that started a downward spiral where he was beaten, he was ostracized from his job, he was -- his wife was publicly beaten and his wife was eventually murdered. This is what it's like to get baptized in Yemen. We don't even know what that's like. I mean our risks are strictly social. But God gives us these risks and he asks us to go through those risks and the more risks you're willing to take socially, the more you're ready to take any other kind of risk. So yeah, it's a risk. So is loving the unlovable. But my prayer for us is that we are willing to take that risk. So let's pray.

Father, I just again, I thank you for Donna, I thank you for Rich, I thank you for what you are teaching us through their lives. I pray that you would continue this day to give us the understanding

and the knowledge that the gospel advances when we are willing to take these risks. Give us the ability, give us the strength, give us the grace, give us the power to do just that, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.