

How are we? If you're a guest here tonight, my name is Lan. I'm one of the pastors here at the Village. Actually I'm associate pastor of pastoral care. Beau asked me to speak today and tell you a little bit about my story and also the story of this place. Because the majority of people who come to this location don't know the story. I won't be able to do justice to it because you don't have enough time. You have classes and work and things like that tomorrow, but I'd love to have a cup of coffee with you and give you just every jot and tittle of the story. But let me give you the Cliff's Notes of mine. I was born at a very early age. When you're born, most people get a name. I didn't. They gave me a number, Landrum P. Leavell III. That stinks in the first grade. And so I didn't have to wait for an identity crisis; I was born with one. I'm a third generation preacher, but it's not a family business though. Because just because you spend the night in the trunk doesn't make you a spare tire in the morning. Some of you all will have to chew on that, but that's the deal. It was a little bit later that I really knew beyond any shadow of a doubt God's call on my life. Not just Landrum P. Leavell (the original) or Landrum P. Leavell II, but also God was speaking into my life. And I knew the call on my life to the gospel ministry. And so for me there's never been a plan B. It took me almost 30 years to find Suzanne. My mom used to say that I wasn't real picky, I was just looking for a Dallas Cowboy's Cheerleader with a Bible under her arm. Hey, it shouldn't have been that big of a deal. I mean, He did the whole world in six days. How hard should that be? I just had to look a long, long time. I finally found her. She and I have been married for 24 years and 29 days. Thank you. That's an accomplishment on her part. We have two daughters of whom I am indescribably proud.

So that's kind of my story except that I am also a recovering Baptist. I began my religious recovery about ten years ago. I grew up in a wonderful church. There are some friends here from Wichita Falls, and it's amazing that at the church where I grew up there are lots of connections. You'd be surprised at how many direct connections there are to current Village staff members that go back to Wichita Falls. So that is where I grew up. It was a great place to grow up. I became a pastor in 1977 and over the next 25 years experienced both the best and much less of the bride of Christ. I've been robbed by the church. I left a church and a deacon arbitrarily made the decision that he didn't think I need the last check that I had coming. There was a time where I had a wife that was pregnant and I had a three year old daughter. We needed that money. Never got it. It was a couple years later that God worked on me and said that I needed to let it go. So I wrote that man and told him I didn't understand why, probably never would and that he had injured my family, but I was choosing to forgive him. I hadn't seen him for seventeen years. When I did, I hugged him as if nothing had happened because that's what forgiveness looks like. Last Fall, he attended my father's memorial service in New Orleans and we hugged again. There have been times as a lead pastor where I instructed the financial secretary not to pay me because there wasn't enough money to pay the staff, and so that's what you do. I've also been immeasurably blessed by the body of Christ. There have been friends, there have been fellow Christ followers, there have been adoptive grandparents for our kids who we still talk to 25 years later. And that's one side. Every coin has two sides. I've been stabbed in the back by men in the church who were having parking lot meetings plotting your dismissal and five minutes later in committee meetings acting like they had your back and nothing was absolutely wrong.

And so you probably have a question looming in your mind, "Lan, why in the world are you still here?" That's a great question, and I'm going to answer it succinctly. The reason is I believe that the local church and the universal church that Matt's been talking about the last two months are the hope of the world. I believe that to the core of my being. And I believe that God, in His sovereignty, has allowed you and me to participate in that kingdom building, not ours but His. And what that means for you and me is we translate it to where we live right here, right now. That means that all our

excuses that we use to try to justify our exits or our experiences or our escapades don't really hold any water. Because I'll compare scars with anybody, but they really don't match up when you think about Paul being stoned at Lystra, Jesus giving His life on the cross. You know, whatever lies, whatever disappointments, whatever wounds, whatever potholes along the way, I can tell you one thing – they did not come from the nail-scarred hands of the risen Christ. They came from folks like you and me when they take their eyes off of Jesus. Last week, Matt talked about an old song we don't sing anymore, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," and quite frankly that's my word to you and to me. People blame the church for a lot of things and rightfully so, but I'm not all that smart. If I was, it wouldn't have taken me so long to get through school. But I just spell out "church," and when I spell it out, the letters at the middle of "church" is "ur." Hebrews 12 tells us that Jesus is the founder, He's the finisher, He's the perfecter of our faith, and if you're looking for anyone other than Him, then you need to kind of consider yourself cockeyed.

That's a little bit about my story. Let me tell you about this place. Grace Temple Baptist Church was established over 55 years ago. It peaked in 1982 and from that point on, it went south. It had been on a 30 year decline and a 5 year free fall when God, in His omnipotent sense of humor, allowed me to become the the pastor. Again, you don't have enough time. But I came in there with 30 years of deferred maintenance and all sorts of things. There was a Godly group of committed people that were here still crying out for God, still reaching people for Christ. And we continued that, but it kind of came to the point where we were not going to be able to continue in terms of just literally keeping the place open. You'd have buckets in the aisle catching water because it would cost \$14K to repair the roof or whatever. And I had some ideas and thoughts. I had heard about this struggling church in Highland Village and I thought, "You know, they need help." They were out of room, and we happened to have some, so I thought, "Maybe if we could get them to loan us a hundred people for a year to help get over critical mass, that would be great." And I asked a friend to help maybe begin a conversation like that, and nothing happened, not even a busy signal. Looking back, it was just one of those sovereignty things. It never happened. Well about two months later, a friend of mine who goes to the Highland Village campus and works with our association, he started a conversation with some of the staff in Highland Village. And what's interesting is in the beginning of those conversations, Matt was not in favor of it. Now I knew they were going on, but I wasn't in on it. And that was a good thing because it gave me plausible deniability. In case anything got out early or wasn't right, I could always say, "I don't know. I wasn't in that meeting." And I wasn't. What's amazing is Matt and I had our first conversation with any specificity about "what if" on Monday, April 30, and I wish I had time to give you dates and prayers and meetings and all that sort of stuff. I went to our leadership team on Monday night, May 6, 2007, and I did some thing that was just brain dead. I went from zero to the goal line in one night and I said, "Here's what I'm looking at. God may be opening a door for us." I said, "We're out of business. Pick a date. Fourth of July, Labor Day, one more roof repair and we're done. But God's no through with this place. And so I see this as our option. Not one of many, this is it." And they listened. I told them not to pray about it. They looked at me kind of funny. I said, "No, don't pray about it. Just pray that if it's not right, God burns a bush. Otherwise, I really feel this is where we need to go. And by the way, come back tomorrow night." We came back the next night and Matt, Gilbert Montez and Del Steele, our now departed patriarch of the church, they came and met with us. And it was not an elephant eating a mosquito deal. Because five years ago when Matt came to Highland Village, it was the same scenario. They were laying people off and didn't know how they were going to pay the bills. And so they were very sensitive to where we were and that we actually had the opportunity to choose life. And so we talked. The bottom line is on Sunday, May 20, we made a recommendation to merge with the Village, and I didn't even like that word because you don't sell a merger. What we were talking about was a marination, where you take two things and put them together and what comes out is something different and better. And I believe that's what's happened, as part of the providence of God. And so on June 3, we voted "yes" with one dissenting vote. That's less than 30 days from when the conversation began to voting on it. I wanted to call the Guinness Book of World Records, because that's never happened anywhere in the history of Christianity. That's why Matt and I both have said that nobody can take credit for it because neither one of us are this good. It was a God thing. I continues to be. I look around tonight and there are more people tonight than we had over two or three weeks before. And so for me, it's been a halftime that I wasn't looking for.

My field has grown tremendously. This is just a hoot to me, but overnight I became the sage. I thought, "Man, if we're the sage, we're in deep something." But anyway, that's the way it is. And we have the opportunity to impart to those coming behind us and we sang tonight and we continue to sing about how there's more to be done in this city. You all ought to hope that God allows all of us to live long enough to see what will happen over a lifetime with people who are sold out to Christ.

Because the fact is we want everyone in here to do one of two things. Particularly those of you who are in college, we want you to do one of two things. I'll give you your options. We want you to stay, and we want you to go. Those are your two options, nothing in the middle. We want you to stay here for the rest of your life or we want you to go. And if you go, go as a missionary. If you stay, stay as a missionary. There are those that are still here in this church that were a part of Grace Temple Baptist Church. Now that's amazing. There are a lot of people that used to be members of Grace Temple Baptist Church. I think at one time you couldn't even join Denton Bible if you had not formerly been a member of Grace Temple Baptist Church.

But what I want to do tonight, and you need to listen real fast, I want to share with you some lessons I've learned along the journey. They're very honest words of assessment and encouragement. I do so with a lot of freedom because I'm not running for anything and I'm not running from anything, but I've experienced what I've experienced by the sovereignty of God. And the things you'll hear me say tonight, they're not unique to me. Other people have learned similar lessons, but these are reflections that come when you stop for a moment. The apostle Paul talked in Philippians 1 thanking his God upon every remembrance of that body of Christ in Philippi, and I understand a little bit of it. I think about those reflections that are in the corners of my mind, but I've got the perspective today to make some deductions from this journey that I've made thus far in life of ministry. You hear Matt talking about our 40 years, and the staff for some reason laughs at me when I echo that phrase. I want to be here. I want to have a motorized wheelchair. I want to be a part of this. Early on, I asked Matt a question one day and I don't know that he got it really the way I intended it. I asked him one day in June after the vote, before we had really done any official coming together, I asked him to do my funeral and I was serious. I wanted him to know that I'm here for the long haul. And so when you step back, when you get a little perspective, the perspective that time brings, sometimes God says, "Step away, hide yourself, be quiet," and you get a little different perspective.

If you've got your Bible, I want you to look in James 1. James 1 simply says, "for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Now in moments of reflection, God has impressed upon me several lessons, and again hear me clearly, I am not so presumptuous as to think I'm the only one that's learning them. There are a lot of tracks on the road, there are a lot of footprints in the sand, others have been there before, but here's one thing I know beyond any shadow of a doubt. Individuals are more important than institutions and people are more important than programs. I've been to the top of the ladder in our denomination's educational opportunity. I've been to the apex of the academic ladder, but as I look back, people are more important than any program that I could support or perpetuate. If you look at any of the gospels relationally, if you look at Jesus in Mark's gospel, He's there in the synagogue with that man with the atrophied hand and all that the keepers of the institutional flame were only worried about was whether or not Jesus was going to heal on the Sabbath. They wanted Him to act properly within the confines of their program, and frankly Jesus didn't give a rip about their program. The running battle in the first chapters of Mark's gospel is between Jesus and the institutional religion. Those early chapters of Mark's gospel tell us that the Son of Man was more interested in people than programs, more interested in individuals than He was institutions. And so they watched Him. And as they watched Him, He was doing some heinous things, things like eating and drinking with sinners. They were waiting to nail Him for healing on the Sabbath. And so what does Jesus do? He asks that man with the atrophied hand to do what he could not do. "Stretch out your hand." And with those words, emblazoned across it, Jesus was saying that people are more

important than programs. I think back in my life about people who have crossed my path. When have you had mountain top experiences? You might talk about a revival, you might talk about a camp, you might talk about a church service, you might talk about that divine moment. I can tell you that never have I felt any closer to God than when I've been sitting in someone's living room talking with them about Christ, sitting down talking to a couple who is facing the painful reality of marital failure while tearfully considering the challenging opportunity of forgiveness and restoration, talking with children like those to whom Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come to Me," or maybe talking to that man who has come to the dead-end of self and dives head long into the arms of grace. People are more important than programs. And when the race is run and the day is done and the battle is won, the thing that you're going to remember is what you've done in the lives of people, not how many statistics you have, not how many sales you've racked up.

I also want to stop and clarify because it will sound a little ironic because of where we are. We need to recognize that God is just as concerned with littleness as He is in bigness. You see, we've developed a virtual idolatry of bigness, but you can't find that in the pages of the gospel. Now we do know that they were counting in the book of Acts. The book of Acts tells us that there were 3,000 added to the church in just one day. They were counting, and we count too. I mean, we're counting right here. We've had just over a thousand to 1,200 adults six weeks in a row at our services here. We count too. But at the same time, as late as this very morning, this staff has been crying out to God to give us the wisdom and the strength to shepherd and disciple and equip those with whom we're being entrusted. But I want you to understand something, my friends. Almighty God, the Maker of heaven and earth is just as concerned with littleness as in bigness.

And again I take this from the life of Jesus. We look at all these big events, but let me tell you something. You look at the presentations in the gospels, and those are not so much as when the multitudes pressed upon Him as much as it was when He was one on one with individuals. Think about those passages that just shine so luminously in the gospel of John. You find Jesus with Nicodemus, Jesus with the woman at the well, Jesus with the man born blind, Jesus restoring Peter, all of those being cameos where Jesus is saying, "I am going to focus on the one person and not just the many."

There's a well known pastor in Chicago who several years ago said that one of his goals as a preacher was to never quote Charles Hayden Spurgeon. But for many of us, the study of Spurgeon's life has been a study. I've did several studies of his life in ministry when I was doing doctoral work. Some of you may have never even heard of him, but the life of this guy is still one of the most striking lives in the history of western civilization. It makes absolutely no sense. How in the world could the son of a rural preacher in England with the equivalent of a high school education come to London when he was 19 years old and they couldn't find a place that was big enough for all the people who came to hear him proclaim Christ? And everybody was after him. The press tried to crucify him, the Anglican Church tried to bury him, the Baptists who didn't think he was Calvinistic enough tried to shut him down. the American press tried to screw him to the wall for actually having the candidness to say that when he would sit back in the evening for moments of repose and reflection with a cigar, he smoked to the glory of God. That went over like a pregnant high jumper. I mean, the sourpusses said that he told humor from the pulpit, to which Spurgeon replied, "If only you knew how much I hold back." Boy, do I know the truth of that. But Spurgeon's first biographer said, "I saw it all happen. I saw it when he filled the New Park Street Chapel. I watched him build the Metropolitan Tabernacle, which in 1861 seated 5,000 people. I watched him preach in the Agricultural Hall at Exeter. Spurgeon preached at the palatial Surrey Music Hall, which seated 12,000, as well as the Crystal Palace to the biggest crowd that had ever gathered indoors to hear preaching. In 1857, over 23,000 people gathered in the Crystal Palace for a national day of mourning as Spurgeon spoke what was considered (up to that time) the largest congregation ever addressed by a preacher of the gospel in Europe or the world."

Yet his biographer said, "Now that he's gone, it's none of those instances that I think of when I think of him." He goes on to say what he remembers is the day he went down to Spurgeon's orphanage in Stockwell south of the Thames in the

southern section of London. Once a week, Spurgeon would go down there to visit the street urchins in Victorian England. They loved him. And keep in mind that was a day long before the Salvation Army or Christian Community Action or Our Daily Bread or any of those. Back then, children would literally starve in the street if it were not for churches who built orphanages. And so when he'd go down there once a week, the kids would put their arms around his legs. And on that day, a nurse came up to him and said, "Mr Spurgeon,..." You see he never was ordained. Spurgeon said that ordination was putting empty hands on an empty head. I'm not saying that, that's what Spurgeon said. But he did pretty well for somebody who's not ordained. But the nurse came up to him and said, "Mr. Spurgeon, there's a little lad dying of consumption (or tuberculosis)." And his biographer went with him to the infirmary of the orphanage and he sat there with this little 12 year old. He said that it was a scene out of Charles Dickens' London. Spurgeon, a big man, got down on those gout-swollen knees and he looked at the little boy and said, "Laddy, are you ready to meet the Savior?" And the little boy said yes. And he said, "Laddy, is there anything I can do for you?" And he said, "Mr. Spurgeon, all my life all I wanted was a canary in a cage." Spurgeon got off his knees and he looked at that little boy and he said, "You will have one." He got back in his horse-drawn hack, had it whipped to where the Metropolitan Tabernacle was. The man himself went in and out of stores all through the area looking for a cage with a bird in it. He got back in his horse-drawn hack, went back to Souther, went back to that little boy's room and said, "Son, I've got you a canary in a cage." His biographer said, "I've seen it all, but I don't think the greatest moment was when he founded Spurgeon's college or when he built the Metropolitan Tabernacle or when he issued 56 volumes of sermons. It was when that man, whose visage was known to every person in London, took a canary in a cage to a little boy whose name no one knew.

You see, there was once a day where we might have marveled at a story like that, but do you know what we would say today? Today we say, "That's true." Because bigness and crowds and accolades and all that stuff, it can quickly turn to ashes. The only that matter are the things that we've done in the name of Jesus. And I'll tell you something else. When you've experienced the things I've experienced, you learn that God really is your only refuge. Somewhere Isaiah said, "Never put your trust in a man." That's a universal statement. It's also biblical to boot because the great Hebrew word there means "do not deposit your security with a human being." Now you might or might not be surprised how quickly degrees and credentials and networks and organizations and people can vanish. But the good thing is, as the late Dr. Oscar Thompson of Southwestern Seminary said when he was dying of cancer, "When I got to the bottom, I found that it was a rock." You see, Jesus is as faithful as He says He is. God is working in the silences even when He seems like He is absent. Do you remember that cry of dereliction that came from the cross where Jesus said, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? You see, God seemed to be so terribly absent that even in that moment He was saving the world. And I would tell you that sometimes the silence of God is when God is saying and doing the most.

Another life lesson I've learned is that the only thing that will keep you hooked up with the kingdom of God and the church is the people who encourage you, not the people who step on you, not the people chip at you or chew on you, lie to you, two-face, malign and do everything else to discourage you. But understand, part of that's just life. There are always going to be people like that. Isn't that just life? Who among us hasn't messed up? Now if you think you haven't just raise your hand. If you think you haven't messed up, I've got great news for you. The meter is still running. You've got time, and you will. But when we take some of the actions and experience things, failures that we'd rather conspicuously go through, you don't even have to worry as to whether or not people will critique you. They'll line up to do it. People that you have helped to get where they are will vanish. But I want to tell you the good news about God's grace. People that you've never dreamed of will come out of the woodwork to encourage you. I can't tell you letters and notes and e-mails that Suzanna and I have received over the years from people I hadn't thought about in ages. We're living in this day and age of such connectivity. In this last year, I've gotten letters and e-mails from people that I hadn't thought of in fifteen years. A lady I knew in the early 90's tracked us down. You can do that today. She tracked us down to let us know

how much we had made an impact in her life and tell us what was going on with her family and all those other things. There are so many additions that you begin to build up in your treasure chest. People, that's what's graced my life.

But the question tonight is: Who have you called? Who do you look up? Who do you pray with and for? Who have you tracked down? Who have you refused to give up on when they were down? Who is it that God impresses on your heart that you will not leave alone even when they don't want to talk to you? Let me tell you something, friends. There are people who are going to persevere in the race, people who are going to do strange things in the race, but if you want to help them in their relationship with God, then you need to look them up and encourage them. In over 25 years as a pastor, if I had fallen to every rock thrower or people who think they do the kingdom of God a favor by anonymously defaming you or kicking you when you are down, my soul would have shrunk to the size of a raisin. But I thank God for the people who have helped me, who have propped me up, kept me up, encouraged me. Because they are the people who have kept me connected to the church and the kingdom of God.

I've also found the truth of the significance of what James in our text tonight says. And you could sum it up into two words: perseverance matters. Look at that text again. Not only do we have the gospel of a good beginning, we have the gospel of a good ending. And before our race is run, it's going to take all sorts of curious twists. Look at the text, this great word of James, the half brother of our Lord, "And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete." And I've come to believe that God is not nearly so concerned about any one turn of the journey as He is the outcome of the race. Back in the 4th century, there was a leader of the early church called Chrysostom. They called him "Golden Throat." He was the golden-mouthed orator of the early church. He was a man who preached so powerfully that even pagan Roman soldiers who didn't believe what he was saying would interrupt him with applause. And John Chrysostom said that steadfast endurance, keeping on keeping on is the queen of all the virtues. That means you can't pray unless you keep on praying. You can't love unless you keep on loving. You can't minister unless you keep on ministering. What do you learn out of steadfast endurance? I'll tell you one thing you learn. You learn whether or not that which you call faith is real. You see, it's one thing to persevere when God is in His heaven and all is right with the world and your name is praised and it pays well to preach. It's another thing when it doesn't matter to anybody but God whether or not you persevere. We have a gospel of a good beginning, and we have a gospel of a good ending regardless of what happens in the middle of the race.

I've learned, I think, to maybe understand a little bit about what Paul was talking about in Philippians. In the first chapter, Paul is writing from prison, and I've been to that place. It wasn't like a prison today with air-conditioning and cable. It was literally down underground. Water, refuse, all sorts of stuff would go down in there. You had just a little crack where you could look up and see street level. It was from that prison that Paul wrote those words, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." He's saying, "The very gravity that's holding me in this Roman prison, the very drag of opposition has been the wind beneath my wings. And now the gospel has a hearing that it never would have had before." Those, friends, are the words of a man who loved perseverance, a man who did believe what he wrote when he said, "God who began a good work will put the finishing touches on it."

I've observed a lot of things about human beings. I love watching people. If you don't believe God's got a sense of humor, apparently you've never been to Wal-Mart in Denton. Have you ever noticed that it is human beings that don't finish stuff? I mean how many people have graduated ABD, All But Dissertation? We've got a guy in our church who's working to finish his dissertation because he's about to bump up in his ten year time allotment. We're the only ones that don't finish stuff. There are unfinished symphonies, there are concrete blocks of buildings that were never finished, there are manuscripts of unfinished books in many a drawer, but have you noticed that God always finishes what He starts? We've got friends here tonight who have just got back from the mountains of Colorado. Have you ever looked at

a Rocky Mountain and said, "Aw darn, it's a pity He couldn't finish that?" Ever go to the beach and see a seascape, "Aw man, that's only three quarters finished?" God finishes what He begins, and is that not ultimately our only confidence?

Last fall when Billy Graham turned 90 years old, I read article and he was talking about every day he missed his wife Ruth. And she was a piece of work. I wish I had time to tell you some Ruth stories. But Ruth Graham, on her tombstone, guess what they wrote. All they put on her tombstone was "End of construction. Thank you for your patience." Is that not great? I mean, we are all works of progress, but God finishes what He starts. And so you'll understand that a boat that's build in dry dock is not considered sea worthy. Only when it gets out in the wind and the water and the gales. A soldier who goes through boot camp is not considered battle hardened because he has not been in battle yet. The testing that we go through in our lives is to demonstrate that on the other side of the test you actually have a faith that does not fizzle before the finish.

And so the last thing I share tonight as we wrap up is that whatever happens to individual churches, the kingdom of God will prevail. You see, I've been a pastor in both the swamp and the desert. I've been in churches that were rural, suburban and urban. I've been pastor of people who were blue collar, white collar, gray collar and no collar. I've had occasion to think seriously about the quality and the dynamics and the intention and the integrity of individual churches. And the truth is churches are planted, they are begun, they are organized, some prosper, some don't, some die, some don't but need to. But the kingdom of God will triumph. Jesus did not come telling us to build the the kingdom. You may be saying, "Didn't He?" No, Jesus came to announce the kingdom. He came to inaugurate the thing that He will ultimately consummate. And I stand here today in Denton, Texas, the epicenter of the universe. And from where I sit today, I see the kingdom of God like a river flowing through history. And when God spoke into my life as a young boy and I knew it, and later when later God was calling me to the gospel ministry, that's when I launched my frail craft on that river, and I'd be a fool to think that I'm the one that makes the river go. That's crazy. You don't make the kingdom go. The kingdom makes you go. You don't carry the kingdom, on your back or anywhere else. The kingdom carries you. One of these days when you wake up and you look at the obituary and your picture's there, that's when you disembark your frail craft of humanity. But the river's going to roll on. You see, when you look at people with white hair and some of them think their time is done, you look at them and you tell them, "Uh uh, God's not through with you until you assume room temperature." I believe that. I'm so tired of people going, "Well, I've done my time." Bull, you still got some left. Use it up. Because from the moment God's Son came incarnate in the advent at Bethlehem, the victory of the kingdom has been assured. When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, that kingdom in humanity, on earth as it is in heaven is not there because of you and me. What God inaugurated at Bethlehem is not going to succeed because of our work or our credentials or our denominational labels or our ingenuity. There's something much bigger at work.

So I pray that the lessons I've learned thus far in this journey will be of help to you. I pray that ultimately you'll make yourself a kingdom person and recognize that people are all that matters, that God works in littleness as well as bigness, maybe more. He's your only offer of security. How are you going to help people? Not by kicking them but by encouraging them. And whatever comes across your path, God is going to use to demonstrate what the wind beneath your wings really is. Because the kingdom of God is what's going to triumph.

As Beau said earlier, we end every service at the cross as we remember the body and the blood of Christ that was shed for our sins. And I want to invite you tonight to consider that as we partake in the elements, because this is the time that we actually have a link. Since we do this week after week, I've often wondered if it will become old. But it seems to me that it takes on almost more significance week by week. Because this is not just something that we're doing; this is when we are actually connecting with everyone who has gone before us. I think most closely about my father, who is now sharing the new wine. I think about Chrysostom, I think about Spurgeon, I think about all those who have gone before us. And we won't do this forever. Jesus said, "Just do it until I come again." And so tonight, we practice open communion. We

invite anyone to come if you're a Christian, if you're a Christ follower. If you're not, we would ask you to sit it out because this really is a family thing that's important to us. The apostle Paul, who we've mentioned tonight many times, he said that we are to examine ourselves before we receive these elements. So I would encourage you to do that.

As we come tonight at this special time, let's pray together. "Father, we thank You tonight that You love us enough to allow us to learn so many lessons in this journey of life. Father, we ask for Your renewing presence tonight, to explode in us, to invade our hearts, to move us day by day from where we are to where You would have us to be. Father, we thank You tonight for the body and blood that You shed. We pray tonight that our worship, that our connecting, that our communing with You through Your word has been acceptable in Your sight. I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart have been acceptable. O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, it's in Your name that we pray, it's in Your name that we leave, it's in Your name that we live. Amen."

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