

20.12.2009

Dear 12two,

Welcome to all of you who find yourself at 12two for the first time, or have been a few times, and welcome to those of you who call this place home. I hope that God will speak to you through these brief words as I ponder and reflect on our 12two community, where we have come from and where God is asking us to go.

I could have written an email to you but it's too easy for you to delete, or feel like you don't have the time to read.

I could have sent a text, as I do enjoy a text or two, but it somehow didn't seem to be practical.

I could have preached a traditional sermon, but for some reason tonight called for something different!

The advantage, although a little strange, of me writing to you and then reading it, is that if someone doesn't want to hear what I'm saying, they can get up and leave, but everyone else wonders what exactly upset them and why they left at all. So my apologies to those of you who just realised that you forgot to go to the toilet before I began, but feel as though you can't move because of the above reasons.

As I reflected on how Paul communicated with the Churches that he nurtured and loved and cared for I noticed that he wrote letters to them. And given this is a different sort of service and is near the end of the year I thought to myself "self, wouldn't it be cool to write a letter to 12two, but then read it. That's arty right!"

You see guys, I love you. In fact I think I would do anything for any of you at any time if it helped you see that you are deeply valued and loved by God. Maybe part of my shortcoming is that I have given too much at times and not allowed you to find God and worn myself out in the process. This week I found myself weeping for you. It was quite strange actually, for the first time in my life I caught a glimpse of what it must have been like for Jesus to weep over Jerusalem, and so I cried for you. I prayed for each of you by name. I know some of you, maybe many of you are struggling under huge burdens of loneliness and pain, rejection and betrayal, bitterness and hurt, grief and loss, anxiety and depression. And it grieves me that healing is not as quick as I would like, let alone as

quick as you would like. It pains me greatly to see you struggle, to see you put on a brave face each week for 12two, when 12two should be the one place where we can all take off our masks and find God's grace enough to love each other instead of judge.

With this I feel that I need to be the first to lower my mask. To tell you all that I have been struggling. That my energy is not what I wish it could be, that my time is not as generous as I wish it could be, That my teaching is not as deep or challenging as I wish I could be, that my leadership is not as strong or as wise as circumstances might have required. But I say this not out of a place of pity, but out of a place of confession, that I know if the standard is perfection I fall miserably short. But we all do. We all fall short of God's standards and requirements, after all ^{Ro 3:23} **all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**, which is wonderful because it is this that makes us prime candidates for God's limitless grace and mercy.

As I reflect on what has been our history together I see that we have been a place where any expression of worship is valued, where we can gather and pray, sing, preach, laugh, act, hear, sit, be silent, sometimes doing all of these and sometimes none but still search for and meet God in the unravelling of it all.

We have become a people who have invited others to be part of us, who have welcomed people in, not just on their first night but on many subsequent nights.

We have become a people who has sought to open ourselves to the controversies this world is facing: poverty, hunger, loneliness, slavery, and then gingerly and cautiously we have begun to respond to these things. But it's been a response nonetheless.

We have become a people who have grown not only in our understanding of what it means to worship God, but in our experience of worshipping God, knowing that it incorporates all of who we are and is measured in how much we surrender on a daily basis.

We have seen people come to know who Jesus is and follow him with devotion and courage, we have heard stories of what God is doing in our lives and in the lives of those we've been praying for. We have seen more people step into ministry and begin serving and seeking to bless people. We have seen an increase in people coming together in weekly groups to love, know and serve each other and God.

And what really flows through all this is your servant heart. I could name so many instances where a helping hand has been asked for, or a need has arisen and you have been there to meet it. Where often you not only sacrifice your time, energy and money, but you also go above and beyond and say no to more appealing things in order to bring your best here. But how easy it is for us to slip into the trap of serving the king with everything we have, but never stopping long enough to get to know the king we serve. *Jesus wrote to the Church of Ephesus saying:* ^{Rev 2:4} **Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.** And as I ponder this, I fear we too easily have forsaken our first love, Jesus Christ. Never with intention, but often without devotion.

We too often have double standards. We worship Christ in here on Saturday which is a dramatic shift from what we've been up to on a Saturday night. We judge others but do not apply the same level or method of judgment to our own lives. We even judge those who we feel are judgmental of others. We seek to find the fault and exploit it, or at least name it, often not to the source but to anyone willing to listen. And we do listen, we tend to drink up gossip as if it's a drink quenching a thirst on a hot day. In fact rarely would we want to offend someone by saying "I'd rather not hear you pull that person down or slander or spread gossip." In light of this too often we choose not to trust, which has the potential to further fragment our community. And disappointment, how we disappoint each other, often hurting ourselves and others in the process. Tasks promised to be fulfilled only to be forgotten on the altar of distraction or laziness or business or complacency. And too often how we choose who we will spend time with, instead of giving ourselves relationally to everyone or anyone in the community. We are applying double standards instead of double grace. We are hurting each other and unknowingly hurting ourselves. We are ripping away at the very fabric that God is trying to knit us together with.

And it's important to name these things up front. To recognize our guilt and shame, but not to let this guilt and shame take hold. Yes we are guilty, but yes, Christ offers us freedom and forgiveness... We cannot continue to fuel a battle within our community, as the battle was never meant to be within our community, but together we are called to face the enemy of this world. ^{Eph 6:12} **For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.** God has given us each other, to strengthen us, to encourage us, to lift us, but we need to realise this, and own this, and become these

things, that we are to offer Christ's encouragement and strength and care and love to each other.

As I have reflected and written and reflected and corrected I am lead as I trust we all are to a place that desires God's forgiveness and cleansing. May God forgive us for the pain we have caused him, for times when he has asked of us to use our gifts and we've shied away. For times when we weren't satisfied with the music or fed enough by the teaching or cared for enough by people. For the times when he set us up to win and we retreated in fear. For the times when we have hurt others, and betrayed friendships, and sort that our own needs be met over that of another. May God forgive us when we became the object of church, instead of Jesus becoming the object of our lives and worship.

Yet in spite of all of this, we are here, we are together, we are seeking to know and understand Jesus and he is enjoying this. And he will continue to call us forward, to shape us, to gather us, to bless us, to encourage us, to challenge us, to reprimand us, to call us to account, to empower us and to protect us. And this happens as we abide in him, as branches connected to a vine. Not just as a group of individuals, but also as a community.

I Love you all and feel so honoured to not only be your leader, but to be part of 12two. But I am not satisfied for us to go on without God. I am not satisfied for us to do Church because it's Sunday. I am not satisfied when Jesus isn't becoming the centre of everything we do and all that we are.

So my plea is that you too would risk what you know you have to and would be met by others who are also risking and by a God who risked his only son so that we would be able to know the king!

Love

Ralph