

“A New Commandment: Love One Another”
Sermon Series on
Becoming the Church That Jesus Longs For #1
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(Jn. 15:9-17)

Introductory Remarks.

A year ago this very week, Lorie and I returned from seeing our kids and grandson in Colorado after Christmas. It was a great time, but we did have some challenges. You may recall that Lorie had experienced some bone fractures the year before, and during the trip to Colorado the pain became unbearable. Dr. Billy Rice of our congregation kindly worked Lorie into his schedule the day after we returned home, and after examining her and running some blood tests, Billy broke the tragic news to us – Lorie had cancer. She has multiple myeloma. It’s a cancer of the blood that affects the bones. There is no cure, but it is treatable.

The next day, as Lorie and I were still reeling from the shock of the news, Dr. Elms Allen, a retired oncologist in our congregation, came over to our house. He sat in our living room and expressed his sympathy, and he patiently explained to us what this disease was all about. He also gently answered our questions regarding treatment, life expectancy, and what we could expect in dealing with it all. In addition, he arranged for us to see one of the former partners in his medical practice the following day. Elms told us, “If I had this disease, this is who I would go to see.”

Lorie resigned her position at Samaritan’s Purse, and we set ourselves to tackling the cancer. Over the course of the next several months, as Lorie began her rounds of chemo therapy and we adjusted to the new normal for our lives, we were surrounded by an army of caring people in this congregation. And we were blown away. Some of you provided meals, which showed up at our house three times a week. (I gained 10 pounds because I ate so well! This congregation can cook!) Others of you served as our “angels,” as Lorie and I referred to you – people who would be on call for a particular day if Lorie needed anything. Two other members in our church also have multiple myeloma, and they have provided a wonderful support group for Lorie. And all of you prayed.

I don’t think we could have made it through this past year without your caring support, and I believe we’ve literally been carried by your prayers. Lorie is doing well now, and each day is a step of faith. We can’t thank you enough. What a special church family we’re privileged to be part of.

Author and professor Jerry Sittser has written that “when the church is functioning at its best, there is simply no community on earth that can rival it.” (I can attest to that!) But he also writes, “...when the church is functioning at its worst, there is no community on earth that can do as much damage. History itself proves the point.”¹

Through the centuries, the church has been an agent of grace in countless ways that has changed the lives of untold millions of people. But the church also has a history of oppression and scandal which has given us a black eye all too often. In addition, churches can sometimes be a source of great pain to people who are hurting. As one author put it, “The church is the only army that shoots its own wounded in the back!” Sometimes the church is a

far cry from the community God intended, and believers don't always live as their faith demands.

In the spring of 2014, our church conducted a congregational survey as a part of our strategic planning process. One of the findings of that survey revealed that, while there are many strengths to our church's ministry and we're doing a lot of things very well, nevertheless many people in our congregation don't feel like they're experiencing the kind of community they hoped for in our church. They don't feel as connected as they would like to be. And it made me wonder: *What do we at First Pres need to do in order to become more like the caring community Jesus longs for and people are looking for?* We already do this in many ways as a congregation, but perhaps there is more God wants for us than we already experience.

So I began to pray about that when I was planning my sermons for this New Year, and I sensed the Lord leading me to preach on what Scripture says about the need for community and explore how we can experience it more fully at First Pres. As we begin 2016, we're going to take time to consider a number of the "one another" passages, as they are sometimes referred to.

A study of the NT reveals over and over again that the writers of the Bible urged Christians to be concerned about each other: "welcome one another," "be subject to one another," "forgive one another," "serve one another," "admonish one another," and "encourage one another." They are what scholars have referred to as the "mutuality commands of Scripture." Today we consider the New Commandment Jesus gave His disciples – Love one another.

I. A New Commandment.

The first mutuality command we're going to consider is foundational, and it lays the groundwork for all the others that follow. And it comes from the lips of Jesus Himself. In John 15 our Lord addressed his followers in the upper room as they celebrated the Last Supper, and He said, *"My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12).*

In a related passage in John 13, Jesus put it this way: *"A new commandment I give you that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn. 13:34,35).* One way the world will know if we are His disciples or not is if we love one another. The mark of love is a distinguishing characteristic of any healthy and vibrant church.

However, the love of which Jesus spoke isn't the kind of love we sometimes think of when we hear the word. Usually, when we hear the word "love" we think of the emotion of romance or passion. It's like the little boy who, when asked how you can tell if two people are in love, said, "If people are in love, they just stare at each other when they go out to eat, and their food gets cold. Other people care more about the food!" The love Christ had in mind is more complex and deeper than that. If we take a closer look at the meaning of the idea of love in Scripture, we see that there are actually different kinds of love of which the Bible speaks.

C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful book entitled *The Four Loves* in which he explored the meaning of the different faces of love - affection, friendship, erotic love, and the love of God. He explained that whereas in the English language we only have one word to express love, the Greek language in which the NT was written has several. And each of these words sheds a different light on human love and the love of God.

There is *storage*, which is the affection of family love. There is also *pileos*, which is brotherly or sisterly love. It's the love of friendship. Then there is *eros*, which is the sweetness, strength, and passion of erotic love. And finally there is the word that is used by Jesus here in this passage, *agape*. It's a word that has an interesting history.

Agape is a Greek word that was largely marginalized and rarely used in ancient literature, and it generally meant "benevolent kindness." But when the OT Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek in the 3rd century BC, the translators picked up this neglected word and used it to translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, which meant "the steadfast love of the Lord." They infused the word *agape* with new meaning and gave it a depth of understanding. Outside the Bible, the word *agape* appears only a few times in all of ancient literature.

For the next 300 years, until the time of Christ, the word *agape* was used by the Jews to describe the unconditional love of God toward humanity - His *hesed*. However, when Jesus came along, He took this word and applied it not only to God's love for humanity, but also to our love for others. Jesus intensified the OT provision to love one's neighbor as oneself, and He called His followers to love even their enemies, just like Jesus did. "*Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing.*"

II. A New Kind of Community.

In John 15 Jesus said community expressed in *agape* love is an essential part of our witness to the world, and when we become a part of the body of Christ we form a new kind of community. In his book *The Connecting Church*, Randy Frazee writes, "In a culture of individualism, when do non-Christians get to see other Christians loving each other in such a way that it compels them to run to Jesus? The church has often mirrored the culture by making Christianity an individual sport."

We have, haven't we? Too many of us try to go it alone in the Christian life, and we don't invite other people into our lives and welcome their care or accountability. We want to do things our own way, and we're also afraid of rejection. We're worried that if people knew who we really are they wouldn't like us. So we tend to gut it out and go it alone. This isn't what God had in mind. We hide behind our masks and put on a happy face and try to tell the world, "I've got it all together." But we don't, do we? We all have our struggles, and we tend to struggle alone.

A few years ago, Lorie and I were in Atlanta. During our time there, we went with my brother Bill to his Cocaine Anonymous meeting. I've shared with you before that my brother is a recovering cocaine addict, and he's been clean and sober for over 20 years now. He's a walking miracle, and I'm so proud of him. It is such an eye-opener whenever I attend one of these meetings. People are so candid and honest, and there's no pretense or posturing. Folks are frank about their struggles, and they're just trying to make it through one more day of sobriety.

I left the meeting wondering, "Why can't the church be more like this group? Why can't we realize we're all fellow strugglers just trying to make it one day at a time? Why aren't we willing to open up and be vulnerable like these people are?"

I think it's because most of us haven't hit bottom yet like they have. We still think we can make it on our own. We haven't become desperate for God or desperate for fellowship like addicts have. They know they can't make it one day without God, and they know they can't

make it without each other. That's why they get together. That's why they're honest. What would it take for us to become a community where we're willing to risk vulnerability like they do?

III. The Measure of a Church's Success.

In his book *Love One Another*, Jerry Sittser says that the measure of a church's success doesn't depend on great wealth, political power, or superior organization. It isn't the result of great preaching, big buildings, or creative programs. Rather, the measure of a church's success is the mutual *agape* love that is shared in the community of faith. The quality of relationships among Christians makes the church an effective witness for the gospel, because it creates the kind of community into which others are naturally drawn.²

Sittser points out that in his letter to the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul argued that Christ destroyed old animosities that existed in the ancient world when He died on the cross. The walls that separated men and women, citizen and barbarian, slave and free, and especially Jews and Gentiles were torn down in the death of Jesus Christ. In Paul's day, devout Jews considered themselves superior to Gentiles. They thought they were the favored few, and Gentiles were considered outsiders to the community of faith. But all that changed when Jesus came. He established peace and unity, and Christ broke down the walls of racial hostility that separated them. We are one in Christ, and we're all on equal ground at the foot of the cross.

The year before I attended seminary, I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together*, which is his classic on building community in the church. Reading that book changed my life, and I commend it to you. In this book Bonhoeffer says that Jesus Christ provides the only foundation upon which the church can be built, and it's Jesus. He's the foundation for our community. Jesus turns sinners into saints, He transforms enemies into friends, and He enables believers to love one another like Jesus did. Listen to how Bonhoeffer puts it.

"Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this....We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. Now Christians can live with one another in peace; they can love and serve one another; they can become one. But they can continue to do so only by way of Jesus Christ."

People in the world today are becoming more and more isolated from one another, and they are looking for community. Will they find it here? In a recent study the Gallup organization wrote, "We are physically detached from each other. We change places of residence frequently. One survey revealed that seven in ten people don't know their neighbors. As many as one-third of Americans admit to frequent periods of loneliness." Couple this with the explosion of technology and the ability we now have to text and email, do Facebook and Instagram, and people are increasingly communicating without personal interaction. I believe something is lost when this happens. As one writer said of the next generation, "They are always *connected* but rarely *connecting*."

Conclusion.

I look back over the last year Lorie has battled cancer, and I'm humbled by all the love we've been shown by this wonderful congregation. When my brother Rob and his wife Cathy heard about all the ways we had been supported by you during Lorie's illness, they compared that to

the lack of community they experienced in Reno and in California when Rob went through his liver transplant last year. And what made Rob's death last August even more tragic is that he and Cathy were thinking about moving here to Winston-Salem later this spring. They saw what Lorie and I experienced by your love and devotion, and they said, "We want some of that!" Sadly, it never got to happen. Rob went on to be with the Lord.

But it can happen for others. How will you be the hands and feet of Jesus in expressing love to people in this church and in our community? How will you fulfill the Lord's command to "*...love one another*"?

Eugene Peterson has written, "Jesus' best-known command, 'Love one another,' is also the least obeyed. It's the most difficult thing Jesus asked us to do."³ Is there someone God is calling you to love? Is there a person in your life, or even in this congregation, who is hard to love, with whom you need to reconcile, and is God asking you to love them like He does? What does God want you to do to help build a deeper expression of community in our church?

I pray this New Year will be a new beginning for many of you in your experience of Christian community at First Pres. Take a step of faith, and see what God has for you as you love one another in response to the invitation of Jesus. Amen.

¹ Gerald Sittser, *Love One Another*, p. 14.

² *Ibid*, p. 17.

³ Eugene Peterson in the foreword to Jerry's book.