

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

#### **LOVE - Chief of the “One Anothers”**

Study #1

##### Introduction: Rope tricks...

My fascination with ropes and knots dates back to my years as a Boy Scout when I learned the difference between a granny and a square knot, along with how to tie a clove hitch, a half hitch, two half hitches, and a bowline.

In the intervening years, knot-tying has proven helpful when I’ve had to tie down loads in the back of my truck, secure limbs when cutting down trees, and, most especially, on camping trips.

The right knot is important when tying off tent stakes, strapping down gear to packs, or when hanging a food bag from a tree to protect the food from critters.<sup>1</sup>

As important as are these uses of rope, they don’t compare to the critical use they’re put to by mountaineers who may climb up a glacier or a sheer rock face.

Mountaineering ropes are thick and are very expensive. In mountaineering, knot-tying expertise is not a convenience. It is a matter of life and death. After all, if a climber falls, the only thing protecting him or her from death is the rope and the knot.

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<sup>1</sup> Such bags are called “bear bags” and are to be hung at least ten feet off the ground. I have to confess that some of my “bear bags” have been hung at a height that would have only prevented a raid from the extremely rare Rocky Mountain red dwarf grizzly.

On large-scale expeditions, several climbers will often be roped together. The group moves up the mountain as a team. Each one knows that his life depends on the others.

If one team member slips, his or her whole weight will be supported by their climbing buddies. The lives of all the climbers depend on the ties that bind them together.

This morning I’d like for you to think about ropes and knots as we launch our new series of studies, “The Ties that Bind.”

Over the next several weeks, we are going to explore one of the New Testament’s most frequently repeated couplets: one another.

There are certain ways that you and I, as followers of Jesus, are to **BE** with each other. Depending on how you count, there are about fifty occurrences of the “one another” instructions in the New Testament.

Included are calls to comfort, exhort, admonish, pray for and submit to one another. We are to forgive and serve one another. We are NOT to judge, envy or brag to one another. And we are to accept, encourage, and kiss<sup>2</sup> one another.

When we “*one another*” one another as the Bible tells us to, we strengthen the ties that bind us.

On this expedition through life, we - brothers and sisters in Christ - are teammates. When we are bound together with strong “one anothers” I can slip and fall and know that I’m supported. When you slip, you’re supported. We keep climbing, together.

The “one anothers” describe the quality of our relationships with each other. And this morning we are considering the chief “tie” that binds: LOVE.

Love is the knot upon which all other “one another’s” are based. Love is the high water mark of Christian graces.

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<sup>2</sup> Yep, the Bible says, repeatedly, “*Greet one another with a holy kiss*” - we’ll talk about that one.

As the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13, hope is important and faith is critical. But love excels them both. It is central to the heart of God that you and I learn to love well.

Over and over again, God declares His love for us. One of the clearest themes played out in both the Old and New Testaments is the refrain of His love.

And He didn't just say it. He sent Jesus to show it. Jesus spent the last three years of His life loving those around Him and the last six hours of His life loving us all when He died on the cross.

And now, this God who has showered His love on us wants us to love. Jesus calls us to a life devoted to love.

### **Jesus – On Love**

#### **The GREAT Commandment (Mark 12:30)**

Once, He was asked what was the ONE greatest commandment God ever gave. Jesus one-upped His questioner and gave a two-part response.

***[Mark 12:30] “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. [31] The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”***

It is possible for us to do many, many really good things. We can give money to charity, tell the truth, fill out tax returns (in full), be a faithful husband or wife, obey parents, and lots more.

Love, says Jesus, is better than all of these. Without love, all these obediences are meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

The Lord became more specific about love's call when He was with His followers on the night before He died.

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<sup>3</sup> The logical corollary to the Great Commandment is that the greatest sin is to NOT love God and others.

Now, keep in mind that this was a tense setting. He is only hours away from betrayal and arrest, trials and crucifixion. There is no way Jesus was going to waste His breath on trivial things on this night.

He spoke about first things: The ministry of the coming Holy Spirit; hardship and suffering to come. Not surprisingly, His remarks revolved around love.

Now, the following words may be familiar to you. If so, try to listen to them as if you're hearing them for the very first time. Listen to them, remembering that these are among the last words Jesus spoke on the night before He died.

Early on in the evening, Jesus looked at His eleven remaining disciples<sup>4</sup> and spoke about the primacy of love.

#### **The NEW Commandment (John 13:34-35)**

***[John 13:34] “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. [35] By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>5</sup>***

We can make three quick observations from what Jesus says here.

*The new ~~suggestion recommendation~~ COMMANDMENT!*

First, He is not giving a suggestion, a recommendation, or a piece of advice. He is giving a command.

Two weeks ago, on Easter Sunday morning, we listened as He told His disciples, *[Matthew 28:18]... “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth...”*

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<sup>4</sup> Judas Iscariot having already left.

<sup>5</sup> A bit later in the evening, He said this. *[John 15:12] “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. [13] Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. [14] You are My friends, if you do what I command you.”*

Jesus is Lord. The Lord can give commands. He can tell people what to do. His command is that we devote our lives to love. Love generally, yes. Love particularly to those in the community of faith.

*A quality of love - His love*

Second, Jesus' words speak to the quality of our love. We are to love like He loved. His love was genuine, sacrificial, and from the heart. His love was tender and strong.

That's how we are to love. Just like He did. We are to imitate Jesus' love.

Given a choice, most of are not drawn to imitations.

Kathy's grandfather was like that when he sat down to a meal. He was a good, old Ohio dairy farmer and he couldn't stand margarine ("*Skid grease*" he called it.). He would have nothing but butter on his bread. No imitations.

Most mechanics, given the choice, will replace worn out parts with the same parts that the car came with from the factory. They look down their noses at imitation, after-market brands.

In our experience, the imitation product is the inferior product. Not when it comes to love. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery and if we want to love the way God wants us to love we will love the way Jesus loved.

*The effect of such love:*

Third, there are out-of-this-world effects that come about as a result of love.

One of those effects is that outsiders will know that we are Jesus' disciples by the genuineness and the depth of our love for each other.

Different groups in our society have their own symbols and signs.

Republicans have their elephant and Democrats their donkey.

We recognize the Buddhist's lotus flower. The Islamic symbol is a star inside a crescent moon, and we know that Muslims pray five times daily, on their knees, facing Mecca. Devout Jews display the Star of David and seek to obey that Law of Moses.

The unmistakable, essential indicator that you are a follower of Jesus is that you love. It isn't church attendance and it's not giving. It's not being an elder or a pastor or a deacon. It isn't serving on the Missions Committee or on the Praise Team.

It is love.

And every contributor to the New Testament picked up on the thought that there is something "central" about love.

Paul certainly did. Some people have wrongly thought of the Apostle Paul as a cold technician who sat in an ivory tower writing theological treatises. Far from it!

Paul was certainly brilliant, but there is no question that he also knew the beauty and the importance of love.

Just listen to what he says in what is surely his theological masterpiece, the book of Romans.

**The Apostles on Love**

**From the Apostle Paul**

*Love says it all (Romans 13:8)*

***[8] Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.<sup>6</sup>***

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<sup>6</sup> [9] For this, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' [10] Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

The way Saint Augustine (4<sup>th</sup> century AD) applied this thought was to say, “*Love God and [then] do what you please.*”

In other words, don’t worry about carrying out the other commands of God because if you are loving well, you are no doubt doing all the others, too!

Every sin is a violation of the law of love. Every obedience to God is an obedience to the law of love.

And then listen to Paul’s words to the church at Thessalonica.

*Excelling in love (1 Thess. 4:9-10)*

***[1 Thessalonians 4:9] Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; [10] for indeed you do practice it toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more.***

Paul means here that the Spirit of God tattoos the importance of love on the redeemed soul. We intuitively KNOW that love is crucial.

But no matter how long we have walked the path of love, we can always love better. We can cultivate an increasing capacity for love as the years pass.

You may have heard couples who have been married for a long time say that when they got married, they didn’t have a clue as to what love was really all about. That is my story.

Well, thirty-five years and three grown children and sicknesses and health and ups and downs and good times and hard times and the deaths of parents and more have grown my capacity to love.

And I’ve still got so far to go! I can only dream of a day (and I do dream about it!) when my love for Kathy approaches the love of Jesus for His church.

I’m sure you’re not always as loving as you wish you were. But, if you’ve been walking with Jesus, what you are capable of today is more than it was a year ago.

And if, over the next two to three years you walk with Jesus you will be stunned by the new capacities to love you’ll discover in yourself.

We are to never be satisfied with our *status quo* level of love. We are to always press on, and seek to “***excel still more***” - until our love looks just like Jesus’ love.

That’s just skimming the surface of Paul’s thoughts. Throughout all of his letters there are nuggets about love’s centrality. But Paul wasn’t the only apostle who “got it.”

The Apostle Peter, famous for his triumphs and failures, also wrote two of the New Testament’s letters. In these letters he repeatedly calls us to love.

At the start of his first letter, Peter mentions the price of our redemption, which is the precious blood of Christ. And then he tells us what is to be the upshot - the “so-what” - of that redemption.

The very FIRST thing he mentions is love.

### **From the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:22-23)**

***[1 Peter 1:22] Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, [23] for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God.<sup>7</sup>***

This is hot-blooded, fervent, no holds barred, let loose and really go for it, LOVE.

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<sup>7</sup> Or consider this, from Peter’s second letter: ***[2 Peter 1:5] Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, [6] and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, [7] and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.***

I deeply admire the memory of Richard Wurmbrand, who was a pastor in Romania who suffered unspeakable persecution for his faith in Christ. He served time in Soviet prisons for faithfully proclaiming the Gospel.

The main theme of Wurmbrand's life was the power of the Gospel unleashed by courageous, radical love. In his book, *Tortured for Christ*, he writes, "God will judge us not according to how much we endured, but how much we could love."

In that same book, he tells how that love worked itself out in prison.

*"It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their [the communists'] terms. It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy."*

Love for Christ and for those for whom Christ died prompts behavior like that.

For a Christian, LOVE is a very big deal. It's not one of the eight or ten things we do. It is what we do.

The apostles Peter and Paul "got it." They repeated the "**love one another**" theme more than any other "**one another**."

And another apostle "got it", too. This is the apostle who called himself "**the disciple whom Jesus loved**."

Toward the end of the New Testament we find John's three short letters. In these letters he emphasized over and over again how important it was for Christians to love each other.

Listen to this, from 1 John, chapter 2.

## From the Apostle John

*The new/old commandment (1 John 2:7-11)*

**[7] Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.**

It's fun to take hikes on new trails. I love to go walking in an area I've never been. A new trail offers new views, sparks new imaginations, prompts new risks.

But there is also a lot of enjoyment in hiking well-worn trails. Hike the same trail a dozen times and you can enjoy the familiar beauty more deeply every time.

John doesn't take us into uncharted wilderness. He guides us down a reliable old trail - the trail of love.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing new. It's exactly what Jesus said.<sup>9</sup>

But the old command to love is anything but boring, "same old, same old." It isn't outmoded and it's not irrelevant. "**Love one another**" is just as fresh and relevant in 2014 as it was on the day Jesus first said it.

The call to love is invigorating because it challenges us to constant creativity.

She says: "*Dear husband, how does this new blouse look on me? This new pair of slacks? These shoes?*"

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<sup>8</sup> Can we even imagine the thoughts that must have been rolling around in John's mind as he mentioned the "old commandment" while writing this letter? Some people believe John was in his 70's or 80's when he wrote these words, as much as 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. He would have remembered Jesus giving this commandment for the very first time. He was there, listening to Jesus speak in the Upper Room on the night before He died.

<sup>9</sup> The main character in C.S. Lewis' space trilogy is a man named Ransom. In the third book (That Hideous Strength), a woman remarks to Ransom that his "masters" (meaning God and the angels) have some old-fashioned ideas about love and marriage. He responds that their ideas are not at all old-fashioned, but that they are, indeed, very old. ☺

And you hear in the background, ***“Husbands, love your wives...”***

There is no reliable formula that will tell you exactly what to do in that or any other scenario.

Every situation is a snowflake. It is a unique, never to be repeated opportunity to love with freshness.

We turn to God for grace to respond to an insult or to a snub lovingly. We ask Him for wisdom to respond to a loss lovingly. We depend on Him to give us words to lovingly come alongside someone who has suffered.

Love is not a technique to be mastered; it is a sensitivity to people coupled with a confidence in God that has to be nurtured. Love can't be reduced to a set of rules. It's relational.

John doesn't only tell us how important it is to love. He gives us a “fer instance.”

*Love gives (1 John 3:16)*

***[16] We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.***

Both by His life and by His death, Jesus shows us that love gives.

His most precious assets were placed at the disposal of others in need as He loved them.

That's love. Now, for the devastating punch line: In the same way that Jesus loved us (think crucifixion), so we are to love each other.

If you tell me to love without sacrificing time, energy, prayers, material resources, I will sign up in a minute.

Tell me that love, by definition, involves sacrifice, and I'll have to think about it. Love costs. Love gives.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5-7), Jesus said a lot of very important and very interesting things. Among the most interesting are words found in chapter 5, verses 39-41.

Here are some of those interesting words with a little commentary thrown in for good measure.

***“.....I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also.”***

*“I'm sorry, did what I say, what I do, offend you? Is that why you hit me? Do you sense a need to hit me again? Will that draw you closer to God? Fire away, my friend.”*

***“And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.”***

*“Yes, it's cold out today. Are you sure my jacket is going to be enough for you? Maybe you would like my shirt, too. I could go back home and bring you my down vest. Gloves, too. Would that help?”*

***“And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two.”***

*“Well, here we are at the end of that forced one mile march. Are you lonely? Would it help you if I just tagged along and carried your load for another mile or so? I could tell you a story about a Man who always walks with me...”*

We put a lot of different spins on these words of Jesus. And, sure, there is going to be some leeway when it comes to practical application of the specifics of those verses.

But, there is no question that Jesus was calling His listeners then, and He is calling us now, to become radical, bloody faced, naked, second-mile lovers.

Our every involvement with each other is to be marked by love. And when we are loving, the Apostle John says that something amazing happens.

*Knowing love and knowing God (1 John 4:7-8)*

***[7] Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. [8] The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.***

There were pockets of early Christians who had grabbed hold of this command. A man named Lucian, who was a second century Roman satirist and a very outspoken opponent of Christianity, wrote,

*“It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion (Christianity) help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator - Jesus - has put it into their heads that they are brethren.”*

A lack of love shows that there is a shallowness in our relationship with God. It is fair to say that there is a correlation between how well we know God and how fervently we love.

We could even say, *“He doesn’t love very well; he doesn’t know God very well.”*

To the extent that we don’t love, to that extent we haven’t entered into the depths of a life-changing relationship with God.

And if we who have placed our trust in Jesus don’t love very well, it’s because, at the root, we haven’t allowed the love of God for us to sink down into the depths of our own souls.

John says one more thing about love that is intriguing. At first it seems rather cryptic. Then, the more we think about it, the more stunning and compelling it is. Grasping what John writes in 1 John 4:12 will shock, amaze, and make your mouth water.

*See love and seeing God (v. 12)*

***[1 John 4:12] No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.***

It is a truism that we cannot see God. It is a mercy that He won’t allow Himself to be seen. His ages-long policy has been to veil Himself from us while we are in these mortal bodies. To do otherwise would be to destroy us.

Oh, He made some veiled appearances in the Old Testament to Abraham and to Moses and to one of two of the prophets. But, nobody has ever seen God in His unveiled glory.

Yet John says that when Christians love each other, God abides in us. The thought is that the Christian who loves clears the way for God to be “seen.” The loving Christian reveals what a lost person needs to see God.

A former member of our church, Hadley Reed, deeply impacted me and a lot of others because of his vibrant faith and his love for God and for others.

The introduction of Christianity to Hadley’s family began a couple of generations before him, when his grandfather came to Christ. The manner of his grandfather’s conversion is a story worth telling.

His grandfather (I’ll call him “Mr. Reed”) was a young man in 1918. That was a time near the end of World War I and it was also the beginning of what is often called the Great Influenza. In the two years it lasted, the worldwide influenza pandemic took more lives than were taken in all the battles of World War I combined.

It is estimated that nearly five hundred million people were infected and that as many as one hundred million may have died of this terrible flu.

It was the worst pandemic the world had ever seen - and Mr. Reed was stricken with the disease.

Prior to becoming sick he had always referred to Christians as “weaklings” who only turned to God as a crutch because they couldn’t face life on their own.

So there he was, in the middle of a severe winter cold snap in Oklahoma, lying on his deathbed.

His wife was desperately looking for a repairman to come to their house to light the furnace to heat the house, knowing that without heat her husband would surely die in his weakened condition.

Every one she called wanted to know if anyone in the house was sick. When she, who was a Christian, told them truthfully, "*Yes, my husband is sick with the flu.*" They would hang up or walk away.

Finally, Mrs. Reed called a man who attended a neighborhood Bible study she also attended. Now, Mr. Reed had previously spoken with contempt about this man as one of those "Christian weaklings."

But when he was asked to take a look at the furnace, he went over - into the home of Hadley's very sick and contagious grandfather.

This neighbor walked across the snow-covered street, wrapped in bed sheets, his feet covered in pillow cases. He went inside and re-lit the furnace's pilot light, restoring heat to the very cold house.

He then went outside, where he burned all the sheets in the front yard, trying to do everything he could to avoid exposing his own family to the most fatal infection the western world had ever seen.

In the warmth of the now heated house, Mr. Reed recovered. He lived.

It was this courageous act of love - entering an infected house - that prompted Hadley Reed's grandfather to seriously consider the possibility that Christianity might be true.

He saw what he needed to see of God by an act of love and placed his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It all started when a man who knew Jesus risked his life to come to the rescue of a man who had treated him with nothing but dismissive contempt.

Love did it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Later, in 1920, evangelist Billy Sunday came to Oklahoma City for a seven week crusade. Hadley's grandfather secretly attended, night after night. He told his wife

### Conclusion:

The assignment to love is not given to a select band of super saints. No, all who name the name of Jesus are called to love. I am. You are.

By our love we identify ourselves as Jesus' friends and followers.

By our love we imitate our Savior's ways.

By our love a watching world gets a glimpse of our God.

Brothers and sisters - let us love one another!

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that he had become a Christian. She didn't believe him at first, thinking that he was just trying to be (for him) funny. She was finally convinced, however, when he attended her church and walked to the front to make a public profession of faith in Christ.