

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 18, 2014)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

Relational “NOTs” (part 1)

(1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

Study #3

Introduction: The ties that strangle...

For the last two weeks you and I have been celebrating the “ties that bind” us, as believer in Jesus. Keeping the knots of LOVE and SERVICE tight will bind us together. Like the square knot, these knots are strong and they work to preserve the beauty of our unity in Christ.

Of course, there are other knots that are strong, and not so beautiful. Sometimes knots are used to keep people captive. Some strong knots shackle and strangle.

And today, having looked at two positive “one anothers”, I am going to go negative on you.

Today and next Sunday, on our way to establishing “ties that bind” (in a good way) we’re going to explore some “relational nots.”

There are plenty of them out there. The New Testament lists quite a few ways we are NOT to be with each other and it doesn’t take finely honed observation skills to notice that relationships are both central to life AND that we live in a relationally fractured world.

That is the way it has always been and the Bible highlights those fractures.

A World Tied Up in Relational “NOTs”

As Seen in Scripture

SOME good relationships...

Of course, there are examples of wonderful relationships in Scripture. The friendship of David and Jonathan comes to mind. Jesus sustained close relationships with His disciples. The Apostle Paul had great friendships with many of his brothers and sisters, fellow-workers in the gospel.

But, no matter where we look we will find more prominent than good relationships, problem relationships.

MORE broken relationships...

They show up throughout the Bible.

- Adam and Eve turned the beautiful Garden of Eden into a war zone by playing the blame game.
- Cain’s jealousy of his brother Abel led to the world’s first murder.
- Isaac was a terrible father to his two sons, Jacob and Esau.
- The romance of Samson and Delilah consisted of nothing but lust and deceit.
- Jesus battled the Pharisees until they had Him killed.
- Paul’s and Barnabas’ great friendship ruptured over what to do with the young man, John Mark, who had abandoned them midway through the first missionary journey.

We could multiply biblical examples of relational brokenness all day long. But these stories - along with the success stories - show that, fundamentally, the Bible is a book about relationships.

This is key. If Scripture is not speaking of our relationship with God, it is focusing on the relationships we sustain with the flesh and blood people with whom we rub shoulders each and every day.

From Genesis forward, the Bible charts the conflict that has marked human history. Clearly, those conflicts continue, unabated, at least through May 18, 2014.

As Seen on the News

What kind of a history of western civilization could we write if we decided to leave out relational conflict and war?

Those of us who grew up in the 20th century were taught that it was *remarkably, more than normally, unusually* filled with war.

Now, the previous century was marked by terrible wars and genocides. But it is not true that it was exceptionally bloody. With rare exceptions, centuries are marked by war.¹

Our current century is off to a warlike first decade and a half, with conflicts and uprisings, revolts and revolutions in Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Ukraine, Korea, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. And what are wars but relational conflicts on an international scale?

Here at home we weep at every outbreak of violence in our schools - and what are these outbreaks but tragic symptoms of relationships gone bad.

Relationships are challenging in schools and neighborhoods, work places and homes and (need I say it?) in church.

As Seen at Church

There were relational fractures in the first century church. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he urged two women, Euodia and Syntyche - fine Christian workers who had shared Paul's struggle in the cause of the gospel (Philippians 4:3) - to live in harmony in the Lord. Implication? They WEREN'T living in harmony in the Lord.

One of our enemy's chief means of silencing vibrant witnesses and immobilizing energetic servants is to stir up relational problems.

At least for a time, Satan had a "mission accomplished" in Philippi and we can only hope that Paul's urging prompted reconciliation between Euodia and Syntyche.

Relational discord was, is, and (sadly, likely) always will be present in Jesus' church. And that discord is not just present in the church down the corner or around the block or on the other side of town.

It is here - at Northwest Community Church. I'm not saying that it's necessarily worse here than anywhere else.

But I dare say that if you have been attending Northwest very long, and have gotten to know very many people at all well, you have already experienced some level of conflict and tension.

I am not a prophet. But I do predict that, along with some delightful and inspiring fellowship, you will experience conflict if you stick around long enough.

Relationship conflicts and tensions are unavoidable. How we deal with them, though, that is the thing.

Conflict and tension handled poorly, will tear down relationships, drain us of energy, and dilute our witness.

Conflict handled wisely and lovingly gives us a bully pulpit to speak about Jesus to the world. It enhances our testimony. It nurtures genuine community. It honors God.

So, this Sunday and next, we're going to explore some relational "nots."

Stated positively, we are going to drill down into a New Testament passage that calls us to appreciate and respect and honor and affirm each other.

Stated more negatively, (keeping with the theme of "nots"), we'll listen as the Apostle Paul guides us through some relational minefields that destroy appreciation.

¹ One of the most remarkably peaceful periods of human history was the Pax Romana (Roman peace) dating from 27 BC to AD 180 when the might of imperial Rome effectively kept the peace within its borders and no outside force dared attack Rome.

There were times when Paul said what he said straight up, no beating around the bush, with little attempt at artfulness. Paul could be blunt.

PAUL'S WARNING, STRAIGHT UP:

In his letter to the churches in the region of Galatia, he tells us how we are NOT to be with each other. **[5:26] *Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.***²

It would be hard to get clearer than that.

On the one hand, don't be boastful and arrogant toward others who may not have what you have.

The kind of boasting Paul has in mind is the kind that says,

"I have things to offer the Lord that are better than the things you have to offer Him. I can do things for the Lord that are better than the things that you can do for Him!"

Something toxic happens when any of us hold such an attitude. It is poison to the life of a church and to the work of Jesus in the world.

On the other hand, don't envy what others have that you may not have.

Envy has been around for a long time. It was behind the first murder, when Cain killed his brother, Abel, because God received Abel's sacrifice and didn't accept his own.

Solomon writes against envy in Proverbs (3:31; 23:17) and Jesus mentions envy in the same list that contains theft, murder, and adultery (Mark 7:22). Matthew tells us that it was because of envy that the Jews delivered Jesus up to Pilate to be crucified (Matthew 27:18). Paul and Peter rail against the dangers of envy and jealousy.

² Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in his version of Galatians, *"That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original."* (The Message)

The New Testament envisions Jesus' church as a group of people who are united in mission and who work harmoniously toward commonly held goals. And sometimes Paul said pretty much exactly that. No frills.

"Don't become boastful...don't envy one another."

At other times he would look for ways to paint a word picture to get the same idea across using figurative language.³

Figures of speech - metaphors, analogies, similes, and the like - can be just as clear as a simple command AND will often pack more punch.

Paul turned to metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 to urge us to appreciate each other by using the image of a human body.⁴

Opening Summary: The Church: A Diverse Unity (vv. 12-13)

[12] For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.⁵

We know from the context that Paul's reference to the "body" is going to become an extended metaphor of the church.

³ Given the importance of the message found in the Bible, we aren't surprised that it is chock-full of illustrations. When we read, *"The Lord is my Shepherd"* and *"Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path"* and *"The tongue is a fire"* images appear on the screens of our minds, describing by picture something about God's care for us, the importance of the Bible, and the destructive power of uncontrolled speech.

⁴ When Paul wanted to explain to the Corinthians what the church of Jesus Christ was all about, he used several metaphors. He called the church "God's field" - the context for sowing seed and nurturing young growing things and producing a crop. Then he said that the church is like a building, a temple. However, the figure Paul finally latched onto is that of the church as a BODY. Everybody here today can relate to the image of the church as a body. We don't need to undertake an historical background study or do intensive research to be able to appreciate the image of the church as a body because we are all experts on the body.

⁵ He goes on to say, ***[13] For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*** Because of mutual baptism by the Spirit and our mutually being indwelt by the Spirit, we, Christians, make up "one body."

But notice that he doesn't end his thought by saying "*so also is the church.*" He ends by saying, "*so also is Christ.*"

There is no clearer way to communicate the significance of the church than this. The church IS the presence of Jesus in the world today.

If someone wants to see Jesus today, we can point them to the Scriptures to read an account of His life AND we can point them to a group of believers that will provide an image of the living, breathing Christ in the world.

If people in Northwest San Antonio are going to know what Jesus is like, it will be through us and churches like us. His Body is on display here. We, the church, are the shape of God's body today and that body takes the form of a unified diversity - "*many members...one body.*"

From this, mutual appreciation should flow. But it might not flow, and Paul knew that it might not flow.

It is possible for us to fall off on either side of the appreciation tightrope and Paul addressed both sides when he wrote to the church at Corinth.

He first speaks to that group of people who didn't believe that they, personally, brought much to the table when it came to Christian ministry.

They saw themselves as unnecessary, superfluous, to God's purposes. They thought that it wasn't essential that they be "on mission" for Jesus' Great Commission. They didn't see themselves as counting for much in the grand scheme of things

Paul says, "*Nonsense.*"

Untying Relational "NOTs" (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

No Place for Envy (vv. 14-16)

Beautiful diversity!

[14] For the body (the HUMAN body) *is not one member, but many.*

Our human bodies are marvels of diversity. Internal and external organs are all as different from each other as night and day. And the diversity and multiplicity of members in the body is God's design. He LOVES diversity!

What is true about the physical body is also true of the "body" of Christ, the church.

Each believer in Jesus is gifted by God to fulfill a crucial role in His grand plan. But some believers - in ancient Corinth and likely in San Antonio - don't believe that they count for much in God's plan.

Some of us think that we're nothing but feet.

Foot vs. hand

[15] If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body.

For any one of a number of reasons, some of us think like the foot in Paul's metaphor and believe that we could be useful IF we were a hand.

Now, as the son of a podiatrist, I can testify that feet are very important. Feet put bread on the table in our home! However, we can all understand how the poor foot might have something of a complex.

The hand wears the jewelry (attractive toe rings, notwithstanding). People shake hands when they meet - not feet. They don't usually say, "*Give me five!*" - and then hold out their feet. Lovers may play footsies, but when walking down the street, they hold HANDS!

So the foot is depressed because it's not a glorious hand. It's even envious of the hand.

Paul wants the foot to remember that it, too, is crucial, just for different things. Walking. Kicking. Running. These are the things that feet do. The foot is every bit the essential part of the body that the hand is.

Paul continues, revealing that the ear has the same inferiority complex as the foot.

Ear vs. eye

[16] And if the ear says, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body.⁶
[17] If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

Again, we can understand where the ear is coming from. After all, about the only reason people notice ears is if they are big. Nobody writes love songs about ears and who wears ear make-up?

Then again, ears hear the oncoming train and the beautiful song and the voices of loved ones and the Word of God. The ear can do what no other body part can do that.

And Paul has something to say to every foot and ear out there that might think itself an ugly or unnecessary add-on.

God has sovereignly placed ME where He wants me (v. 18)

[18] But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

A multiplicity and diversity of parts is essential if our physical bodies are to run right. And in God’s work in the world, every Christian has an essential function to fulfill.

YOU have a role to play in what God wants to see accomplished in His world.

God designed the foot to touch the ground and the hand to stick out from the end of the arm and the thumb to be opposed to the other fingers and kidneys to come in pairs and the knee to go so far and no farther.

In the same way, God designed you - with your **giftedness** and **life story** and **values** and **interests** and **skills** **“just as He desired”** AND He has placed you in the body of Christ **“just as He desired.”**

⁶ Note that the foot does not compare itself with the eye and the ear doesn’t compare itself with the hand. We are prone to envy those who have similarities to us, rather than those who are patently in a different class.

Embracing that one truth kills envy cold. Stops it in its tracks.

Different parts of the body have different functions, but that doesn’t make one part “better” than another. Big toes and thumbs, ears and eyes, forearms and shins are just different. Neither superior nor inferior.

It would be silly and destructive for an eye to think, *“Man, I sure do wish I could hear,”* or for a foot to think, *“I wish I had an opposable toe like the hand has an opposable thumb!”*

It is just as silly for one Christian to envy another.

Everyone here today, having trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for eternal life, is gifted to serve. God will use you to make a difference. You are to be “on mission” for the Great Commission.

If God’s work is going to get done, it will get done because you, by His grace, have done what you can do.

You have a talent to use to bless the church. You have a gift to give to bless the world. You have a resource to share that will honor God.

You need never be jealous of who someone else is or of what someone else can do. Just do what you can do and be the YOU God saved you to be.⁷

To be envious and jealous is to fall off on one side of the appreciation tightrope.

To become boastful and arrogant is to fall off on the other side. It is to believe that we ALONE have the gifts God needs to bless the world.

No Place for Boasting (vv. 20-26)

Beautiful interdependence (vv. 20-21)

[20] But now there are many members, but one body. [21] And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

⁷ As the Yiddish proverb says, *“If I try to be like him, who will be like me?”*

Here, the eye and the head are being arrogant regarding the roles they play in the human body. They think that their giftedness makes them superior and independent of other members of the body.

They don't respect, honor, affirm, or appreciate the other members of the body.

It's a silly way for a head or an eye to think and Paul explains why it is so silly.

Things aren't always as they appear... (vv. 22-24a)

[22] On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; [23] and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members⁸ become much more presentable, [24a] whereas our more presentable members have no need of it.

Some body parts are not considered suitable for public display, so we cover them with clothing that we don't supply for other, usually considered more attractive body parts, like the hands or the head.

We might jump to the conclusion, based on this practice of hiding body parts, that the hidden parts are less important than the visible parts.

That would be a bad jump. Things aren't always as they appear.

Body parts that are kept hidden from view - either by clothing or by skin - are every bit as important to the body's function as the more visible parts that get shown off.

Paul doesn't say that the "unseemly" members are "welcomed additions." He says that they are essential. They are every bit as necessary as the ***"more presentable members."***

My brother-in-law, Don, suffers from numerous disabilities. The doctors believe that Don suffers from a malfunction in the mitochondria in his cells.

⁸ Many have thought that Paul has both the internal organs and the sexual organs in view here.

Each of the cells in our body contains hundreds or even thousands of mitochondria. Mitochondria generate power in the cell, control cell growth, and differentiate between cells.

They are really, really small. About 1/100th of the width of a human hair. But because of problems with his mitochondria, Don has suffered high blood pressure, loss of hearing, loss of eyesight, and loss of kidneys.

Despite being really small, they are anything but insignificant. They are essential to the proper functioning of the body and if your mitochondria are just a little bit off, you're in trouble.

As it is in the human body, so it is in the work of God.

You might recognize some of the following names: Kari Jobe, Matt Chandler. Franklin Graham. Chuck Swindoll. Beth Moore. Carolyn Custiss James. Michael W. Smith. Natalie Grant. John Stott. Rick Warren.

These are high Christian profile leaders, and high profile leaders fill an important role in God's work. These men and women are influential, godly, and well-known in certain circles.

I could name dozens of other godly men and women you haven't heard of. You, too, could name men and women of God who'll never make a splash.

Paul says that low-profile Christians - like you and I - are every bit as necessary to the on-going work of God in the world as those who have their names up in lights.

In fact, the health of a church and the health of the overall Jesus movement depends on the church's "mitochondria", believers who don't get the limelight, faithfully doing what they do.

- They love their neighbor.
- They serve at a crisis pregnancy care center.
- They teach three year olds in Sunday School.
- They speak about Jesus at school.
- They serve in the church nursery.
- They park far from the front door of the church to allow those who are elderly or who have small children to park closer.

- They support Christian missions.
- They pray.
- They serve disabled people.
- They sit with the lonely person and welcome them with open arms.
- They lead worship services at assisted living facilities.
- They serve widows.

You get the idea.

And in this way, Jesus' body thrives and the work of Christ moves forward.

Conclusion:

[27] Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church (and what a church that was!), telling them that **THEY** were Christ's body. If Paul were here today he would tell us the same thing. Each congregation of believers can be described as a "body of Christ", a "*corpus Christi*."

Our church is a diversified unity. At our church, everyone is to embrace the idea that God has gifted them to make a difference. At our church we are to all welcome the contributions made by others.

The church is not a melting pot. It's a salad bowl where each "individual" retains his and her identity. This individual uniqueness is something that I am coming to value more and more as the years pass.

When I don't know a group of people, it is easy to view them as a grouping.

"That is a group of young people. There is a group of senior citizens. Look, a group of parents."

However, once I enter into relationship with the people who make up a group, I can no longer view the group the same.

I see individuals. The better I come to know someone, the more I can see that his life, her life would make an academy award winning blockbuster of a movie.

Each individual life consists of stories with depth and texture and complexities that are astounding. Each one of you here is living a heroic quest.

Realizing this more and more, the word "*individually*" stands out to me more and more and more as time goes on. Every person in this (and every other) church broke the mold.

God never made another one like you or like me. We are each uniquely gifted. We are a church filled with people whose life stories are full of amazing grace and high drama, dazzling failures and roaring successes.

What a gorgeous palette of colors He has collected here (and in every church). What an assortment of gifts. What diversity!

If I want to cooperate with what God is doing in the world, I had better learn to appreciate diversity of opinion and talent and interests and passions and perspectives - and so had you.

There is no place for envy and jealousy and there is no place for arrogance and boasting.

You are more gifted at certain things that need to be done in the work of Christ than I am, and for that I should be extremely grateful, not envious. I am more gifted in some ways than others, and for that, you should be grateful, not jealous.

COMPARISON - of the boasting or the envying variety - is the silent killer of community and it's the death of impact.

When I compare myself to you, I can't revel in what God has made me. I also can't rejoice in how God has made you.

So, let's put aside comparison. Instead, let's learn to appreciate and respect and honor and affirm each other!