

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: ON MISSION

The Grace-Giving Church

(selected New Testament passages)

Study #2

Introduction: Churchy expectations...

If you have an office job, you know pretty well what to expect when you show up for work on Monday morning: fresh assignments, light personal interaction, professional manners, performance reviews. You might **HOPE** for a big fat raise.

Likewise when a student shows up at school she has certain expectations: a teaching setting, classmates with whom to share the learning experience, exams and papers to write. Perhaps her **HOPES** are for an "A."

And what expectations do you have as you arrive at church on a Sunday morning? Song singing, coffee in a Styrofoam cup, pleasant interaction with pleasant people, a sermon (of whatever quality), classes for learning and interacting. And what about **HOPES**? If you let yourself dare to **HOPE** for the church experience of your dreams, what would you hope?

If wonder if you would dream about the delight of connecting with people on the same faith journey you are on at a soul to soul level; of warm embraces, eye to eye contact, and enthusiastic greetings; of relationships with Jesus at the center, where you can honestly be you - the real you - as others are actually being who they are and acceptance rules the day.

I would imagine that those might be some of the hopes you have of your church experience. I believe that those hopes would describe the church that Jesus died and rose again to establish.

Last Sunday we began to look at our purpose here at Northwest, starting off with God as we focused on worship and prayer.¹

Today, we continue to address the question of church purpose by considering the line from our Mission Statement about our becoming a community of believers who *passionately pursue life-changing relationships with each other.*

For the next few minutes, we'll think together around an open Bible about the relationships we are to sustain with each other here in the church.

In a word, of course, we are to love each other.

And the love with which we are to love each other is to be modeled after the love of Jesus.

Look at Jesus in any situation you choose and you'll find Him walking in love. For instance, watch Him with children and you'll see example after example of tenderness.

Called to Love

The Model of Incarnational Love

He knew how to love TENDERLY.

He healed sick children, raised a couple of children from the dead, and laid His hands on other children for blessing.

Of course there were many children Jesus didn't heal during His three year ministry and many children He didn't lay hands upon. But He was eager to love children and He lavished compassion on them when He could.

He was tender with grieving parents, too. He was tender in the way He dealt with the poor. Jesus knew how to love tenderly.

¹ I had wanted to emphasize the importance of prayer if we are going to become the worshipping community God intends for us to be.

For another face of Jesus' love, watch Him with the disreputable.

He knew how to love COURAGEOUSLY

For a Man presumably interested in being recognized as the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, Jesus was remarkably casual about His companions.

His preferred crew included women and men with bad reputations, tax-collectors, the demon-possessed, beggars, and lepers. With every party He attended, He risked His reputation with the reputable - and showed that love courageously looks past the outer veneer to the heart. Love doesn't fear what others may think.

Then, watch Him with the religious movers and shakers.

He knew how to love "TOUGH"

Over and over again, He honestly confronted the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the priests and the scribes, telling them what was wrong with them. It often wasn't tender, but it was always loving. Jesus loved them with a tough love.

It is loving to tell people what they NEED to hear, even if it is not what they WANT to hear.

On the last week of His life, He held up a mirror so that His enemies could see for themselves exactly what they had become. If they had been willing to look deeply into that mirror, they would have seen themselves for the white-washed tomb/brood of vipers/hypocrites Jesus said they were!

And of course, at the end, when we watch Him on the cross, He proved that He knew how to love sacrificially.

He knew how to love SACRIFICIALLY.

Jesus endured the humiliation of mock trials, a betrayal from one disciple and denials from another, rejection from His own people, scourging from the soldiers and an official execution of the most brutalizing kind - crucifixion - solely because He loved you and me!

And that's the life of Jesus - a life of LOVE!

After three years of active ministry where He demonstrated love at every turn, Jesus' time on earth drew to a close. He chose to spend the final hours prior to His arrest and crucifixion with His disciples.

It was during these hours that they took a Passover meal together. Jesus washed His disciples' feet. Then, He gave them marching orders, assignments to carry out in light of His soon-to-come departure.

Pre-eminent over all the other words He uttered on that night was one command, a command He issued repeatedly. It was the command to LOVE ONE ANOTHER.

A Call to Incarnational Love

Call to love

From Jesus...

Near the beginning of their evening, having just washed their feet, Jesus said, **[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."**

A little later, while talking to them about leading fruitful lives to God's glory, He said, **[John 15:12] "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."**

And He followed that up a few minutes later with, **[John 15:17] "This I command you, that you love one another."**

...to us!

Now of course we, who are Jesus' disciples, are bound to obey any command He issues. But, when the Lord gives the same command three times in one address, we really sit up and take notice!

On His last night on earth, Jesus took His disciples into His confidence and exposed to them what was most precious to Him.

And in a word, what was most important to Him was that after He was gone, His followers would love each other in the same way that He had loved them.

His words are so well known and so revolutionary that we have named them.

We don't refer to Jesus' words as the Great Recommendation or the New Suggestion or the New Piece of Advice. Rather, what He gives us is **THE NEW COMMANDMENT**.

Two thousand years after He died and rose again, our marching orders from Jesus are to love each other - tenderly, but with toughness, sacrificially and courageously, enthusiastically, whole-heartedly, boldly, vulnerably, powerfully!

A vision to love!

Most of the world's population spends their lives seeking love. We look for love, often, in all the wrong places.

But it is understandable that people want to be loved. Babies and VBS kids and teens preparing for a Challenge and new parents and middle-agers and the mature were made to be loved. That "love hunger" was placed in our hearts by the God who made us.

And for the Christian, that desperate need to be loved has been met by a relationship with Jesus Christ. We have been perfectly loved by Almighty God! And now it is our aim to perfectly love!

As disciples, you and I are to have, as a priority of the first degree, a goal to love the way Jesus loves us.

My goal in life as a Christian must not be to have people treat me well (as nice as that is when it happens), but to give myself lovingly to others. That's how Jesus wants me to live.

Think about that for a minute. Can you imagine anything more satisfying than to know that people who come in contact with you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are in the presence of someone who really loves them?

The impact of a loving person is incalculable!

The loving woman leaves the fragrance of caring and concern behind her. The loving man leaves a wake of advocacy and protection.

What if it was true that YOU could have the same sort of impact on your friends, children, parents, spouse, neighbors, and people at work that Jesus had IF you loved the way He loved?

Wouldn't you give anything to have that kind of impact on those around you? Wouldn't that be exciting?

You bet it would! We get it. We understand how important love is. Even if we struggle to love, we buy the idea that it is crucial.

Well, the authors of the New Testament letters - all written to Christians - got it, too. The theme of love's importance weaves its way through all of the writings of John, Peter, and Paul.

They tell people like us that we are to relate to each other lovingly - and then they add some color to what love looks like. Many of these colorful pictures come in the form of "*one anothers*" splattered over the pages of the Bible.

Love in Living Color

Engagement/Pursuit

"One another-ing" one another

Positively...

Positively, we are to be devoted to each other in brotherly love and to give preference to one another in honor.² We are to be like-minded with one another on the important matters of the faith,³ build one another up,⁴

² Romans 12:10

³ Romans 12:16; 15:5

⁴ Romans 14:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:11

accept one another,⁵ admonish one another,⁶ and greet each other with holy kisses.⁷

We are to care for one another,⁸ serve one another,⁹ forgive one another,¹⁰ and be kind to one another.¹¹

You and I are to speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs,¹² be subject to one another,¹³ and consider one another more important than ourselves.¹⁴ We are to comfort one another,¹⁵ encourage one another,¹⁶ live in peace with one another,¹⁷ and always seek what is good for one another.¹⁸

Along with the “shoulds” though, the New Testament includes some “should not’s.”

Negatively...

Negatively, we are to see to it that we don’t judge one another,¹⁹ or take each other before a judge in a lawsuit.²⁰ We are NOT to devour one another²¹ or challenge or envy one another.²² And, we are not to lie to one another!²³

⁵ Romans 15:7

⁶ Romans 15:14

⁷ Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12

⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:25

⁹ Galatians 5:13

¹⁰ Ephesians 4:2, 32; Colossians 3:13

¹¹ Ephesians 4:32

¹² Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16

¹³ Ephesians 5:21

¹⁴ Philippians 2:3

¹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 4:18

¹⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:11

¹⁷ 1 Thessalonians 5:13

¹⁸ 1 Thessalonians 5:15

¹⁹ Romans 14:13

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:7

²¹ Galatians 5:15

²² Galatians 5:26

²³ Colossians 3:9

When we in the church are one-anothering each other as we are called to do, something magic happens.

It’s like an engine hitting on all cylinders or a team that is working together as one unit. A one-anothering church is carrying out the sum and substance of all of the commands of God.²⁴

In short, a one-anothering church is a loving church! I love the picture Peter paints of how we are to love each other.

Passionately pursuing one another

[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...

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

But this is so often not what is given back and forth, in the church and elsewhere. Instead, what we often receive is the gift of **NICENESS**.

Frank Mabry was one of my college roommates - and Frank went berserk when someone once told him that they thought he was “nice.” It was the ultimate insult. “Nice” to Frank implied neutral, vanilla, milquetoast, weakness and passivity.

And that is anything but loving. Love as Peter describes it - **FROM THE HEART** - is risky, but it’s where the action is!

Loving each other, fervently, from the heart, means that relationships in the church move past the comfort zone to a vulnerable genuineness. No “billiard ball fellowship” where we bounce off of each other’s veneers.

Our conversations drop below the surface and we talk about more than the weather. We probe each other’s souls, ask, “*How’s it going?*” - and mean it (!) - and regularly go out of our way to meet needs.

²⁴ Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9

When we love each other the way Jesus loved we demonstrate to a watching world that we are His. Just as He said, “...*by this all men will know that you are My disciples...*”

In the Old Testament, the sign that you were under the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision. The sign that you identified yourself with Moses? You kept the Law. The sign that you were one of the followers of John the Baptist was that you got baptized. Other groups in our own society have their own symbols and signs.

And the unmistakable sign that you are a follower of Jesus is that you LOVE! The unmistakable mark of Jesus’ church is that we love each other.

Now, as you engage and pursue and look for opportunities to practice the “*one anothers*” here (in Sunday School classes, the Hospitality Center, Care Groups and elsewhere!), you will develop relationships with others here in the church! That is a good thing! That’s part of seeing that dream come true.

You’ll develop friendships - close ones. Shared life will happen. You’ll learn things about your friends that will bless you and that will encourage you.

And sometimes what you learn will frustrate, aggravate, annoy and disturb you!

That’s right - from time to time, in relationships in the church, offenses will occur.

When they do, you will have opportunity to practice a supremely important “*one another.*” One that is mentioned more than once in the New Testament. You will have the chance to practice **forgiveness**.

For the time remaining I want to speak about what I have come to believe is one of the greatest barriers to true community there is - lack of forgiveness.

Forgive/Grace-giving

The essence of forgiveness

The Greek word we translate “*forgive*” comes from the same root as the word we translate “*grace.*”²⁵ As the two words are closely related, so are the concepts.

To receive grace is to receive something good when we deserve something bad. Grace doesn’t violate justice, but it is a willingness to overlook a wrong. Grace chooses to bless when to not bless may seem reasonable. Grace turns the other cheek.

At times, forgiveness may look like insanity or the height of irrationality. To forgive (to give grace) seems to invite continued misbehavior. But we find the command to forgive splattered all over the Bible.

And it’s not hard to imagine situations in the church where forgiveness just might be necessary ...

The occasions for forgiveness

You volunteer for a particular job at Vacation Bible School (one that you really wanted!) and are told, at the last minute, that your services are needed elsewhere.

Or, you went to great effort to organize an event at church - and nobody showed up.

Or your children are treated insensitively at AWANA. Or you make plans, as a leader, and someone takes exception to your plan, calls it a bad plan.

Or YOU may be the one who is offended. You get impatient with the announcements, the song choices are not to your liking, the messages are boring, the pastoral leadership is too cautious - you name it.

It’s gonna happen!

²⁵ *xaris*

If you hang around here (or around any church) for long, somebody is going to rub you the wrong way, make a decision you disagree with, hurt your feelings, be insensitive, yell at your kids - do something that wrongs you.

And guess what? Hang around long enough and get close enough to a few people and YOU will cause offense to somebody else, too!

When a situation of offense arises, here is what you do. Pull out your Bible, turn to Paul's letter to the Colossians, read Colossians 3:12-13 and apply the truth of those words liberally to your heart.

The command to give grace

[12] So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; [13] bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; JUST AS THE LORD FORGAVE YOU, SO ALSO SHOULD YOU. (emphasis added)

The thought process we are to go through en route to becoming forgiven forgivers goes like this: I've been forgiven; I will forgive.

Once, in response to a question Simon Peter asked about forgiveness, Jesus told a story. It's a fantastic story for any Christian who wants to grow in the grace of forgiveness.

The story is about a slave who got into trouble with his King.

A "How-To" from Jesus (Matthew 18:21ff)
(i.e. - how to become a "forgiven forgiver")

This slave had been unfaithful in the management of his master's resources and ended up being in debt to the King by ten thousand talents,²⁶ and amount of money so vast that he would never have been able to repay.

Knowing that he couldn't squeeze blood out of this turnip, the King decided to sell the slave, the slave's wife and the slave's children to get what repayment he could.

I can certainly understand the King's interest in getting rid of this dishonest slave and of trying to get some repayment. But, Jesus' tale takes a twist.

This slave didn't go quietly off to the trading block. Instead, he rushed to the feet of the King.

[26] The slave therefore falling down, prostrated himself before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything."

Surprisingly, the King, overcome with compassion for the dishonest slave, ***[27] released him and forgave him the debt.***

What a cool story! The guilty slave will not be sold to a different master. His wife and kids will remain with him.

The slave and the King are now square! The slate is wiped clean; no more debt to be paid! And still Jesus' story is not finished...

As this forgiven slave skips away, rejoicing over his good fortune in having had his debts wiped out, he remembered a pressing piece of personal business. Taking a turn off of Easy Street, he went to visit one of his fellow slaves...

[28a]...that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii.

You'll notice the difference in the amount of money the first slave owed the King vs. what this second slave owed the first slave.

Not that one hundred denarii is nothing. It was a decent chunk of change, roughly the equivalent to the wages of a middle income worker over a three month period.

In today's economy, and in terms of the purchasing power in Jesus' day, it amounted to a few thousand dollars (or about four tanks of gasoline!).

²⁶ This slave must have held a post of some security and position, or he would not ever have been able to gather such a debt at all.

So, it's nothing to sneeze at, but it is **nothing** in comparison to the debt the first slave owed the King. Why did Slave #1 seek out Slave #2? He wanted his money back!

[28b]...He seized him and began to choke him, saying, "Pay back what you owe."

Slave #1, in choking Slave #2, was following the freedoms granted by Roman law, which allowed someone to take a debtor by the throat. Called "*twisting the neck*" this is the first century equivalent to sending Luigi to break the kneecaps of a guy who won't cooperate with the mob.

This scene continues in an identical fashion to what we saw when the first slave spoke to the King.

[29] So his fellow slave fell down and began to entreat him, saying, "Have patience with me and I will repay you."

Just as before, the slave in debt fell down before his creditor.

Just as before, the slave in debt made a request.

Just as before, the slave in debt asked for patience, not mercy.

Just as before, the slave in debt promised he would repay all that he owed.

BUT unlike before, the first slave **didn't** show mercy, as he had been shown mercy. He **didn't** set the second slave free, as he had been set free. He **didn't** forgive the debt, as his had been forgiven. And, he **didn't** feel compassion, as the King had felt compassion for him.

[30] He was unwilling however, but went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed.

This action was not taken in a social vacuum. The other slaves of this King had all seen what Slave #1 had done to Slave #2.

[31] So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

The King was furious. Try to imagine the rage simmering in the King's voice as he calls Slave #1 to his throne room!

[32] Then summoning him, his lord said to him, "You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. [33] Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?"

The first slave had been forgiven a multi-billion dollar debt and refused to forgive a fellow slave's thousand dollar debt.

The King in Jesus' story, anticipating Paul's comments in Colossians, expected compassion to be shown by those to whom compassion had been shown.

It is the principle of **reciprocity**. He had received mercy. He should have given mercy.

Always, forgiveness involves my placing the wrongs that I have suffered against the wrongs that I have committed; learning to view every wrong I have suffered against the backdrop of God's forgiveness of my sin.

This is not a command restricted to "the few, the proud, the missionaries." It is not just for the Rangers and SEALs among us. Every last one of us is called to become a forgiver.

It is possible to be a forgiver. Not easy, but possible. To forgive will be to go against every natural instinct for self-preservation and self-justification. But, to forgive is give evidence that we have experienced God's grace and power, and it is to demonstrate to a watching world the reality of Jesus in our life, and in our church.

Conclusion:

When we read in the Bible about the importance of love (which our Mission Statement affirms!), we understand that we are to be committed to the passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with each other in this church.

That means that we are committed to forgive when wronged, to love in tangible ways, and to engage (one another) each other - even when it is challenging. We are perfectly loved; by the grace of God, we aim to love perfectly!