

I want to begin this morning by reading from the introduction of a book written in 1976 by a guy named Gene Getz:

“Several years ago, I made a wonderful discovery. It happened when I was a full-time professor interacting with my students at Dallas Theological Seminary about God’s plan for the church. Their questions were penetrating and challenging! What is a healthy church? What does God expect from all believers? What makes a church a dynamic witness to the world?

All of these questions motivated me to investigate more deeply what is recorded in the letters written to the various New Testament churches. As I pursued this journey through the New Testament epistles, one major concept kept jumping off the pages of Scripture. Again and again I noticed the exhortations regarding what believers are to do *for one another*. Paul particularly used the Greek word *allos* nearly forty times to instruct Christians regarding their mutual responsibilities to each other...

During my initial interaction with my students at the seminary, several of them challenged me to start a church and to apply these “one another” injunctions at the grassroots level. At first, I was hesitant. After all, I had been a professor for nearly twenty years. But, I took this challenge seriously and helped several families start the first Fellowship Bible Church in Dallas. I served as pastor.”

Forty-three years ago, Fellowship Dallas, known then as Fellowship of the Park Cities, was founded by Gene to create a community of believers committed to Jesus and committed to living out the one anothers...with one another. It is our legacy, it is just as relevant today, and it’s what we are going to focus on over the next six weeks in this series called *Belonging*. Last week we saw in Romans 12:5 the magnificent truth that we are members one of another, that each member belongs to all the others, that God has woven us together and made us a part of each others’ lives. That should stop us in our tracks and make us ask “What does it mean to belong to each other? How do we live that out?” The answer is the one anothers. They are our playbook on how we live life together and the substance of our belonging.

We begin with what I believe is the only place to begin; love one another. Scripture shows us love is a central attribute of God, it is the primary fruit of his followers, and it is the defining characteristic of his Kingdom, and it puts all other one anothers into perspective. It’s so foundational, in fact, that we are going to spend the first two weeks of this series on it, starting this morning with the command of Jesus to do this very thing.

**[John 13:31-35] <sup>31</sup> When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. <sup>33</sup> Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ <sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

If you were about to be separated, and you had just a little more time, what would you want to say to those closest to you? Jesus knows his time has come. The cross is imminent, and he wants to leave his disciples with some final instructions. Those instructions begin with the command to love one another. So then what is this love Jesus commands?

**Love is an unconditional, self-giving, others-benefitting expression of my goodwill and affection.** It is the pouring out of oneself for the sake of another. Love is the nature of God, it is his motivation to save us, and it is the foundation from which we participate in each other's lives. **Love is the posture needed to live out the one anothers because the practice of them prioritizes the other.** Without it, the practice of the one anothers begins to prioritize self: self-promotion, self-gratification, giving to get/strings attached. I'm sure we've all done something that appears nice in order to receive praise or obligate that person to ourselves. We cannot live out the one anothers in that way. But if we start with love, our motives will be pure, and we can live them out in the interest of God and his people.

Jesus tells us two truths about love. **Love is possible because love has been given.** Not surprisingly, if love is the nature of God, he's the one who helps us live it out. If we don't have the love of God, we won't be able to give love like God. But Jesus says, "as I have loved you". He is referring to all the ways he has loved them during their three years together, and he's referring to the ultimate act of love about to be carried out on the cross.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God promised he would sprinkle us clean with clean water, give us a new heart of flesh capable of love, and put his Spirit in us so that we could live the way God calls us to live. The apostle John says it more simply: **[1 John 4:19] <sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us.** What a great place to start this series by declaring that all of this is possible first and foremost because we have been given God's love. He has come, he's poured himself out on a cross for our benefit, and his love is both our inspiration and provision to love one another.

And not just love. I pray we all come to see that what God's Word calls us to in belonging to one another is what Jesus has already done, and continues to do, for us. He cares for us, prays for us, he bears our burdens, he welcomes and comforts us, he exhorts us, he spurs us on to good works...and he loves us. All of these are one another commands, and we can live them out with one another because Jesus lives them out with us. If you are a follower of Jesus, you have everything you need.

**Love is powerful because love can be seen.** While the one anothers address how we are supposed to live with each other in the church, Jesus shows the impact that can have on those outside of the church. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Love identifies us with Jesus.

One summer I was home from college and a few of my friends and I went out. That night I decided to wear a bandana on my head. Why? Because that's the high-fashion sensibilities of a nineteen-year-old. As we were driving to our destination, my friend said we needed gas and we stopped at gas station in an unfamiliar part of town. Unfortunately, we were in an area where the color of your bandana was more than a fashion statement. It identified you with a group, a gang. We were almost immediately confronted, and, after some discussion, we got the heck out of

there. Half a mile down the road, we were pulled over by the police. They had been called to the gas station, saw us pull out, and had our id's run because, as the cop said, he saw my bandana and wanted to know what I was about. Now, the color of my bandana was teal...not the most intimidating of colors...

Love is the bandana we wear that associates us with God and his gang called the Church. It is so essentially who he is that when we love it is unmistakably because we belong to him and to one another. I will never forget the moment after a gathering of extended family where several of us, who are believers, were together. And a couple days later another family member said, "You all had something between you, and I want it." Every time you love one another it creates the possibility of so captivating an unbelieving world that they come seeking. It creates the opportunity to introduce them to the God who is love.

So then how do we do that? Jesus says, "As I have loved you, love one another." His love for us is not only the provision and inspiration we need, it's also the example, and he shows us how to love at the beginning of this chapter.

**[John 13:1-5, 12-17] <sup>1</sup>Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup> During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, <sup>4</sup> rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him... <sup>12</sup> When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.**

In one of the most shocking and unexpected scenes in the life of Jesus, the God of love who loved to the end, shows us what love in practice is. It is a picture of what Jesus does for us spiritually, but it's also the example of how we are to love one another. Jesus says, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" I am your Lord and teacher, and my love for you is expressed through a towel and basin. You do the same thing for one another. What can we learn about love through the example of Jesus?

### **Love sacrifices.**

If I asked you what the opposite of love is, you'd likely say hate. And I wouldn't totally disagree with that. But I also believe an equally valid answer is selfishness. Jesus shows us love lays self down. Love gives up position, pride, entitlement. And love loves those who are hard to love. Notice that Jesus washed twelve pairs of feet, not eleven. That means he washed the feet of Judas, knowing he was going to betray him, to invite him to himself one more time. Have you

ever said, “Why did God put this person in my life?” Sometimes the sacrifice comes in the difficulty of the person. But Jesus shows us how to love even that person to the end.

The God of the universe, who could come and demand to be served, literally takes on the clothing and position of a slave to love his followers. The one who said he came not to be served but to serve, and he who is last is first, humbles himself to express his love for his closest friends, to show them what he will ultimately do on the cross, and to give us an example of how to express our love for one another.

Our Children’s Ministry staff has been a picture of loving one another like Jesus loves us. They have experienced a lot of pain this last year. Stephanie Phelps, who told her Courageous Next Step story, has been dealing with severe health issues for several years, all while being a mother and wife, serving our church in her incredible way, and spending lots of time at different hospitals. Her courageous step was to move to Colorado in December, as that climate will make it easier for her to live with her ailment. But before she did, I saw a group of people whose relationship went way beyond co-workers. They sacrificed time, worked outside of their job description, cooked, encouraged, cared for, and sat with. They loved, and Stephanie endured.

The result of Jesus’ loving sacrifice was ultimately eternal life. You and I don’t have that power or responsibility, but when you sacrificially love one another, you help that person flourish in the life God has for them, regardless of circumstance.

**Love gets close and, sometimes, messy.**

To wash the disciples’ feet, Jesus had to get close enough to see the dust on their feet and physically touch them. He also got close enough to see the stain of sin on our souls and take that upon himself on the cross. He would come away from both encounters having been sullied by the messiness of the issue. The intimacy of this moment is enough to make many of us uncomfortable, but it is what we are called to if we are to follow his example.

I’m sure you’ve heard about the terrible wildfires throughout Australia. This is a satellite picture of the Christchurch area, and you can see the devastation. But there’s very little we can do at this distance. They have our compassion and prayers (which are important), but they don’t have our presence. That’s why I was moved to see twenty firefighters from California head over there to help. They are getting close. They are sacrificing. And when they are done, they will certainly smell like smoke and may even be hurt by flames. But they go, and we pray.

It is difficult to love someone from 30,000 feet. Our love is best and most effectively expressed when we are near, close enough to have a relationship, close enough to know what is really going on in that person’s life, and close enough to get a little mud, or a little smoke, on us when things get messy. Love can get messy because people are messy, and the closer we get, the messier it can get. And our love may not accomplish what we are hoping it to accomplish. But if we are to love one another like Jesus loves us, proximity is essential. When you do that, it tells that person “You matter. I care about you. You are not alone.” That’s when love has the greatest potential to do what God intends it to do.

**Love tells the truth.**

In the middle of this passage, Peter at first resists Jesus' attempt to love him by washing his feet. He believes it is beneath Jesus' dignity, and he's also confused by it. But Jesus says, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Jesus is telling him he has a spiritual problem and Jesus is the only one who can fix it. Jesus is not willing to ignore it. In fact, it's just the opposite. Because he loves him, he won't ignore it.

We live in a day where love is tantamount to acceptance, that it is unloving to say anything is wrong or someone is out of bounds. But God has set up boundaries in life because they are the means to the abundant life he promises. They are given out of love and loving one another includes reminding each other about them.

There is a conversation that occasionally takes place in my home. It is initiated by Martha, it has a certain tone, and I know generally what it's about. It is a conversation that isn't a whole lot of fun, and it comes at a cost to Martha because it would be easier to not speak. But it comes from the place of love and is for my benefit. More than anyone, Martha knows when I am drifting spiritually. After much prayer, and out of love for me, she will call it to my attention because she wants all that God has for me.

You and I are not the Christ, we are not the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual cleansing of people is solely the work of God. But God has given us a weighty and incredible responsibility to lovingly point each other back to him and to the life he has for us. Jesus models for us not words of condemnation, hate, or Bible thumping. He models truth told in the tone of love. And notice this comes last. We can only love this way when it is clear we do it to serve the other person and have come closely enough to know them deeply and show we care about what it is going on in their lives. That's how we love one another as Jesus has loved us.

Sound easy? It's not, and as you are challenged with it, perhaps the best place for all of us to start this week is to remember to first rest in the love God has given to you. It's where all this begins.

I wonder what Gene thought would become of this movement called Fellowship Bible Church. At the close of his introduction, he gives us an idea, and I believe they are words worthy to be listened to still today.

"During those years of church planting experience, I've discovered that no emphasis is more important than to teach Christians what the Bible says about these "one another" injunctions. When I began to emphasize these great biblical truths in my pulpit ministry, in our orientation classes, and in our small group ministry, I've never seen more "body function" and "personal participation" take place among Christians. Furthermore, I've never observed more spiritual growth."

If a generation is 40 years, we have just begun the second generation of our church. It is a new chapter, and I believe we'll have our greatest impact living by old ways...ways 43 years old, ways 2,000 years old. If we do, I'm confident we'll see the same things Gene saw many years ago: growing "body function" and "personal participation" and "spiritual growth". **I believe we'll see belonging and becoming.** And if that's true, the possibilities to impact each other's lives and, ultimately, impact the world, are endless. So let's go!