



## LOVING WELL

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
May 27, 2007*

So how was your week?

Last Sunday night, Scott got the call that hinted strongly that we had won the song contest and they wanted us to be in L.A. for the taping of the American Idol final on Tuesday. We decided we probably could make that happen. So we both scrambled around to figure out how to rearrange our lives for a few days. Monday the show called back and said congratulations, we were for sure the winners. That afternoon they had us on the phone with USA Today and the LA Times, and we hadn't even left home.

Tuesday came, with more interviews. Then we went to the taping of the show, where we were surrounded by all kinds of famous people. One fun moment was when Chris Sligh, one of the finalists, looked over and said, "Scott Krippayne! I'm a huge fan of yours!" He was a worship leader and had seen Scott in concert. After that, they grabbed us for our on-camera shot and we had our two seconds of TV limelight. Fortunately, I was shorter than Scott, so I probably got three seconds.

Anyway, as amazing as that was, what came next was completely overwhelming. They took us to a large press room filled with camera crews. Our handler took us from one to the next, where we were interviewed over and over again for an hour. Then they took us to an outside press area where we did the same thing all over again.

The next day, it was more morning interviews over the phone, and then we actually walked the red carpet before the finale. I've never been anywhere near a red carpet before, so I had no idea all the press that lines the sides. Once again, we were interviewed over and over again. But when we got to the photographer section, we were standing between two famous people, so the cameras were all pointed to either side of us.

It was an intense environment and a shock to the system. One of the overwhelming impressions you got while you were there was what a totally different value system drives Hollywood and show business. Money and power and fame and image all sound impressive, but when you see a world built on that, you see right away just how shallow everything feels. At times I found myself going, "What am I doing here? How does this relate to my life as a Christian and a pastor? And how does anyone who lives and breathes this stuff all the time stay centered?" It can play head games with you when you have hundreds of cameras and microphones in your face all the time.

So it was a great surprise to go to the after party on Wednesday night and get to meet some of the finalists. Because a number of them are strong Christians. They've not only been a support for each other – they've been an influence on the other finalists that they've been with day after day. They are going to be bright lights in a very dark place for years to come. And it made me realize God is doing what Meghan talked about a couple weeks ago – placing people in strategic spots to influence culture, in some of the last places you'd expect to find them, to be salt and light and bring glory to him. It's a tough environment for trying to keep your integrity, but God is bigger than Hollywood, and he's bigger than any idol, American or otherwise.

All in all, though, it was an amazing once-in-a-lifetime experience. I'd appreciate your prayers that God would help Scott and I know how to best put it to use for his glory. It comes back to the New Day vision: How do we take our life experiences and use them to show the reality of God's kingdom?

Of course in the middle of figuring that out, I also had to figure out how I was going to get a sermon written for today. God again was gracious, and by the time our plane landed in L.A., I already had a good chunk of it underway so it could be percolating in the back of my brain while I hobnobbed with the rich and famous.

We've been going through our core values as a church and we've almost reached the end of our series. Today we're on value #6:

**The church must lead the way in love and reconciliation.**

According to Jesus, loving one another is the most convincing way to show he's real.

On the way to the airport Tuesday, Shannon Wittenberg gave Karin the latest issue of O Magazine to read on the plane ride. That night, Karin had left it on the bed in our hotel room, so I picked it up and looked at it. The whole issue was devoted to the topic of love, and they had a pullout June calendar in the middle with the title Loving Well. I thought: what a perfect way to describe what it is we're talking about this morning. We want to know how to love well.

We take it for granted that we will love well, and as a result, we don't often focus on it. It's such a big word and it's used so often that we forget how intentional we need to be about it. That's why we hold it up as one of our core values – to help us pay attention to it. Because this is a terribly important value. Love is at the center of the church's reason for existence. We can be about a lot of activities. We come up with a lot of big ideas for what our church can accomplish, but when it all comes down to it, our main job is to care about each other fiercely.

That magazine on love had a quote in it from the monk, Thomas Merton, who said,

*Our love, or our lack of it...will in the end be an expression of ourselves: of who we think we are, of what we want to be, of what we think we are here for.*

The commitment, the priority, the work, the energy we pour into love reflects our philosophy of life. Do we really see relationships with God and people as being at the center, or do we give more all the other things we do?

Lesslie Newbiggin once said, “Jesus did not write a book, but formed a community.” He had the option of deciding how he wanted his truth to be communicated – on paper alone, or through people who loved each other, and that was the route he chose.

The love chapter in 1 Corinthians pounds that home, and I like the way the Message version translates the first three verses:

### **1 Corinthians 13:1-3**

*If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate.*

*If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing.*

*If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love.*

In theory, we all know that. We all would agree that love is a good idea. It sounds wonderful. But then Paul goes and gets practical, and love starts to sound a lot less like a nice feeling and a lot more like hard work. You've heard these words many times before, but listen again to how specifically Paul defines love for us.

### **1 Corinthians 13:4-8**

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*

There is not a single description of love on Paul's list that comes easily for me. And he doesn't leave much wiggle room to justify something less passing for love. We think of love as an emotion, the way we feel toward someone else. We have positive, happy, warm thoughts about someone and we think of that as loving them. But Paul turns love into a character quality instead of just a feeling. It goes far deeper.

### **Love reorients**

If you read through the individual words Paul chose to describe love, they all involve another someone. Love shifts the focus from me to you. I quit spending all my time thinking about myself and begin to see the beauty and worth of other people.

Donald Miller tells a story about this man he did not like at all. He says, “I thought he was sarcastic and lazy and manipulative, and he ate with his mouth open so that food almost fell from his chin when he talked. He began and ended every sentence with the word dude.”

Donald Miller goes on to say, “I wanted him to change...I didn’t know how to communicate to him that he needed to change, so I displayed it on my face. I rolled my eyes. I gave him dirty looks. I would mouth the word loser when he wasn’t looking. I thought somehow he would sense my disapproval and change his life in order to gain my favor. In short, I withheld love.”

Don began to feel very convicted about the way he was treating this guy. He knew it was wrong, and it got so bad that he couldn’t sleep. He says, “I told God I was sorry...instead of withholding love to change somebody, I poured it on, lavishly. I hoped that love would work like a magnet, pulling people from the mire and toward healing. I knew that was the way God loved me. God had never withheld love to teach me a lesson.”

God has never withheld love to teach me a lesson. I forget that in my relationships, and I become stingy with my affection. The way I feel about other people revolves around what I want for them or want to get from them. Love refocuses us on the other person instead of on us. It helps us remember to treat people the way God treats us.

**Luke 6:32, 35-36**

*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them...But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Donald Miller concludes his story by saying that after he saw his attitude from God’s perspective and changed, “things were different, but the difference wasn’t with my friend, the difference was with me. I was happy. Before, I had all this negative tension flipping around in my gut, all this judgmentalism and pride and loathing of other people, and now I was set free. I was free to love. I didn’t have to discipline anybody, I didn’t have to judge anybody, I could treat everybody as though they were my best friend, as though they were rock stars or famous poets, as though they were amazing, and to me they became amazing.”

Love reorients us, and there’s nothing easy about being reoriented. It requires humility and a willingness to change. But in that comes a great freedom to love people well and see them the way God sees them.

Secondly,

**Love represents.**

When I was a kid and my mom would ask me to do something for her, I would usually ask why I had to do it. And when she got frustrated with my questions, she would say, “Because I said so.” I wanted to push for reasons, but sometimes that’s all I got.

Jesus doesn’t just ask us to love each other “because he said so.” He gives us a reason, and that’s because it is by loving each other that we best represent him.

### **John 13:34-35**

*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*

In all of Scripture, the only way Jesus says people will recognize us as Christians is by our love. What a remarkable thing for him to say. He could have said, “People will know you’re with me by how well you know your Bible.” He could have said, “People will know you’re with me by how sin-free you are.” Or, “People will know you’re with me by how much you sacrifice for the cause.” And we sometimes act more like those ARE what he said. If we put as much effort into being loving as we did into other aspects of our faith, what would it look like?

One of the most powerful illustrations I have known about this came from my brother-in-law Mark’s family. My sister literally married the boy next door, or at least the boy just a few houses down the street. A few years after they were married, Mark’s brother Greg came out of the closet and announced that he was gay. That’s hard for any family to come to terms with, particularly a Christian family. When you’re trying to live by what the Bible says about sin and at the same time live by what it says about love, it’s tough. Mark and Greg’s dad was a pastor.

Then came even more difficult news: Greg’s partner, Dennis, had contracted HIV and had given it to Greg. But Greg’s turned into full-blown AIDS. This was back before there really were any hopeful treatment plans, and AIDS was a death sentence.

Well Greg’s parents stepped in to take care of him. Even though they disagreed with his choice of a lifestyle, they stuck by him and loved him and were with him until the end. Things were very tense between them and Dennis, who didn’t want them around.

Greg passed away, with his parents staying by his side until the end. Dennis was so angry with their involvement that he wouldn’t even attend the funeral. But not long after Greg died, his parents got word that Dennis’s HIV had finally developed into AIDS. It would have been natural for them to feel a secret sense of justice. After all, he was the one who gave their son AIDS. He was the one who treated them so terribly. But love doesn’t rejoice in evil. And they knew they were supposed to reach out and show God’s love to Dennis. So Greg’s parents did exactly the same thing for Dennis that they had for Greg. They stood by him and cared for him through all the agony of his disease.

One day, when the end was getting near, Greg's dad was sitting at Dennis's side. He looked at him and said, "Dennis, don't you think it's time you got things right between you and the Lord?" And right then and there, Dennis broke down and prayed, giving his life over to Christ and asked his forgiveness. Two people chose to love a very unlovable person and in the process became Christ to him. And it was that unrelenting love that eventually won him over. Someday, when they get to heaven, Dennis is going to be waiting there with open arms to greet them, all because they represented Jesus so well.

"This is how the world will know you are my disciples." Love that is costly, love that is consistent, love that is genuine is the most faithful way we have of representing God to each other and the world. He knows what it's like to be a parent who has lost a son. He's knows what it is like to care for those who couldn't care less about him.

1 John 4:16 tells us God is love. It doesn't say he is loving or lovely. He is love itself. That's his essence. We could substitute the word God for love in all of Paul's descriptions:

*God is patient, God is kind. God does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. He is not rude, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered, He keeps no record of wrongs. God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. God never fails.*

There's a song that says, "To love another person is to see the face of God." When we exhibit those same characteristics, people will see the character of God himself.

Love refocuses, love represents, and lastly

### **Love reconciles.**

We use the word reconciliation in our value statement, and it has a slightly different connotation than just saying "love." It's making things line up again that have gotten out of sync. There's this element of intentionally setting things right that Paul says is part of the church's job.

### **2 Corinthians 5:17-21**

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

I'm a terrible check book balancer. It's not that I can't add the numbers. It's that I don't always write down what checks I wrote. It's kind of hard to keep track of your balance when you're not sure who you wrote check #4673 to, or for what amount.

But when I do get in and finally run the numbers, it's very unsettling if I can't get things to add up. That's the kind of word Paul is using here: It's an accounting term. God has balanced the ledger for us when we had a major discrepancy. He's cleared our debt.

Actually, balanced probably isn't the best word. Balance is what we try to do on our own. Picture a scale where we're carefully trying to manage our sin so it won't outweigh God's love. God simply removes the sin and pours on the love. What Jesus did for us when he died on the cross was completely one sided. There's no balance of us doing our part and God doing his for reconciliation. It's all about him. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

God took the initiative to address the problem. Which is amazing, because the problem wasn't his. He took responsibility for it when the fault was with us. He took the first step.

Paul says that we've now been given the ministry of reconciliation. We have the task of living in light of what God has done – not only in our relationships with him, but in our relationships with each other. We need to be people of the first move.

When Nelson Mandela took office as president of South Africa, he held a lunch for the widows of former white prime ministers to come and meet with widows of black leaders. Betsy Verwoerd, the widow of the prime minister who had imprisoned Mandela, refused to come for health reasons, mentioning casually that the president could stop by for tea sometime.

That's exactly what Mr. Mandela did. He took his presidential entourage of 200 people to her tiny all-white town and had tea with the 94 year old woman. He went out of his way to make the first move, to build a bridge to someone who wasn't even interested in reconciliation.

I love that story, because it points to the need for persistence in our reconciliation efforts. We may hold out an olive branch to someone, and they may turn us down. Do we leave it there, or do we pursue it further?

I have sat in churches where people have coexisted side by side, avoiding each other and still trying to be in the same room to worship God. But it was Jesus who said that we can't do that. If we come to worship and know there's something between us and another person, we need to reconcile. Otherwise, all the baggage we bring on Sundays – the anger, the resentment, the hate – it's going to block our ability to truly focus on God and hear anything he's saying.

I go back to that image of the scale. We carefully weigh how much people have hurt us to decide how hard we're going to try to love them. But just as God's love was completely one sided, our love must be one-sided, without any accounting. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

I used to have sort of a “pay it forward” attitude, like we have to forgive people because God had forgiven us. But it goes beyond that. We forgive them and reconcile our differences with them because God has already forgiven them and reconciled his differences with them. When Christ tipped the scales over, he didn’t just do it for me, he did it for the people who have hurt me as well. My sins were no easier for him to erase than anyone else’s.

What will reconciliation look like at New Day? If we say that’s a value at our church, how will it show up in the way we operate?

First, we will **roll sins uphill**. Picture a hill with a large stone at the bottom. The last thing that rock will naturally do is roll itself up to the top. Gravity being what it is, the rock will resist attempts to raise it higher.

If we think of the cross as standing up on the top of Calvary, our sins aren’t going to want to go up to the foot of the cross. Injustices won’t budge. Our hurt relationships aren’t going to naturally want to go there. They’d rather roll away. But Paul tells us that God said he was reconciling the world to himself through Christ. He’s the only one who can take our brokenness and heal it up. He’s the only one who can give us the strength to love those who have wounded us.

Reconciliation isn’t ignoring hurts. It’s not about just “getting over” it and “moving on”. It’s the hard work of pushing those rocks straight up to Jesus. We need to commit ourselves as a church to not letting problems stay at the bottom of the hill, but addressing them head on and taking them straight up to Jesus where we can find forgiveness and healing.

Second, we will **leave them there**. Equally as hard as bringing stuff to Jesus is trusting him to take care of it. Letting go of our pain, finding a hopeful future takes courage and the faith that God is a God of justice, and he is far better equipped to right wrongs than we are.

Look again at 2 Corinthians:

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

One line that people always comment on in the song we wrote is in the first verse where it says, “I am made of more than my yesterdays.” I wish I could take credit for it but that was Scott’s. Actually, Paul should probably get credit, because that’s what he’s saying here. We can move beyond our past. In fact, Christ gives us a new history – his own history. His work on the cross is applied to us and becomes part of our record. And he does the same for everyone else who wants it. Reconciliation gives us eyes to see people who have responded to Christ’s love as new creations.

As we close this morning, I'd like you to look again at those descriptions of love from Paul. In your program, we've printed it with blanks in the place of the word love. What I'd like you to do is ask God to put one of those words on your heart. Then write your name in the blank before that word. I know I'm not very patient. I'd like to be able to say "Jeff is patient" with a straight face. What might God be wanting you to develop in your character?

What rock in your life needs pushing? Maybe there's something you've been living with for a long time. Maybe you're like Donald Miller and there's someone you've had an incredibly tough time loving. God has never withheld his love from us to teach us a lesson. Take that relationship, that sin, that hurt to Jesus this morning. Maybe what you're dealing with is too heavy for you to roll on your own. Ask Jesus to help you push. He will do it, because that's why he came.

Maybe you're struggling with leaving something there at the foot of the cross. You haven't been able to quite trust Jesus to take care of you. The Psalms say, "God is near to the brokenhearted," and he wants to lift that burden from your back. Ask him to take it from you this morning and work it all out in his time.

The path to love and reconciliation is a path we walk on our knees. It takes humility and a willingness to put others before ourselves. But nothing is more powerful, because nothing looks more like Jesus.