



UNTYING THE KNOT

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I was talking to Tom Parks this week, and he was telling me that he went to knot tying school last weekend. Actually, it was a training for scout masters, and one of the skills they learn to teach their troops is how to tie knots. I asked Tom if his troop could demonstrate a few of them for you here this morning. I will put a knot on screen and we are going to see who can tie it the fastest.

Not to question how the boy scouts are running their operation, but it seems to me that a more useful skill than knot tying would be knot UNtying. That would be way more practical. How do you get those tangled shoelaces apart when you just cut your fingernails? How quickly can you unravel the cord to your ipod headphones that's been smooshed in your pocket, or that 100ft. extension cord somebody left in a clump on the shelf in the garage? These are my kinds of questions.

The Apostle John must have been a boy scout, because he has made a really tight knot of the passage we're going to look at today. He weaves different strands together into a complex cluster of ideas. You read through it and go, "Wow where do you start?" The task in front of us this morning is to see if we can untie this bundle to follow his train of thought.

1 John 3:11-24

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Last week, John's central message for us was about a love to avoid – he said, “Do not love the world”. Our hearts all too easily get drawn to pursue things that take us away from our pursuit of God. It's like that old hymn says – we're prone to wander. We're naturally inclined to care too much about this world's attractions.

Now John is flipping things around. Instead of telling us what not to love, he's telling us who we're supposed to love, which is one another. Apparently, that's not as natural for us as loving the world.

The ancient church theologian named Jerome records an interesting story about John. He says that when John became so old and weak that he could no longer preach a sermon, members in the church would carry him in and set him down in the congregation. He would always say the same thing: “Little children, love one another.”

The church had heard him say this so often that they would kind of roll their eyes and go, “Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Finally they asked him why he repeated that so often. John replied, “Because it is the Lord's command, and if this is all you do, it is enough.”

I like that story. I can identify with that congregation, saying, “Yeah, yeah. We know that one already,” and dismissing John's words here as one more repetition. We know we're supposed to love each other. Tell us something new. But for John, loving one another wasn't just a nice-sounding cliché – it was THE point to remember.

I said at the beginning that this passage was kind of like a big knot that needs untying. Maybe you could hear that as we read it. Lots of different ideas bundled in there. John's mind works so differently from Paul's. Where Paul builds an argument in a tight, ordered sequence, John pulls in images and contrasts in a sort of stream-of-consciousness pattern. And sometimes the thread can be hard to follow.

I have to admit, John lost me initially when he started talking about Cain and Abel.

Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous.

Why would John go there of all places? It's like having a bumper sticker that says “Be kind – don't kill anyone today.” Or “Happiness is not firing your shotgun into the crowd.” Just because I may struggle with caring for someone doesn't mean I want to go out and murder them. So that feels a bit extreme.

Then John goes to the other end of the spectrum and talks about Jesus as our model for loving one another well. I look at that and go, "That's true, but he was God. I can't live up to that standard." So we're caught between these two polar opposites that are hard for us to relate to.

What is John trying to do? The best way to untie a knot is to start at one end of the rope and see where it goes. So I went back to the story of Cain and Abel as recorded in the book of Genesis.

Genesis 4:2-9

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Here's Cain. He brings this offering to God, and God rejects it. We're not told exactly why: Some people say it's because it was vegetables instead of an animal sacrifice, but that's not spelled out. What we do know is that there was a heart problem with the sacrifice. Cain's attitude was all wrong. Because when God turned it down, Cain wouldn't take the opportunity for a do over. It makes you wonder why he bothered with the sacrifice in the first place, like he was just fulfilling an obligation. There was obviously a disconnect. And Cain got angry.

God called him on it and said, "Don't get all upset. There is a choice here you've got to make. And what you decide will determine what control sin has in your life." If Cain had been able to bring himself to a place where he could say "I'm sorry", God was ready to welcome him with open arms. But his pride and rebelliousness won out. He said I don't need to change. I can do it my way.

It is in the middle of this wrestling match with God that Cain goes and kills his brother. He takes all that frustration with the Lord out on the nearest target. Cain's fight wasn't really with Abel at all – it was with God. His struggle with his brother was rooted in his struggle with the Lord.

And this is the first point I think John would have us take away from this story: **Love (or the lack of it) is evidence.** *Our relationships with people reflect our relationship with God.*

John said straight out that the evidence for us belonging to the truth is the way we love one another. Jesus himself had said the same thing to John and his friends:

John 13:35

This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other.

I get the fact that love is a powerful way to show we're Christians. But I don't know that I like the idea that if I'm NOT being loving, that too may say something about how I'm doing with God. Right away, I find myself resisting this whole idea. I come to my own defense. I'm just fine with God. There's nothing I need to change about how I'm doing with him. This is totally unrelated. Hmm. That's starting to sound an awful lot like Cain, isn't it? I don't need to change. I can do it my way.

John says the way we really don't have a choice in the matter as to whether or not our relationships with others reveal something about our relationship with God. So I have to start examining my heart more carefully. Is my anger at somebody else based on something I'm really angry at God about? I hear about someone in need, and I hesitate to help. Is it because I don't trust that God will take care of my needs? Is my lack of compassion stemming from some rebellion or pride?

I was thinking about this for myself, and two people in particular came to mind from different stages of my life. One was a man and one was a woman, and I really had a hard time loving either of them. Both of them had said some unkind things to me and made me feel really insecure about myself when I was around them. Neither one of them seemed to like me and they were both strong personalities. So I would have this intense anxiety whenever I was around them, and I tried to avoid both of them whenever I could.

I'm not excusing the way they treated me, but I had to ask myself: Why did their actions hook me so badly? Was it really about them, or was it something deeper going on inside me? And I realized I had this deep seated need to have people in authority be happy with me. And beneath that was a lack of trust that God really accepted me and liked who I was. And because I didn't understand how completely I was loved, their opinion of me rocked me much more than it should have and I wasn't able to love them well. I could trace it back to something lacking in my connection with God.

Who are the people you have not been able to love? Maybe they've hurt you and forgiveness has been tough. And sometimes there is a need for personal safety to not continue a relationship with someone. I'm not talking about eliminating healthy boundaries. But where there is a block in our ability to love and we just can't seem to move past it, maybe there is another issue beyond what has happened between us and someone else.

Where am I struggling to show love? What does that say about my struggle with God? Am I defensive with this person because of a wound? Am I believing a lie about myself over what God says about me? One struggle could be a symptom of another. Is it possible that there are areas in my life where my lack of submitting to God is resulting in a lack of love for my brothers and sisters?

Now in case we're not sure what we mean by loving one another, John spells it out:

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

This is the second point John makes: **Love has substance.**

I often hear people say things like, "I'm praying God will give me love for this other person, because I just don't have it myself." What they mean by that is that they hope God changes how they feel about the other person. I've prayed that same prayer myself. And sometimes he will do that for us. But John isn't really concerned about our feelings here. He's far more practical. Love for him is action.

John holds up the example of Christ, who laid down his life for us. We think of that happening on the cross, but in one sense it really happened in that prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knew the cross was looming right in front of him, and he faced a crucial decision of whether he would give up his own rights and go through with it, or if he would resist it. So he prayed:

Luke 22:42

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.

Everything in his human will screamed "No!" about the sacrifice he was being asked to make. In many ways, it was a similar conversation to Cain's, but with the opposite outcome.

John is framing love in terms of sacrifice. Cain refused to make the good sacrifice, and asked his brother to pay the price. Jesus said yes to the sacrifice, and we didn't have to.

This is at the heart of Christian love, and at the heart of love with substance. Being connected with someone else is costly. You have to give up some autonomy and self-centeredness to be in relationship. Who will pay that price? Will it be me? Do I follow Christ's pattern and make that sacrifice myself, or do I ask the other person to bear the brunt?

This happens on all kinds of levels. Do I sacrifice my money to help that person who has been out of work for six months, or do I ask them to make the sacrifice and do without so I can hang on to what's mine? Will I give up time at the office for my kids, or will I sacrifice a relationship with them for the sake of my career? Love always involves cost.

Karin's folks are in town right now, and the other night they told us about a friend of theirs named Wally Olson. In Northern MN there's an band of Native Americans called the Bois Forte Band of the Chippewa tribe. About 40 years ago Wally and his wife Shirley moved onto the Net Lake Reservation as missionaries to this tribe. They moved into their own home next to a Native American man named Fred Eischam. Fred resented the very idea that this white man had the audacity to live on the reservation. So every morning Fred would take the trash from his house and dump it into Wally and Shirley's yard. Every morning Wally went and picked up the trash and kept it with his own garbage to take to the dump.

This went on every day for the first 3 months and then the next three months. The six months grew to 12 months – and the daily pattern continued. Fred dumped his trash. Wally picked it up. When Wally would meet Fred, he greeted him as if he were a really good neighbor. 15 months went by. Then 18 months.

Talk about love with substance. I might be willing to pick up somebody's trash once. Twice if I was feeling extra charitable. But over 500 times without complaining?

After a year and a half, something happened in Fred. One day, after he threw his trash over Wally's fence, Fred broke down crying uncontrollably. He said later, **“I couldn't believe how Wally lived. Every day he'd pick up the garbage and put it in a bag. Every day he was kind and a good neighbor, never ever complaining.”**

Fred was undone. He became a believer in Jesus and eventually became the pastor of the church on the reservation.

Just over a year ago, the word went out that Wally had inoperable cancer. Karin's parents went for a visit, and Shirley pointed to a plaque and said, “Look at what Wally received.” A few days earlier, a delegation from the Bois Fort Band came to Wally's home where they all knew that he was dying, and performed a powerful ceremony. They made Wally an honorary member of their Tribe. Only one other white man alive today has received that honor.

When Wally died a few weeks later, the funeral filled the church and overflow rooms were created to handle the crowds. The chief spoke and paid tribute to this man who lived so much like Jesus, that they knew what Jesus was like by looking at Wally's life. And it all started with his willingness to pick up somebody else's trash.

Whose garbage am I willing to clean up? When I face a hard situation with someone else, I need to ask, what's the sacrifice? And who am I asking to make it? Love demonstrates itself in the most practical ways.

There's one other thread worth untying in what John has to say about love, one other reason he says it is important

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

I like how The Message version translates these verses:

This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves.

Love gives reassurance.

Do you ever beat yourself up? Do you ever kick yourself for how many times you mess up living for God? We can feel such intense guilt and regret in our hearts. We don't have enough faith. We keep sinning. We aren't loving enough.

John says something absolutely remarkable here: God is greater than our hearts. His truth overrides our self doubt and the way we feel about ourselves. Because our relationship with him isn't based on what we feel – it's based on the love he already showed to us through the sacrifice Jesus made. The fact of his death is unchangeable and unshakable. No matter what my image of myself is, Jesus' work never changes. I'm up and down, God isn't. He's greater than my heart. What a gift!

As I read John's words, I might think trying to love one another will turn into opportunity to feel bad about myself again, because I never seem to love as much as I should. How is that possibly a way for me to set my heart at rest?

A few sentences earlier, John said:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

Then in almost the same wording he says

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth.

Scholars say that the Greek word translated "know" is the kind of knowledge that is grounded in personal experience. What we know in theory about Jesus laying down his life for us becomes known by us in a profoundly personal way as we offer love to others. We start to own it for ourselves.

Jordy mentioned a couple weeks ago that he never really felt the full impact of God forgiving him until he made the conscious choice to forgive someone else he didn't want to. The act of participating in forgiveness opened it up to him in a whole new way.

And as we actively participate in loving sacrificially, we open ourselves up to God's love in new ways that are no longer just intellectual. We know his love at a tangible level.

We begin to grasp how much of our garbage Jesus has been picking up and taking to the dump without complaining. He is for us and he is greater than our worried hearts.

How is your worried heart this morning? We're coming to the Lord's Table in a moment. As you prepare to take communion, ask God to help you answer the questions we've been thinking about this morning.

First, where am I struggling to show love? What does that say about my struggle with God?

Is there a sacrifice I have not been willing to make? If I'm not making it, what sacrifice is that forcing on someone else?

Where is my heart not at rest? God's love for me could not be more sure. It doesn't change with my failures, because Christ has already been crucified. That's what this table is all about.