

# Love One Another

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**Sermon Series: One  
Anothering**

John 13:34

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Today is, obviously, the start of a new year. I'm trusting that, by your presence here this morning, you either skipped most of last night's festivities or you're here to pay penance for them! It is also the start of a new season of emphasis for our preaching and teaching here at Vienna Presbyterian. For the next nine weeks, we are going to be focusing on creating community in our church. Your leadership believes that, in order for us to be an effective disciple-making church, we MUST have a true and authentic sense of community among our members and friends.

Now, in many ways, community is easier to talk about than it is to define. Many of us here today LIVE in what we would call a community. I'm curious this morning, how many of us here have a Vienna mailing address? The Town of Vienna has, for decades, prided itself on having a small-town community feel. Certainly this community feel had some significant impact on *Money* magazine when it picked Vienna as the 4<sup>th</sup> best place in the nation to live. If you're here on the night of the Halloween parade, you can certainly feel the community, but try to define community and you might struggle a bit. One

definition of community talks about a group of people that share things in common. And, of course, for Vienna, that shared commonality would include the traffic on Maple Ave. Even *Money* magazine itself said, "Everyone shares one complaint: traffic on Maple Ave." Thankfully, Maple Avenue is not all we share.

Naturally, here at VPC we share a lot in common—but commonality ALONE does not create community. The definition of community that I really like goes like this: "All the groups of organisms living together, usually interacting or depending on each other for existence." And it is that kind of mutual need that we see represented in the early church—particularly in Acts 2, where it says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home...."

Now, you and I both know that Acts 2 was a different world, a different era—and the church was a significantly different organization then. But, we can surely learn a

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lesson or two from our history. Truthfully, one of the things that is virtually LOST at VPC is our sense of mutual dependence in the Body of Christ. If you look around this room today, how many of you can name even three people here that you rely on or depend on? In fact, we tend to pride ourselves on our self-sufficiency rather than our mutual dependence. Can we even name three people here that we could call on IF we needed help?

One of the huge downfalls we have here at VPC is that not enough of us are in small, intimate groups, where we share our joys, our fears, our hopes, our frustrations. The Bible invites us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Too many of us don't have even ten people to whom we're close enough to share those burdens AND joys. I know that in a large church like ours it can be hard to make those close connections and to really build community. Some folks even say that we're too big for our own good! Yet the 1st century church had over 3,000 members join just on ONE day—but they were effective at breaking that large body down into smaller fellowships that met regularly in homes IN ADDITION to their regular, larger gatherings in the Temple.

It is in the small group that true community develops. Not here in this large gathering. In a few weeks, we're going to be offering another series of small-group

gatherings during Lent, and MANY of you have been waiting and watching for a time that you could step in to a small-group experience. Frankly, sometimes around here we make it rather hard or intimidating to get plugged into a small group—but this will be a huge entry door that you will hear a lot more about in the coming weeks. I can honestly say that the small group that my wife and I have been part of for the last 10+ years has been the single most important piece of my connection to the church and to Jesus Christ.

And what's wonderful about our small group is not the stimulating dialogue (though there is plenty of that), not the wisdom of our study time or even the power of shared prayer. The wonderful thing, at least to me, is the way we LOVE and care for each other. Sometimes that love is expressed in very concrete ways, such as watching each other's kids, sometimes in very intangible ways such as a warm hug or friendly phone call. A couple of months ago, we were discussing the process of inviting new folks to join our group since one couple was moving away, and someone said to me, "Whoever we invite needs to be someone you can be yourself with, let down your guard, not be a pastor to." Friends, that kind of consideration and care is REAL LOVE in action.

This morning's reading from John is foundational for our shared life together. Jesus gives his readers a "new commandment"—to love one another as He has loved

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them. So often we read this passage on Maundy Thursday during Holy Week because it is part of the Passion narrative. We call the Thursday of Holy Week “Maundy” because the Latin word for “commandment” is “mandatum,” and Jesus gave us this commandment to love as part of his final instructions, if you will, before he was betrayed and crucified.

And Jesus’ commandment to us is to love with agape love—God’s love. The New Testament uses several different words for love (as many of you know) and agape (the word used here in John 13) is the same word used for love in I Corinthians 13, where God’s love is described as patient, kind, humble, hopeful and enduring. Agape love is the kind of love that Christ demonstrated in offering himself for sinners and scoundrels like you and me. And it is the love he commands us to show to our enemies, as well as our friends. Agape love has nothing to do with FEELINGS—it has everything to do with the will! Agape love is VOLITIONAL—we decide to love whether we feel like it or not. And agape love does not look out for OUR own interest in the way this love letter reads: “Dear Jimmy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I’ve felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you’ll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Marie. P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery.”

The amazing thing about this passage from John is that Jesus follows up this commandment with a promise. He says that everyone will know that we are his disciples IF we love one another. Dwight Moody, a famous evangelist of the previous century, told a story of a little boy in Chicago who attended a Bible study at his church. Getting to the Bible study was no small feat, as the boy had to walk several miles across town. Moody asked him why he didn’t go to a church closer to his home and the boy responded, “because you love a fellow over here.” The way we love each other says more about our faith than anything else. You have heard me say it over and over that I believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the reason people were attracted to the early church was because of their love for each other and the way they cared for each other. They didn’t have fancy buildings; their theology was all over the map, their preaching and worship was homegrown, but they were living out that commandment to love—sacrificially love—each other. And that made their witness unbelievably compelling to the world around them.

If we are going to be faithful witnesses to Vienna and the world then we must start with Jesus’ “new commandment”—to love one another. And the only way to love is to let ourselves get involved in each other’s lives. It is impossible for me or you to be involved in the lives of 3,000 people. Three hundred or even 30 is too much. But what about three? Can you

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make a commitment to faithfully love three people in this church– this year? Love them by getting involved in their lives (healthy involvement, now–not meddling–the church has a BAD history of meddling)–I mean caring for them as you care for yourself. If we DID that for 12 months–this town–this community would really know that we are Jesus’ disciples.

Let us pray ...

Lord, show us how to really love each other. Help us make the types of connections that build a caring community, not just a bunch of folks coming together for worship. Make our love a living testimony to this town so that people will know that we are Jesus’ disciples. Amen.