

**Loving Relationships**  
**Natural Church Development Sermon Series #09**  
**July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

**Series: Natural Church Development**

**Scripture: John 13:1-17**

**Scripture: Philippians 2:1-4**

**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on July 6,  
2008 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

I love to dance. As a matter of fact, a little known fact about myself – I have an Associate of Arts Degree in Dance! I love to move with a good beat. Once when I was at a wedding reception and the music slowed down, most of the couples sat down for a breather, all but one. In the middle of the floor was this elderly couple gently slow-dancing. There was not anything especially glamorous about them. They were plainly dressed in earth tones and Hush Puppies shoes. Thought they looked ordinary, they radiated a tenderness and depth of love that was palpable. Like a fine wine, you could tell their love for each other was carefully cultivated through the years. In good times and bad, they had learned how to trust, depend, and encourage each other. As I watched them I thought to myself “when I get older, I want to be just like them.” Plain, but deep; ordinary, but in loving step with my spouse.

Are you in or out of step with people around you? I have a group of friends in Des Moines that get together on a regular basis for fellowship and to play some games. There are times I just don't have the energy to go and don't really want to go. I always wonder which of my friends will show up. Will I have to deal with the tension of seeing people I would rather avoid? Will things explode with old conflicts still unresolved? But I do my best to make it to every gathering. Welcome to relationships! Healthy relationships, be they intimate, personal, or social, do not come easily. They are hard work.

Jesus tells his followers the night he was arrested: “this is my command: love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you.” (John 15:12-14 from The Message)

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Later in the Bible Paul encourages this kind of behavior when he writes the church in Philippi: “If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. (Philippians 2:1-4 from The Message)

It is not surprising that one of the most important characteristics of a healthy church is that it is characterized by loving relationships. When faith communities are focused on serving and loving each other, then they start becoming what Jesus intended. When we are genuine in caring for each other, the world gets a glimpse of Jesus. In the book of 2 Corinthians, we are described as the “fragrance of Christ.” It says: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.” (2 Corinthians 2:14 NIV) that is why Jesus urges us to love one another. He said in John 13:34,35 NIV” “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

How do we improve our relationships? Having and maintaining healthy relationships is like a dance. We need to learn the steps, hear the rhythms, and work together. I think if we are honest with ourselves we all need help with our relationships. Issues come up that confuse and overwhelm us. How do we love our family when they are being difficult? Maybe it is a child in a season of stress, a friend who is making poor decisions, or a parent suffering with a serious illness. We all need help in loving the people around us. If you want to learn how to dance, you watch TV and videos, you sign up for a class or with an instructor. The reason Arthur Murray Dance Studios are still in business after all these years and the game “Dance Dance Revolution” is such a big hit is that dance needs to be learned. **Be intentional** – love doesn’t naturally happen for most. If it does, it is probably focused on only a few.

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How do we learn to love in a deeper way today? We start with the Creator of relationships. We ask God to help us. A friend of mine was struggling with how to love his son through those teen years. One day, as he was shaving and praying for his son, an idea came to him as to how to love his son at this stage. He realized that his son had a paper route and never got a day off. He decided to help his son by doing his route once a week, thus giving him a break, a Sabbath. Quietly, without fanfare, he got up early once a week and delivered the papers for his son. Thought they were not able to verbally connect during this time, his son knew that he was loved by his father. The Holy Spirit is in the lives of the followers of Jesus to guide and help them. If you are stuck and at a loss as to how to love the people in your life, ask God for help.

When we approach God for help, one of the first things God wants us to do is to remember. Remember how much God loves us. Read and reflect on Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want (or I have everything I need)." Turn to the book of Philippians, chapter 4, verses 6 and 7, and embrace the promise that says: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. God's peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." Slowly turn through the pages of the Bible and allow the truth of God's love to wash over you and fill your soul.

Maybe you have never allowed God to love you. Please know that God loves you very much. We are told in John 3:16 that, "For God so loved the world (that he so very much loved you and me) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." If you want God to love you, quietly ask him to come love you. Ask God to forgive you of your sins and invite His Holy Spirit to come and live in you. The God who created love works best from the inside of a person.

When you know you are truly loved, unconditionally loved, you are better able to turn and love in the same way. God will teach us the dance steps of love.

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How else do we learn to love well? We learn from others. Be around people who are loving. Listen to what they say. Watch what they do. When appropriate, imitate their words, attitudes, and actions. Children learn from adults. Adults can learn from children and other adults.

If there is a particular person you have a hard time loving, ask someone you trust and respect to help you. Tell them of your struggle, ask them to pray for you, and ask them for wisdom on how to deal with the situation. Refrain from telling lots of others about your problems that could lead to gossip. Find one or two people to confide in and ask them to keep you accountable to do something about it, not just talk.

At its heart, the dance of loving relationships is learning to receive and offer truth, justice, and grace.

Truth is what you share. In the book of Ephesians we are instructed: "Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word is a gift." (Eph. 4:29) In loving relationships we don't criticize, make fun of, tear down, or put down. Rather we are careful to build up, encourage, and honestly compliment. This is true of our family members as well as our social friends. If you are being hurt by someone's words, let them know. "I feel your words are hurtful. How else can you say what you need to say?"

The truth we share is honest. We gently help people deal with their problems. We do not condemn or judge, rather we walk alongside of each other, listening, trying to understand. We are honest with our feelings, but we do not let feelings dictate our actions. Our words should be just like laser surgery, precisely hitting the issue, the problem, while trying to heal the whole person. I heard it said in a conference on handling conflict that anger is simply someone's attempt to manipulate. Because anger can be controlled.

If there is some hard truth you need to share with someone, please pray for wisdom and tenderness before you speak. If you find you are eager to set a person straight, you probably need to pray some more first, or even write down what you need to say so you can be careful and loving. If someone is trying to tell you something about yourself, ask God for the ability to hear, really hear, the truth they are trying to convey.

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There is a practical side to truth. When we share information about ourselves, it helps keep our relationships close. We need to keep current with each other. It helps our community when we each take time to read the bulletin, our email, The GAIT, and our web page. These are all wonderful ways to keep current with each other. When we send notes, Christmas letters, emails, and call others, we help people connect with us. We help the dance of loving relationships to continue.

Justice is what you do. Presbyterians are justice people. We care what people from other backgrounds, cultures, and countries think and need. As followers of Jesus we treat people with respect and help them to live in safety and respect. Strangers and family alike are welcomed with honor, courtesy and compassion.

Grace is what you offer when people do not deserve it. Sometimes when we are in a relationship with another we step on each others toes. We hurt each other. We say and do things that are selfish and not kind. What do we do then? Stop dancing? Jesus says we are to forgive one another. We do the hard thing of getting together and working it out, even when the person doesn't deserve it.

There are people in our lives, maybe in this church, who have hurt you and I. maybe they did it intentionally, maybe unintentionally. If you or I are still holding that against them, we are in danger. Our hurt will continue to grow and fester. It will leave us sore, resentful, and easily offended. It will not help us be more loving. It will do just the opposite. We will become hard and cold.

For the dance to continue, we must forgive. Whether your wounds came from a family member, spouse, an old neighbor, or friend, we must forgive. Turn those hurt feelings and memories over to God and allow the Holy Spirit to comfort you. The Bible says: "Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4:31-32)." The practice of forgiveness is one that loving people, loving churches do everyday.

My hope and prayer is that we will continue to mature as a community of faith. When others see our love for God and each other, when they see how we dance, they will reply, "I want to be like that."