



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Blest Be the Tie that Binds

Dr. Tammy Yeager

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“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” (Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12)

Just after 9/11, Scott Graham, one of our pastors here at Westminster mentioned the hawk that sits on the cross on top of our steeple in his sermon. Scott talked about making his way in to the building the morning after the unbelievable devastation of that day. And looking up he saw the hawk steady at his post, keeping watch over everything below. Scott said it reminded him that God was keeping watch over us too, in that very difficult time.

I enjoy looking up at the steeple every time I come in to the building too, it has become a habit of mine. And, sometime in the nine years that I have been an associate pastor here, another hawk came. So now, every day, two hawks share the watch from way up high. I admit I have tried not to take it personally that, since I've come to Westminster, God may have thought he just better send one more hawk for safe keeping. I like to believe instead, that the hawks just figured out what the writer of Ecclesiastes did, that two are better than one. The hawks have discovered the joy of being in a relationship with one another; with sharing the blessings and burdens of life together, the sunny days and the stormy ones, from their perch up high on the steeple's cross.

The passage from Ecclesiastes tell us some of the practical reasons why sharing life with others is a good thing: if you fall there is someone to pick you up; lying together two can keep each other warm; and two people working together can accomplish so much more than just one. It is a curious passage because all along it's talking about two people but then suddenly in the final verse it says "A *threefold* chord is not quickly broken." Though some debate the meaning, I have always thought the third fold of the chord is Christ. Those two hawks on our steeple always make me think of this passage, because one hawk sits on one arm of the cross, and the other on the other arm, and between them is the post that Jesus died on for us.

What would our relationships with one another look like if Christ was at the center of them all? How would life be if we realized that we belong to one another because we belong to him?

That's where the apostle Paul comes in with his beautiful description of love in his letter to the Corinthians. "Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful love never ends."

This passage is used a lot at weddings. We tend to think this perfect love, "*agape*," as it's known in the Greek language, is the kind of love married couples should have for one another. But that's just our tradition, not Biblical. Paul is actually describing the kind of love we're supposed to have for **all** people, not just our significant others. We are to be kind, and patient, not arrogant or rude, irritable or resentful, or insisting on our own way with **anyone**.

Can we even imagine a world like that?

If you want to know how that's working for us so far, you just need to get on a plane. I don't know, for some reason I have always felt that airplane rides bring out the worst in us. I think you can see almost every single directive of the love Paul describes ignored by people on flights. First off, it seems that when we fly, we're completely focused on ourselves; and we're fixated on where we want to get to, and nothing else. We get angry and rude with airline employees if there's any sort of delay, even though almost all delays are for our own safety. We don't care if the people behind us can't bring on their carry-on bags. We'll do anything possible to make sure ours get stowed in the overhead bins. We eye up our prospective seating buddies; and heaven forbid we sit by a baby, or a person who is sneezing and coughing. We've been trained now to look for anyone who might be suspicious. And of course that ends up being all of the people who don't look like or dress like us, since we know absolutely nothing else about them.

Then we buckle ourselves in and stake out our fair share of the arm rests for a ride that could last from hours to most of a day in spaces so close that we can breathe on one another. But so often we don't say one word or make any eye contact with the people next to us. We get irritated with people who snore on the flight, little kids who kick the back of our seats, and window seat dwellers who constantly have to get up to go to the bathroom. And as soon as we arrive at our destination and that ding goes off to say it's safe to get up, we jump up in the aisle and fly out the door. We don't know a single thing more about, or even caring if we ever see again, all those people we just had the perfect opportunity to get to know.

One day we will see *face to face* Paul says, we will know fully, even as we are fully known. Being face to face is the perfect way to get to know and to begin to love others as we're supposed to do. Yet, in an age of being plugged in, when we can communicate almost completely by text, when all of us have such busy schedules and personal spaces that aren't supposed to be violated, especially by strangers; it seems we're spending less and less time being present with one another, which is what being *face to face* means.

A few Sundays ago, Ed Sutter gave a wonderful message at the Bridge service and at the end he asked everyone to find someone they didn't know, take a few minutes and exchange with that stranger ways that you could pray for one another that week. I continue to hear wonderful stories about what happened in those precious few moments, *face to face*, as strangers opened up to one another and shared the real joys and burdens of their hearts as they committed to pray for one another that week.

I've been reading a good book recently that reminded me of Ed's idea. It's called, *Praying for Strangers: An adventure of the human spirit*. Through a particular set of circumstances in her own life, author and play write, Sky Jordan, made a New Year's Resolution to pray for one stranger every day. At first she was timid, and prayed without saying anything to each person. But, as time went on she got bolder and would ask people's names and tell them about her crazy resolution. Time after time complete strangers would open up to her and she found herself uncovering the deep needs of the human heart. The stories from her *face to face* encounters are so beautifully written and fill 352 pages.

As Sky began to realize that God was leading her to choose specific people, she became better at recognizing God's leadings. And in that year she came to know so much more about herself and God and complete strangers, people she would have barely noticed before. Sky says the unexpected connections she made changed her life forever.

I know I emphasized the cynical in my description earlier of air travel to make a point. But, I want to leave you with just a short story that changed my "flying attitude" forever.

When our daughter Ashley's fiancé was killed way out in Washington, I made the most difficult trip of my life with my daughter to bring his body home. You can only imagine the agony of that flight. I felt alone for all those hours as we made our way across the country totally consumed by grief.

When that ding happened telling us it was safe to get up and get off the plane, the face of a gentleman several rows ahead of us lit up with recognition when he turned and saw my daughter *face to face*. He was one of the partners of the law firm where Ashley worked. He came to us, and hugged us, and cried with us. As it turns out he was on a very difficult journey as well. He was going to say a final good bye to his younger brother who had been working on a roof and fallen through. His brother wasn't going to make it. Up until that day, I had naively thought that everyone on a plane was either going on a wonderful vacation or on a business trip. Now every time I fly, I look at the people around me in a whole new light.

We are on this journey together, and at times it's not an easy one. We need each other, and we need each other's love.

Blest be the **tie** that binds our hearts in Christian love for **he** is Christ our Lord.



WESTMINSTER
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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org