

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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John 14:15-21 (NRSV)

[15] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. [16] And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. [17] This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

[18] "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. [19] In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. [20] On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. [21] They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

SELF-IMPROVEMENT AND SELF-LOVE

Someone told of seeing an advertisement in the newspaper for one of those self-improvement seminars. It read,

"Start the major love affair of your life by spending a weekend with yourself. Take two days out of your life to spend just with you. You will explore and discover yourself in ways you cannot do by yourself. Discover the most fascinating, wondrous, magnificent person you will ever know -- yourself -- in an experience you'll never forget."

That summarizes the spirit of our world. Do you want to find truth? Look inward. Please yourself. Find yourself. Do what you want to do.

Just yesterday a letter in the Dear Abby column promoted this same kind of attitude. It seems that a man who is now 46 had been married for 29 years. He was 18 when he married Barbara. They have raised two children together. But, now he wants out of the relationship. She's a wonderful person, but it seems that he just doesn't love her any more.

I loved the answer he received. Abby replied, "If you expect me to give you permission to divorce a woman who has borne two of your children and has been faithful to you for twenty-nine years, you're going to be disappointed."

Abby then went on to say that there would be severe consequences if he went through with what he was planning and perhaps he ought to see a counselor. I too think that he needs to have his "head examined" and his heart as well.

This attitude is so typical of our society. We think that love is getting what we want ... all the time. And if we don't get what we want, then we are willing to throw everything and everyone away at a moment's notice.

But, this is absolutely the opposite of what we are called to do as disciples of Jesus Christ. Life is not all about us. Life is all about Jesus and who Jesus calls us to be.

LOVE AND OBEY

In our lesson for today, Jesus and his disciples are gathered around the table as he teaches them extensively about what they are to do after he leaves. Jesus is on the way to the cross. Out of obedience to the Father's will he will soon lay down his life for the ones he loves.

And it is in this setting that Jesus talks to the disciples about the true meaning of love. Love is obedience. Love is sacrifice.

And Jesus orders his disciples to love as he has first loved them.

That seems strange to us doesn't it? How can we order someone to love another person? That goes against what the world teaches about love. We talk about "falling in love" as if it were something easy to do, like falling off a log.

Love is an emotion. How can we order someone to have an emotion? We either have it or we don't.

But, Jesus looks at love in an entirely different way. Love is not just an emotion. Love is also an act of the will.

WILL YOU LOVE?

The Christian marriage ceremony reflects this uniquely Christian view of love. In the wedding ceremony, we don't ask, "Do you love John?" or "Do you love Ann?" We ask, "Will you love Ann?" or "Will you love John?"

Do you see the difference? Love is a decision. Love is a commitment. We decide to remain faithful to this person in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, until "death do us part."

Over the years I have seen some remarkable examples of people who have kept those sacred vows. They have been obedient to those vows even when they didn't feel like it. They have been obedient to those vows when everything was going wrong in their life.

And yet, when they looked back on their life, they did not regret one moment of the journey. Their faithfulness in the tough times created an even greater love.

Love is like that. It demands everything, and yet, in the end we see that it is the only thing worth having.

LOVING OTHERS

The apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians talked about the true nature of love. He wrote that love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not insist on its own way. (I Corinthians 13)

In other words, at the heart of love is the willingness to sacrifice what we want for the good of the beloved.

And, of course that kind of love is seen most clearly in God Himself. The Bible tells us, "God is love" and those who "abide in love abide in God." The sacrificial love of God as revealed in Jesus is the primary example of this special love, and it is the example we are to use as a guide in our relationships with others. (I John 4:8-16)

I think this is what Jesus meant when he told his disciples to "keep his commandments." They were to keep the commandment of sacrificial love. They were to love others as Jesus loved.

Jesus emphasized a single commandment as a fulfillment of the entire law. Jesus once said that the law could be summarized in this way, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Luke 10:27 (NRSV)

In a similar vein, Jesus had told his disciples in the thirteenth chapter of John,

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

LOVE FOR THE WORLD

The love of Jesus was based upon action and not primarily upon feelings.

For example, Jesus told his disciples to "love their enemies." This didn't necessarily mean that they would have warm feelings for their enemies. But, it did mean that the disciples would do beneficial deeds to those who mistreated them. (Luke 6:27)

This is truly a revolutionary way of thinking about love.

Love is no longer some vague, mushy ideal. Love is a clearly defined way of life that extends well beyond our family and friends. Indeed, according to Jesus, God loved the world, and that love is seen most clearly in the sacrifice of his Son for the world. (John 3:16)

TRUE SPIRITUALITY

When people talk about "spirituality" these days, they often project a vague religious sentiment on almost anything. Quite often, the natural world is seen as the essence of the spiritual. For some going to a baseball game in Yankee Stadium can be a spiritual experience. Others might find spirituality in a favorite hobby.

The possibilities are almost endless. For many, spirituality is what we make of it.

But, Jesus will not let his disciples have such a vague view. For those who would be disciples of Jesus, spirituality is not what we make of it. The life of the Spirit is what Jesus makes of it. Spirituality is defined by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a demanding spirituality that requires obedience and courage.

LOVE IS A WAY OF LIFE

The commandment to love as Jesus loved is difficult to follow because the command is so open-ended and dependent upon circumstances. The law is very specific and can be precisely defined given a certain situation. It is easy to define whether you are going 45 or 55 miles an hour down Pleasant Hill Road. And you will be rewarded or fined appropriately depending upon how well you follow the law.

But, how can we claim to have fulfilled the demands of love? We can't. Jesus' commandments are not simply moral speed limits; they involve a way of living; a way of life in union with Him. And as such, they represent a journey that continues all our life.

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

In last week's sermon, we talked about how Jesus comforted his disciples. He would soon leave them, but he was not going to leave them alone. He would not leave them as orphans. The Spirit of God in Christ would be with them.

But, notice how the promise of the Spirit is at the same time a word of comfort and a word of challenge. The Spirit will intercede on behalf of the disciples, but the Spirit is also the disturbing Spirit of truth. The Spirit will challenge those things in our world that do not conform to the will of God as revealed in Jesus.

Many will not be able to accept or receive what God in Christ has to say. And sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to challenge the predominant worldview in the power of the Spirit. Our loving obedience to Christ gives us the resources we need to stand over against the overwhelming tide of public opinion.

A German pastor said that when the Nazis came to power, it was the members of the more conservative sects who were able to see the horror of Hitler and to resist Nazism. This particular pastor was not too enamored with those "rule-keeping, simple-minded, dogmatic" folk. But, he had to admit that the more liberal, open-minded, educated and sophisticated Christians tended to mesh Nazism all too easily with their own thin Christianity.

He said, "Those Christians who stressed obedience, simply doing what Jesus expected them to do without question, had the greater resources for resistance."

SEEING JESUS TODAY

In our Scripture lesson for today, Jesus talked with his disciples about what they would be able to see versus what the world would be able to see. Jesus said,

"In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live."

Jesus, of course, was talking about the resurrection. When the disciples "saw" the risen Christ, they were totally changed. No longer were they afraid of anything, not even death itself. They had seen the truth of God for themselves and that changed everything. They had a relationship with the risen Christ.

The Spirit of Christ enlivened them and enabled them to be more than they ever imagined. I really like the way John Peterson paraphrases this verse. He translates verse 19, "In just a little while the world will no longer see me, but you're going to see me because I am alive and you're about to come alive." John 14:19 (MsgB)

Those first disciples encountered the risen Christ. No wonder they were enlivened in a new way. But, how can we "come alive" to the presence of Jesus? How can we have a relationship with Jesus in his absence? How can we "see" him today?

We can have a relationship with Jesus in his absence by being obedient to his command. How does the old hymn put it? "Trust and obey; for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey."

When we love one another as he first loved us, we become aware of His Spirit among us. When we put his commands into practice, we realize in an ever-deepening way the truth of what he told us. An eternal hope takes hold of our mortal soul.

FIRST COMES MARRIAGE THEN COMES LOVE

I guess the best example of this is again the institution of marriage. Remember that old nursery rhyme, "first comes love then comes marriage"? I think it needs to be revised. It should go, "First comes marriage, then comes love"!

What many of us have learned in marriage is that love, real, deep abiding love is often the result of marriage rather than its cause. That might sound strange to a couple standing before the minister to take their vows. They think that they're here in church having a wedding because they're in love.

But, many of us who have been at this marriage thing for a while know a deeper truth. We know that when we make and keep those promises to love one another for better for worse, in sickness and in health, until death us do part, we are changed. Our love deepens.

I've often heard couples that have been married many years say; "We didn't know a thing about real love when we got married. We were young and foolish. But, over the years we've learned what real love is all about."

It's a strange thing about love and marriage. The more you work at keeping the promises of marriage, the more it becomes a part of who you

are. Fidelity just becomes a part of your lifestyle. We become faithful people through our faithfulness.

DO WHAT FAITH REQUIRES

It works the same way for those of us who promise to be faithful to Jesus. A positive cycle is set in motion. If we obey his commands, we feel his love. And the more we feel his love, the more we want to obey his commands. Just as it happens in a good marriage, our love grows and deepens as it is tested by the challenges of life.

You may have noticed that verse 21 of today's lesson is the converse of verse 15. In verse 15 we read, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And then in verse 21 we read, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me ..."The same statement is turned inside out.

Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer used to tell people who were struggling to have faith in Jesus, "Do what faith requires." In other words, instead of worrying about the fine points of theology or debating about the existence of God, simply follow Jesus. Do what Jesus commands.

Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Do good things to those who talk behind your back and are intent on bringing you down. And so forth.

And do you know what usually happens when we do that? Those faith problems go away. When we obey the commands of Christ, we encounter his presence. The Spirit of Christ is not found in emotionalism or esoteric experiences or even a theology book.

The Spirit of Christ is found in simple obedience.

Martin Luther King, Jr. used to speak of the "weapon of love". For King, love was a powerful force, more powerful than the forces of evil and wickedness. He used to say,

"We will outlove your ability to hate. We will outsuffer your ability to inflict pain."

Martin Luther King, Jr. was a wonderful preacher and a good theologian. But, his greatest characteristic was his determination to follow the way of Jesus. He was obedient. In a violent world, he insisted on being nonviolent. And in so doing he taught the world by example the meaning of Christian love.

Of course, we celebrate the ultimate example of Christian love each month as we take Communion. In the Lord's Supper we remember our Lord and Savior, Jesus. According to the Bible, his body was broken "for us"; his blood was shed "for us". Jesus told his disciples,

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." John 15:13-14 (NRSV)

Jesus is indeed our friend. He died for our sins and was raised for our justification. Let us, out of gratitude and love, obey his command. Let us be a friend to others. Let us love others as he first loved us.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN