

John 15:12-17

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 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. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Why Is It So Hard to Follow Jesus?

Did you notice something funny about the passage we just heard? That first commandment Jesus gives is that we love one another. We usually think of love as something involuntary, like the love you felt when you fell in love for the first time, but that kind of love is what the Greeks called *eros*, from whence comes the word ‘erotic.’ The Greeks also had a word for ‘friendship’ love and then one for ‘parental’ love, and like ‘erotic’ love, friendship love and parental love are sort of *natural* loves; very few parents don’t love their children, and filial love depends a great deal upon common interests. But these are not the kinds of love that Jesus is talking about here – it would seem kind of silly for Jesus to say, “Parents, love your children,” or “love the people you consider your friends,” or “it’s okay to feel a strong physical attraction to some Hollywood actor or actress.” Those things go without saying.

The word for ‘love’ that John uses in today’s text is the word ‘agape,’ which is *voluntary* love. It’s the kind of love that feelings don’t automatically control. Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel, “Love your enemies.” How do you love someone that you’re not attracted to and is neither family or friend? How do you love someone who could never really express any love in return or appreciation, like a severely disabled person who can’t talk, can’t go to the bathroom, can’t feed himself? *Can* you love that person? What about a criminal or a terrorist? Can you love that person? Because God certainly loves them as he loves you. He may not like what they do, but there are probably things that I do that God doesn’t like. So when Jesus COMMANDS that we love one another, he’s telling us to at least act in ways that express love – if someone has offended you, be gracious and not defensive. If someone wants to hurt you, defending yourself and others is fine, but pray for the one who would hurt you, and if you have the opportunity, invite them over to dinner. Love those that you find difficult to love.

The Apostle Paul takes it a step further; he writes, “Consider others as better than yourself”(Philippians 2:3). That’s a tough one! I was at the dedication of St. Mark’s a few weeks ago, and Pastor Sungchan Kim shared a parable about a contractor who worked for a bank. And the contractor had worked closely with the bank on many projects over the years, and he was commissioned by the president of the bank to build a house of a particular size in a particular location. The contractor, who had a hard time saving money and needing to get paid as much as he could as soon as he could, looked for ways he could cut the cost of building the house. He bought the cheapest materials he could, and he always accepted the lowest bid from a subcontractor, even if the quality of their work was questionable. Instead of preserving some of the beautiful trees on the property he allowed the landscapers to make it easier to build by

removing all the trees, even the beautiful oak trees on the lot. When the house was finished, his president of the bank came to inspect, but instead of inspecting the house the bank president handed the keys to the contractor and said, "Here, this is your house. It's my gift to you for your many years of service. Congratulations!" Of course the contractor was surprised and grateful, but he was also disappointed that he had cut so many corners in building the house that he would now be living in.

Of course the point is that we tend to do our best when we're working for ourselves. It's a fundamental dilemma we face as Christians. We usually reserve the best and the most for ourselves. We are all "me first" to some degree. Even in our relationship with God. We tend to call on God when *we* are going through trials. Lots of people publically confess Jesus as their Savior, and I think the reason many do so is that they want some affirmation that they're not going to hell when they die, or when *we* need a little help with something that *we* determined we wanted to do – without even consulting God in prayer – for some folks God is their Genie in a Bible. And I'll bet there are folks who look upon Jesus suffering and death and say, "Thank you, Jesus for suffered in my place, which means that I can go about my life doing what I want to do, because my sins are covered by Jesus' blood." That's a very twisted theology, but it illustrates how our self-interest invades and pollutes our religion. We see God and the Church as tools to for us to get something we want...like a new car or a promotion at a job, or eternal life.

You see, we have a big problem following Jesus commandment...to love one another as Jesus loves us, and at the root of the problem is fear. It's insecurity, which is different from *uncertainty*. We can be uncertain about many things and still feel a sense of security, but that security can only come from God. And because we insist on *trying* to run our own lives and do our own thing, we have compromised our relationship with God, and because we have pushed God away we have lost that security that we once had. Martin Luther said that every sin is the result of a lack of faith, and I believe he's right. Because if put all our faith in God we would not be afraid, and therefore we wouldn't be running around in the dark hurting each other.

Everything we do has consequences for ourselves and for others. We are like the contractor in the little parable I shared with you; when we withhold from others we end up hurting ourselves. We may think of it as *protecting* ourselves or our interests, and in the short term you may succeed. But what goes around comes around: the same people that you choose not to serve are the ones that you may need help from some day, and *they* may choose not to help *you*. I remember there was a disaster movie called *The Day After Tomorrow*, and this extremely cold weather from the Arctic Circle with all the disasters that result from it, was forcing millions of people in the United States to flee to Mexico, and it was the Mexicans that were closing the border to immigrants. Everything we do or don't do has consequences.

And even if you are able to acquire great wealth and great power and have good health and a good education and lots of friends, there is one thing that will remind you that you are still not really in charge. Death. As much work as has been done on longevity and health, science has not yet come up with an answer to aging and dying. Now RELIGION has had an answer to this problem for a very long time: TRUST IN GOD. PUT YOUR FAITH IN WHAT IS ETERNAL, AND YOU WILL FIND ETERNAL LIFE. I honestly believe that we all have eternal life, because God's love is free and fully available. But when we get so use to ruling our own life, we

forget that our own life has an expiration date *until* we get a reminder. And that reminder can be devastating if suddenly you're told that the years you thought you had has become months. I saw this up close when I was training as a chaplain in a hospital, how the news of an incurable condition affected people who had no relationship with God – didn't know if there even *was* a God. All the self-assurance that they had with their job and family and property evaporated as they suddenly became aware of their own insecurity. They were afraid, and very often they became aware of their own sin, their focus upon themselves rather than on God or on others. The prospect of death forced them to really wonder if they had lived their lives in a way that was pleasing to God.

Lives that are spent loving one another. I think Jesus *commanding* the disciples to love one another shows just how serious Jesus was about this. LOVE is the passage to the kingdom of God. LOVE is the lens through which we see God. John writes, "whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). That means she has a clearer idea of God's will and strives to obey God's will. And that lights our way forward.

Because knowing God, and being in a relationship with God, means that God actually shows you what his plans are. If we're always busy trying to do what we want to do, we never bother to learn what God's plans are, but when we strive to obey God, to do what God wants us to do, God shows us the blueprints. In today's scripture lesson, Jesus says, "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." Jesus makes known to his disciples what God is planning, and the plan is a new heaven and a new earth, all under God's rule, where there is no more death, no more suffering, no more war or injustice. It is God's Kingdom forever and ever. And having that vision from God gives us great peace, a peace that is beyond the understanding of a world that has severed its relationship with God.

There is a story of a traveler who sees three laborers, construction workers, making bricks from mud and straw. And the traveler goes to one man and asks, "What are you doing?" The man appears annoyed and answers, "I'm making bricks, what does it look like I'm doing?" Such was that man's limited knowledge of the project he was working on. Rather than speak any further to the annoyed worker, the traveler approaches the second laborer and asks, "What are you doing?" The second man answers that he is working with a few dozen other men on building a long wall that needs to be over 100 feet high. That was all that this man knew of the project he was working on. Still curious the traveler goes up to the third laborer and asks what he's doing, the laborer replies, "I'm part of a large team of workers, and we are building a cathedral that is going to be absolutely magnificent. I've seen the blueprints, and I tell you, this place is going to be spectacular!" There wasn't much difference between the three workers that the eye could detect, but there was a huge difference in attitude. The more you become aware of the plan and the process, the more satisfying your work becomes, and the more you'll inspired to work toward the goal. My friends, we are those laborers, and Jesus has shown us a blueprint for the Kingdom of God, and he has shown us how to build it. And we all have a part to play in the building it.

So as we journey with Jesus during this Lenten season, let's pay attention to the faith Jesus placed in God, and let's strive to cultivate that same faith in order that we not live our lives in fear and doubt but in trust and in joy.