

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 29, 2018
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 66:1-11
I John 3:14-24
John 14:15-21

I want to begin this morning with a question. The question is: What is the distinguishing mark of a *bona fide* Christian? Put another way: How can we know that someone is an authentic follower of Jesus Christ?

I suppose we might answer this question in many different ways this morning. But if we've ever asked ourselves this question, then today we get our answer.

The passage from the Gospel of John contains a literary feature known as *inclusio*, which simply means that the passage begins and ends with the same theme or emphasis. Writers often use this technique precisely to emphasize something that is important to them. Jesus is no different.

Jesus *begins* the passage by saying: "If you love me, keep my commandments." Jesus *ends* the passage by saying, "Those who obey me are the ones who love me."

So, how *do* we know if a person is a *bona fide* Christian? A true follower of Jesus is a person who *obeys* Jesus' command to love others as he has loved us. In

the words of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, authentic Christianity involves “the obedience of faith.” The authentic Christian life is a life of love *in action*. Love is what love *does*.

And yes, the love Jesus speaks of here is the famous *agape* love, the love that is hard to define. But the important feature of this love here from Jesus is that it is characterized by *action and obedience*, not sentiment. After all, Jesus commands this love, and sentiment or feeling cannot be commanded. Action and obedience, however, can be.

John’s words from our epistle lesson are also excellent commentary on Jesus’ words. John very precisely *links* love with obedience, and separates it from sentiment and feeling. He does this in at least two ways.

First, in verse 16 he says, “We know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters.”

Obviously, Christ’s example of giving up his life for us is a wonderful window into the nature of love. But the giving up our lives here from John’s perspective doesn’t involve dying for others as much as it does *living* for others. Dying for others remains primarily a theoretical thing because it’s far less likely to happen. But living for others is far more practical.

John illustrates this in verse 17, where he frames giving up our lives for others in these words: “If anyone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help -- how can God’s love be in that person?”

A second way John links love with action and obedience is in verse 19, where he says: “It is by our actions that we know we are living in the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord, even if our hearts condemn us.”

There may be times when our hearts trouble us, when we struggle with a guilty conscience or when our feelings trick us about our relationship with Christ. But John says that God knows our hearts, and that it is the *obedience of our faith* that confirms we are living in the truth.

Notice how John states this in verse 23 of the epistle: “And this is his commandment: We must believe in the name of the Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he commanded us.”

Notice that this instruction to “believe in Jesus’ name” and “to love one another” is a *single* command, not two separate commands. In our modern world the concept of “belief in Jesus” has come to be reduced to mere intellectual assent. This notion was completely foreign to John and the other writers of Scripture. The notion that one could believe that Jesus was divine yet not *obey* him was absurd.

This seems so obvious to us. Yet, in my years as a pastor, I cannot tell you how many people I've met who think that their salvation is basically a form of intellectual assent. They believe that Jesus died for their sins, they accept his offer of forgiveness, and that's that. The notion of radical obedience, of complete surrender of their heart and mind and will to Jesus, is foreign to them. John's statement here in verse 24 of the epistle is foreign to them: "Those who obey God's commandments live in fellowship with him, and he with them."

It is the *obedience* of faith, or faith working through love, that characterizes authentic followers of Jesus Christ. This can appear to be daunting at times, but notice what Jesus is doing in our Gospel lesson. Jesus asks the Father to send another Comforter, the Counselor, the Advocate, the Helper, the Paraclete.

The term "Paraclete," is used only 5 times in the New Testament, with various meanings. The literal meaning of the term is "one who is called in," or "one who is called alongside." But it is the reason *why* the person is called in which gives the word its distinctive meaning. *In all cases, the Paraclete is called in to help one who is in trouble or distress, doubt or bewilderment.* This is why the term Paraclete has been translated with such terms as Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, and Intercessor.

Jesus knows that we are incapable of loving him (and loving others) in our own strength and power. So he promises not to leave us helpless (i.e., as orphans).

The Spirit will come to walk along side us, to live in us, to guide us, to make Jesus *present* even though he is *absent*. Everything we will need, we shall have -- including the power to dress up our love in work clothes, and give up our lives for others, not by dying for them but by *living* for them.

As we come to the Lords' table this morning, the grace that he offers us is the power to love one another as he has loved us. It is grace for radical obedience. It is power that comes to us from the Comforter, the Counselor, the Helper, the One who walks along side us to make Jesus present to us even though Jesus is physically absent from us. So come with open hearts and open hands, and receive the fullness of his love this day.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.