

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
May 10, 2015  
Sixth Sunday of Easter  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 11:19-30  
Psalm 33:1-8  
I John 4:7-21  
John 15:9-17

A man was standing in the check-out line of a grocery store behind a woman with a young child about four years old. The little boy started to reach toward a candy bar when his mother said, “honey, don’t touch the candy.”

He pulled back his hand, and then a few seconds later stretched it toward the candy again. “I asked you not to touch the candy,” said mom, this time in a slightly more stern voice.

In a few seconds, the little boy reached his hand out a third time, wrapping his fingers around a Snickers bar. His mother said, “I asked you not to take the candy. Now please put it back.”

The little boy said, “I love you, mommy.”

Mom said, “I know, son, and I love you too. But if you love me, please do what I ask.”

A similar message is spoken to us by Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson. We heard it last week as well. “If you love me, obey my commands.”

On first glance, it may make us uncomfortable that Jesus links love here with command. But that is precisely what he does.

In our society we do not easily or readily associate *love* with *command*. For many people today, love is centered primarily in their *feelings*, and no one can command feelings.

Jesus has no problem linking love with command, however, because for him love is not a feeling. Feelings may or may not be part of the equation. For Jesus, to love is to **BE** for another and to **ACT** for another, even at great cost to oneself. That's why he can say that the supreme act of love is giving one's life for another (v. 13).

And so because love is defined more by what we *do* than what we *feel*, Jesus can bring it into the realm of a command. Jesus does not command us to feel a certain way about others; Jesus commands us to *be for* others and to *act for others* in the way he has acted for us.

Jesus is telling us that it is in the *doing of loving things* that we *become* loving people, and thereby demonstrate God's love to the world. Love *is* what love *does*.

John understands this, and champions this truth repeatedly in his epistles. He understands how easy it is for Christian brothers and sisters to talk about love for one another and for the world, and yet not actually do loving things.

John is a realist about this. Some doctrinal controversies had polarized the Christians to whom he writes in I John, so much so that things had apparently escalated to the point of Christians attacking each other personally. So when he says, “Dear children, let us love one another, not merely with our words but with our actions,” John is not spinning off some idle theory. When he says, “Don’t talk about loving God when you hate a brother or sister,” he is not dreaming up some armchair advice to hand out to readers like us who come along 1900 years later. He is speaking to Christians who actually had ill-will for each other.

John reminds these persons that God is the source of love, and that love is not an abstract principle but *acting for the good of another*. In the doing of loving things, we become loving people. In the doing of loving things, we become like God, who *is* love.

This is why Jesus links love with command. It’s why he can say, “Those who obey me are the ones who truly love me.”

Fortunately, many Christians through the ages have understood this, and have tried to live it. John Wesley was one such person. He required his lay preachers to visit the sick and to minister to those in prison. He required those in his small groups to contribute a penny each week at their class meetings, and most of those folks were so poor that they couldn’t rub two pennies together. Wesley

lived up to his own counsel, which was: “do all the good you can, to all the persons you can, by all the means you have, for as long as you can.”

The result of this was that God did some amazing things in the lives of those who were doing the loving things. Wesley even viewed these “works of mercy” as a means of grace, as channels through which God did his ongoing work of renewal in peoples’ lives.

Love *is* what love *does*.

I used to read Jesus’ words here, “greater love has no man than that he lay down his life for his friends,” and interpret them as a reference to “dying” for another person. And that is probably legitimate.

But I have come to wonder whether another interpretation is also possible. I wonder if “laying down” our life for another might mean *living for* another as well as *dying for* another. That is, doing the kinds of things that love does, or as the apostle Paul says in Philippians, “not merely looking out for your own interests, but putting the needs of others ahead of your own.”

One thing is certain. When the love that God has for Jesus, and the love that Jesus has for us, flows through our lives out into the lives of others, it has the power to change the world -- one person at a time.

As we come to the Table this morning, we come to the place where the depth of God’s love is shown to us in ways beyond our knowing. When you

receive the bread and wine this morning, God is saying to you again, “my child, I love you.”

So come to this table this morning with receptive and thankful hearts. Come and receive the Father’s deep love for you. Then rise up, go your way. And let that love that has touched your life be a gift of grace to others.

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