

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 13, 2012
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

Our Gospel lesson from John 15 today continues the theme from last week's epistle and Gospel lessons where obedience is seen as the tangible proof and demonstration of love. *Love is what love does.* Those who obey Jesus are the ones who truly love him.

Today's Gospel lesson amplifies this theme, but the problem for me with this Gospel text is that in my experience it has usually been preached as a series of commands:

- * abide in my love
- * love one another, as I have loved you
- * do as I have told you to do

The problem, for me, is that I often find myself struggling to measure up to these commands. One might counter my claim, though, and respond: "well, pastor, isn't this exactly what Jesus is doing and saying here in John 15? Is he not issuing a series of commands?"

And the answer, of course, is yes. Yes, Jesus is issuing a series of commands. And I would not want to minimize the importance of our obedience to

Jesus in any way. Obedience is important, and the commands of Jesus should not be taken lightly.

Nevertheless, I still struggle to “measure up” at times, and so I decided to explore the context of Jesus’ words here in an attempt to make more sense of his command to us to “love one another.”

We’ll deal with the immediate context of Jesus’ words here in John 15 in a moment, but the primary place to begin is with the wider context of the Scriptures as a whole.

I was thinking again this week about commands in the bible, and I remembered something very important: *biblical commands are always grounded upon God’s prior grace and action.* The ten commandments, which begin, “you shall have no other gods before me,” actually receive their impetus in what comes before, where God says, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.”

In Romans 12, where Paul says, “I urge you to present your bodies as living sacrifices to God,” the basis of that appeal is found in chapters 1-11, which describe God’s love and grace in reaching out to make us his people.

In Ephesians 4, when Paul tells the Ephesians to “live a life worthy of their calling in Christ,” the basis of that command comes from chapters 1-3, where God in Christ chooses those brothers and sisters, saves them by his grace, and seats them in heavenly places in Christ.

Biblical imperatives are always grounded in a prior indicative. From a biblical perspective, anytime human beings are commanded to do something it is always because God has FIRST done something. We act *because* God has acted.

If that's true, then what is the specific context of Jesus' command here in John 15? What prior action of God is the basis for Jesus saying to us, "remain in my love?"

The answer comes to us in a couple places, but it begins right away in v. 9: "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me."

The command to love others comes to us precisely because WE have been loved. It is a command not merely to give something, but to respond to something that has been given to us. The command arises from a love relationship, a relationship that precedes us and is bigger than us.

This command is not a bald faced command as much as it is an injunction to respond to something already present, a command to pass on what we have received. A command to immerse ourselves in a relationship that goes beyond us, but that includes us.

This relationship is characterized by Jesus obeying all that the Father asks him to do -- because it is a *love* relationship. And Jesus now draws us into this relationship, and when we obey all that he asks *us* to do, it's like the circle is

completed. We respond with love and obedience to a love that has been shown to us through great obedience.

Notice what this does to the relationship. Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants, but *friends*.”

In that culture, servants did not know the will and intention of their master. They were told what to do, and they were expected to do it. Their obedience was motivated by fear, or intimidation, but rarely by love. But Jesus says: “you are my friends. I haven’t kept anything from you. I haven’t kept you out of the loop. All that the Father has told me, I’ve told you.”

In other words, our obedience is in the context of a relationship governed by love, not by fear or intimidation. It’s an obedience based on the reality of “I want to,” not “I have to.”

I want to ask you an important question this morning: Do you ever think of yourself as Jesus’ friend? More importantly, does it ever occur to you that Jesus thinks of *you* as *his* friend?

But there is an additional hint of God’s prior love and grace as the basis for Jesus’ command in this text. It comes in v. 16 where Jesus says: “you did not choose me. I chose you.”

Yes, Jesus is commanding us to love one another in this text. But this relationship of love in which we find ourselves is not one we can ever initiate, or

earn. It happens through God's initiative, by God's grace. Our ability to love God and to obey Jesus' command to love one another, comes from God. It flows from his prior love to us.

As we finish this morning, I want to conclude with the issue of "why" Jesus issues these commands. Why is it so important that we love one another as he has loved us?

Remember when you were little, and your parents would tell you to do something, and you would ask "why?" I remember asking my mother on many occasions when she would tell me to do something, "why must I do this?" or "why are you making me do that?"

Jesus tells us why he commands us to love one another here in this text. He says: "I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy, that your joy will overflow" (v. 11).

If you're here this morning, and you're searching for the true secret to life, I can unequivocally tell you what that secret is. When you get a true glimpse of how much God in Christ loves you, and when you enter into relationship with Christ where you learn to love others like *you* have been loved, when you "complete the circle," as it were, you will find true joy and happiness in life.

When you give your life and love away to others like God in Christ has given his life and love away to you -- then you'll know that you have truly found the secret that makes life worth living.

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, we come from many different places, both spiritually and physically. We come as children, we come as sinners, we come as servants. But Jesus invites us here to this place also as his *friends*.

We are his friends, because we seek to give our lives away for others even as he has given his life for us. We are his friends, because he has given to us all that the Father has given to him. We are his friends, not because we have chosen him, but because he has first chosen us, and invited us to live in the fullness of his love.

The bread and wine that we receive today are tangible signs of this friendship, a friendship marked by love, and by joy that is at times unspeakable and full of glory. So open your hands and hearts, and come with joy.

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