

Commands to Love

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“I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” – John 15:17

You can read the title of this morning's sermon in two ways. On the one hand, it can mean that we have been given commands to love things. On the other hand, it can also mean that the commands that we have been given we are to love. Both readings are possible, and I hope they will, together, capture some of what I believe Jesus is trying to say in this morning's gospel reading.

This morning's text comes from Jesus' last set of instructions to his disciples. New Testament scholars commonly refer to that block of material from the thirteenth to the sixteenth chapters of John's gospel as Jesus' farewell discourse, and it's a summation of everything Jesus has been trying to show his followers during their time together, which he knows is about to come to an end. His enemies have been plotting ways to get rid of him, and he's come to Jerusalem for the showdown. He knows that his time on this earth is short – John 13:1 says, “Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father” – and so he wants to try, one last time, to tell his disciples what his life and ministry have been about.

First, he washes his disciple's feet and he asks them if they understand what he's done for them. John, who's the only evangelist to record this event, doesn't tell us if anyone responded, so Jesus goes on and explains that yes, he is their master and teacher, but the kind of master and teacher he is is the kind who washes the feet of his servants and students.

Of course, that's not what we think of masters and teachers doing, and in the world of Jesus' first disciples, it was even harder for any of them to imagine the social order being turned so topsy-turvy. Jesus lived and taught in a profoundly conservative world, and social roles were rigid and all-encompassing. The role you were born into was the role you would very likely play for the rest of your life, and any attempt to depart from that role would have been severely condemned as a sign of betrayal of society and ingratitude toward your family.

That's one of the reasons we have such a difficult time understanding who Jesus was. For most of his life, he was simply “the carpenter's son” from Nazareth, as the gospels make clear, and no one expected him to challenge the interpretation of Judaism that had become normative by the time he began his public ministry. It was the Pharisees who were largely responsible for the way Judaism was understood in and around Jerusalem in those days, and Jesus almost certainly accepted the Pharisaic interpretation of Judaism as he was growing up, at least initially.

You recall that Luke preserves for us a beautiful story about Jesus being left behind in the Temple when he was twelve, during one of his family's annual trips to Jerusalem for Passover. When his parents realized that he wasn't with the group returning to Nazareth, they searched for him frantically for three days, only to discover him in the temple, according to Luke, “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And everybody who heard him was amazed at his

understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:46-47).

Luke's report that people were amazed at his understanding and answers tells us that Jesus was a precocious child who was not only grasping the religious tradition he'd received, but was also engaging with it at a level that people didn't expect. From an early age, apparently, Jesus was thoughtful and reflective and sensitive about his religious tradition, so by the time he became an adult, he'd been turning things over in his heart and his mind for at least a couple of decades. And some of the conclusions about Judaism that he came to clashed with what he'd been taught. And that was the source of the conflict between him and the Pharisees, among whom he had once been so highly regarded.

When Jesus broke with the Pharisees, he'd been a part of them for so long that most people thought that he was still teaching Pharisaic doctrine, but the Pharisees said no, this is not what we teach, and that's where the head-butting came from between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus probably never understood himself to be anything other than a good, Pharisaic Jew, and he couldn't understand why his fellow Pharisees seemed to get so much of their shared religious tradition wrong.

And on two points in particular he seemed to clash with the religious authorities, both of which are found in today's reading from John's gospel.

The first is the matter of joy – the joy that comes from belief. In verse eleven, Jesus says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Jesus was clearly a joyful believer. Although we don't have a single reference to Jesus laughing or saying that he was happy, it's clear from this passage and others that his relationship to God filled him with joy.

And that joy allowed him a certain freedom to engage his religious tradition with a flexibility that his more dour elders and teachers and co-religionists seem to have lacked or at least didn't think much of. When the love of God fills you with joy, you don't worry about every little detail. You don't fret about making mistakes. You don't obsess about making sure your observance is just so. You don't mistake the small things for the big things.

What you do instead is relish being securely held by God's love, being part of the big picture, and you live the life you recognize that God has given you with joy and enthusiasm. Jesus said at least as much when he said that unless we enter the realm of God as children, we can't enter it at all, and if children are anything, they are enthusiastic.

And this enthusiasm, that doesn't always attend to nuance, sometimes gets up other people's noses. I still remember, thirty-odd years later, being scolded by one of my classmates at Yale Divinity School for my lack of reverent decorum as a group of us consumed the leftover elements after a communion service in Marquand Chapel that had been presided over by a Roman Catholic priest. And it wasn't just I who was told that we shouldn't laugh or joke or discuss ordinary matters while we ate the leftover bread and drank the leftover wine; I was part of a small handful of divinity students, Catholic and Protestant, who'd stayed after the service to help consume the leftovers, and we didn't know that there is a proper way to do this and it doesn't involve levity, at least in some traditions. So we quieted down, sobered up, and behaved ourselves.

Conversely, I also remember a painting that hung on one of the hallway walls in the church I attended during college. It was a picture by Richard Hook of Jesus looking like a surfer dude. His hair was a bit unkempt, he was tanned, his tunic seemed casually wrapped, and his lips were parted in what was perhaps the faintest hint of a smile. He looked like an ordinary human being who was simply glad to be part of God's creation.

That deep gladness in one's creatureliness, I believe, is a kind of spirituality, and what I'd call

reverential joy, and I think that's what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of his joy being in his disciples so that their joy might be complete. Joy separated from the spirituality of incarnate creatureliness is incomplete, I think Jesus is saying. Our human lives include a spiritual component – and Ecclesiastes 3:21 says that animals have a spiritual component to their lives as well – and unless our joy includes that component, that joy is going to be less than complete.

We can take joy in lots of things – our relationships, the wonder of creation, artistry of various kinds – but joy in this or that tangible, limited thing is going to be partial, finite, and transitory – incomplete, in other words. But joy in God – and remember that in John's gospel Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate, which is essentially the same thing as God – joy in God and God's presence in this world is the joy that is comprehensive, lasting, and not compromised by self-interest.

And there didn't seem to be much joy in the way the Pharisees were interpreting Judaism at the time of Jesus. Maybe they were, but apparently what struck Jesus in their teaching, and what he reacted so strongly against, was the impression they gave that Judaism was a vast catalog of rules that made ordinary people feel anxious or burdened. “Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus said, in offering an alternative to that way of being religious, “and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29).

One of the big mistakes we Christians have made is that we started our own religion. Instead of simply following Jesus, we started worshiping Jesus, and over the centuries we've built up our own vast system of rules and regulations that can crush the joy out of following Jesus. We Protestants in particular seem especially suspicious of joyfulness because it hints at flaunting the rules, but there's a big difference between joyfulness and licentiousness, and most of us could do with a healthy dose of the former without worrying overmuch about falling into the latter.

So the joy of believing is one of the themes Jesus talks to his disciples about as he prepares to take his leave of them.

The other theme that Jesus emphasizes in these final words to his disciples is love. And not just any kind of love. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9).

When Jesus speaks of love, he's never talking about the kind of love we're going to be celebrating in a few weeks when Kim Lorentz and John Grebenc get married here in this sanctuary. Romantic love, which is where all families begin, is deeply self-interested. We love the other because we have found them attractive and want to be intimate with them, and they have returned that attraction and our desire for intimacy. They've provided something – many things, usually – that we want, and we love them for having done so. There's nothing wrong with that, but we shouldn't confuse that kind of loving with what Jesus is talking about, which is God's love.

God doesn't love us because God finds us attractive or because we've provided something that God wants or needs. God loves us because it is God's nature to do so. God loves us because God is love. To say that God loves is simply saying that love loves. That's what love does. Pure love has no other option. Love is what it is, just as red is what it is or cold is what it is. Love can't be anything other than love, just as red can't be anything other than red or cold can't be anything other than cold.

And that's the way God loves us – of God's own nature, purely, and without expecting anything in return, because there's nothing we can give to God that God doesn't already have.

So when Jesus tells his disciples that he has loved them as God has loved him, and that they should love one another in that same way, he's telling them to love one another with a kind of love that is devoid of self-interest. None of us should love God or one another because of what we hope or expect to get from that relationship. If we love as God loves, we love regardless. Sometimes we love in

spite of. But never do we love so that – so that we will be loved in return, so that we will get something we want or expect, or so that we will find happiness or security.

And this is a lot harder than it sounds, because so much of what we do in this world is tainted by self-interest. Our motives, even under the best of circumstances, are rarely pure, and it takes a lifetime of practice to learn how to love as God loves.

But that's exactly how Jesus commands us to love: we love one another as Jesus loves us and as God loves Jesus, and when you remember that it was God's love for Jesus and Jesus' response to that love that took Jesus to the cross, you can begin to see that the kind of love we're talking about is very different from how we feel. How we feel is reflected in our likes and dislikes; how we love is reflected in our obedience. And we learn to obey not by responding to our feelings but responding rather to God's commands.

And that's why Jesus says he has given us commands so that we can love one another. God's commands show us how to love, irrespective of how we feel. And you can't know what those commands are unless you have steeped yourself – really saturated yourself – in the knowledge of the repository of those commands, which is the Bible. And one of the reasons I have such ambivalent feelings about the United Church of Christ and other liberal traditions is that we have tended to substitute our emotional subjectivity for God's external objectivity. I saw the evidence of this again and again when I examined candidates for ordination for our association and I'd ask them to tell me the difference between spirituality and emotionality and almost all of them stared at me blankly.

Our spirituality is not the way we feel; our spirituality is a divine gift that unites us with God and with God's creation. Our spirituality is no more our possession than is the breath of life that God breathes into each and every one of us, and when we reduce our spirituality to mere feelings, the notion of obedience becomes a quaint relic of an earlier age. The prevailing ethos among liberal believers today is, I'll love God if I feel like it and I won't love God if I don't. I'll love my neighbor if I feel like it, and I won't if I don't. I'll love God's creation if I feel like it and I won't if I don't.

That kind of rank egotism parading as spirituality doesn't have a clue what to do with Jesus' commands because it hasn't a clue what to do with obedience. "If I feel like it" Christianity is completely flummoxed by Jesus' new commandment that we should love one another, because we don't think you can command a person to feel a certain way. Jesus isn't. He isn't commanding us to feel. He's commanding us to live a way of life that is independent of how we feel about it. Living in a certain way – the way that Jesus showed us how to live, including his death on the cross – is an objective reality that does not depend on how we feel about it. It's true, whether we like it or not. And in an ego-based world, if people's egos aren't satisfied, they're not likely to embrace something, regardless of its truth or worth.

And that's why I put the quote from Marilynne Robinson on the front of this morning's bulletin. Marilynne Robinson is one of the few liberal Christians who still sees the danger of using religion to satisfy the desires of the ego. She still sees the danger of accommodating the demands of the gospel to the trends of the culture. She still refuses to believe the lie that everything is relative and that differences don't matter.

She believes, as I do, that Christianity is better than many other ways of living. She believes, as I do, that Christianity is counter-intuitive, challenging, and just plain hard. She believes, as I do, that we find our lives by losing them in that great paradox called grace. And she believes, as I do, that authentic Christianity is always going to be a minority undertaking.

Jesus commands us to love so that we may have life and have it abundantly, that we may know

the joy of the gospel, and that we may live in this world of time and space in such a way that death does not have the last word. He has given us commands toward those ends; who wouldn't love and who wouldn't obey commands such as those?