

## **“If you love me, you will keep my commandments”**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab*

*5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B. Mothers' Day. May 14, 2006. (Text: John 14:15-21)*

I read about a woman who telephoned a friend one afternoon to ask how she was feeling, “Terrible,” came the reply, “I’m worn out, my head’s splitting, and my back is killing me. The house is a mess, I don’t have anything ready for dinner, and the kids are driving me crazy.”

Very sympathetically the caller said, “Listen, honey, you just go lie down. I’ll come right over and bring something for dinner; then I’ll clean up the house and take care of the kids while you get some rest ‘til Sam comes home. —By the way, how *is* Sam?”

“*Sam?*” the complaining mother answered. “I don’t know anybody named Sam.”

“Good heavens. I’m sorry,” the first woman said. “I must have the wrong number.”

There was a long pause, then the harassed voice on the other end of the line asked timidly, “But can you still come over?”

There’s a message here for anyone who knows a mom with a house full of youngsters!

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Jesus said to his disciples, “*If you love me you will keep my commandments.*”

One time quite a few years ago – when I still had little kids at home – I went on a men’s retreat with a group of guys from the parish where I was serving. They put us in small groups and, to start things off, we were asked to share with one another the words we remembered hearing most often from our parents when we were under twelve.

The words most of the guys remembered hearing were “Sit down. Be quiet. And do what I say.” We all laughed about that. And we admitted – since nearly all of us were parents – that we seemed to be passing along the same message to our kids, at least the “*do what I say*” part.

This is Mothers’ Day, and I have to confess that the mothers I observe in action these days – and the dads, too – seem a lot more patient with their children, better listeners to their tales about school and friends, and much more likely those of my own generation to leave them with a better parental message to remember from childhood than “Sit down. Be quiet. And do what I say.”

In one respect, though, parents today are still pretty much like parents of every generation. They expect the children to listen to what they tell them and be guided by that. But today’s parents are more patient than *I* ever was in explaining just *why* their advice is worth following.

Jesus didn’t have any children. But a rabbi with his disciples was considered to be in the role of a father with his children. It was a patriarchal culture, and the traditional duty of the Jewish father was to teach the wisdom and will of God to his children —to instruct them, train them, discipline them, correct them, guide them and reward them.

It was well known that a rabbi’s teaching had to be conveyed in more than just memorable *words*. It had to be passed along through memorable *deeds* —in the conduct of his life. The effectiveness of a rabbi’s teaching depended largely on the quality of his example.

Disciples would almost inevitably develop affection for their rabbi. That was natural. But if the disciples failed to obey their master’s commandments, their “liking” or “feeling friendly” for him was of no value. *Behavior* is what counted, not “feelings.”

Jesus said to his disciples, “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*” People get confused about *love* these days. Most of the confusion comes from the fact that we who speak English as our mother tongue have only a single word to use for a wide range of human behavior and emotions.

June is just around the corner, and that means it's almost "wedding season." We pastors have various techniques for helping young couples discern whether they're just having great emotional chemistry together (often called "being in love") or they're actually ready to make a commitment of body, mind and spirit to each other — "for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health," for the rest of their lives. Some couples get married on the basis of great emotional chemistry, but when the hormonal high wears off one or the other says "I'm not sure I'm in love with you any more." Or, "Things are just not the way they used to be between us."

When Jesus said, "*If you love me you will keep my commandments,*" he was making the essential point that authentic "love" is a choice not a neuro-chemical reflex. Loving Jesus isn't about, as we might say, "liking Jesus," but about choosing to pattern our lives according to his word and example.

When Jesus told the disciples to keep his commandments, he wasn't referring to a law code either. Actually, his commandment was this: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" So, in other words he was telling them "*If you love me, then you will love one another the way I have loved you.*" People who've learned that love is a choice, not an emotional reflex, know that the love Jesus commanded is demonstrated by *deeds* — simple acts that can be repeated if we choose. Jesus told his disciples to treat each other (and by extension, everyone else) just the way he had treated them. That's pretty simple, isn't it?

Jesus didn't just give his disciples, his spiritual children, a lot of rules to follow. He just told them to love one another, and then he demonstrated what that meant. And he did so in obedience to his Father. As the epistle this morning put it, "*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*"

Jesus demonstrated his obedience to the Father by care-giving love. He washed the disciples' feet — an act of great humility. After he did that for them, he said, "*I have given you an example, that you should do for one another what I have done for you.*"

If love is about emotions, about affectionate feelings, it can't be commanded. I can't feel a certain way about someone else just because I'm told to. That's impossible. Nobody can tell you how to feel. Feelings come in response to experiences. Feelings just "are". Even God can't dictate them, because God made us the way we are. But I *can* treat another person with justice and dignity because I'm told to do so. I *can* give my money to help a poor person because I'm told to. I *can* shelter the homeless out of obedience to Christ. I *can* feed the hungry because I'm told to. I *can* work for the welfare of another person because I've been commanded to. I can do these things out of obedience, no matter how I may "feel" about the people in question.

Frederick Buechner said, "When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors... he is telling us to love them in the sense of working for their well-being, even if it means sacrificing our own well-being, our own interests, to do that." This means that, in Jesus' terms, we can *love* other people even if we don't *like* them. Buechner also said, "Liking them may get in the way of loving them by making us overprotective sentimentalists instead of reasonably honest friends."

It's not easy to love one another this way. It's hard to obey Jesus' commandment. That's why Jesus goes on to say that he will give us "another Counselor," the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, to be with us forever. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. The Spirit — and only the Spirit — enables us to get free of our self-interest and our egos enough to develop a sacrificial love that might resemble that of Jesus.

When in obedience we're able to love others the way Jesus has loved us, it's because of his Spirit working in our hearts. Our new life and our unselfish love depend on the One who fills us with his empowering presence. When we reveal the love of Jesus in our treatment of one another, our neighbors, and even our enemies, we show the world that Jesus is alive. As his words that have been on our outside signboard since Easter (and are part of today's gospel) say, "*Because I live you too will live.*"

*"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another."*