

May 14, 2023
John 14:15-21

Easter 6
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Love and Obedience”

“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love and reveal myself to them.”

Growing up as an only child, I was fascinated when I visited friends who had multiple siblings. It was an opportunity for me to experience what it was like for them to share bedrooms, to engage in sibling rivalry, and to experience the reality of “hand me down” clothes if they were among the younger brothers or sisters in the family. One of my clearest memories of my visits to these homes that I found strange and exotic was with a family that had five children that included one of my school classmates. Their mother was a very nice person, but someone who also ran a tight ship and tolerated very little nonsense among her children. Every child was expected to perform their chores, and any attempt to get out of a task inevitably ended in failure. There was also no doubt as to which child was assigned a certain task, since the mother kept a “chore board” in the kitchen that listed which chores each child was expected to perform every day of the week. While I had chores at my house, since I was the only child, I did not have any such system, and at first it seemed to be very harsh and burdensome. One day, I asked my classmate how he managed to live with so many siblings in a house with so many rules, and if he felt at times that what was expected of him was too much. He looked at me at first as if he did not understand my question; then he responded by telling me that “none of us are bothered by the chores our parents expect us to perform. In fact, we do our chores cheerfully, because it is how we show each other how much we love one another in this family.”

This was not the answer I expected, but as I thought about my friend’s attitude toward his household chores it reminded me that loving other people is not simply a matter of saying “I love you”; we show our love for other people by the way we behave toward them. We show our love for our family by caring for them, providing for them, and doing what is expected of us. We show our love for our spouse not only with words or gifts but by our daily devotion and faithfulness to the one who we promised to love and cherish on the day of our wedding. We show our love for friends not merely by clicking “like” on Facebook but by being present in their lives,

especially in times of sadness and distress. Love is not only expressed in words; love becomes incarnate in acts of loving service and obedience to one another.

As he continues his Farewell Discourse to his disciples in the Gospel of John, Jesus emphasizes the connection between love and obedience for those who will continue his work as apostles. Today's Gospel lesson from the Fourth Gospel describe two dimensions of the believers' love relationship with Jesus: the inseparability of one's love of Jesus and the keeping of his commandments; and the abiding and indwelling of the presence of God, even after Jesus' death and departure, with those who love him. For those who would be followers of Jesus, love and obedience go together; the disciples' personal love for Jesus leads them to obey his commandments, and the most basic commandment - to love – arises from the love he shows them: *"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"* (13:34). Through lives of love and obedience to Jesus, *"the disciples are conformed to the Father, and the divine love will shine forth radiantly through them."* (Francis Martin and William Wright).

In John's Gospel, "commandments" (*entolai*), "word" (*logos*), and "words" (*logoi*) are all synonyms. They all point to the totality of what Jesus says and reveals about God. Jesus regularly cites faithfulness to his words as the mark of belonging to him: *"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free"* (8:31). He makes it clear at his Last Supper with his disciples that the sign of faithfulness to Jesus' commandments is to live a life of love grounded in Jesus' own love: *"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* (13:35). For those who would be disciples of Christ, *"to love Jesus is to keep his commandments; to keep Jesus' commandments is to love him."* (Gail O'Day). Jesus' words also point to the ways in which the disciples' love and obedience to Jesus determine their relationship with God. The disciples will share in the Father's love because of their love for Jesus. This mutual love of God, Jesus, and the disciples provides the context in which the three promises of the indwelling of the divine presence in the community are to be heard: the promise of the Paraclete, the promise of Jesus' return, and the promise of the advent of God and Jesus.

Jesus' teaching on the relationship between love and obedience is shared with a group of disciples who he knows are still reeling from the news that he is about to depart from them. While he has encouraged them to *"not let your hearts be troubled"* reassured them that *"I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also"* (14:1-3), he knew that they were still dealing with issues of separation and abandonment from the one who they had left everything behind to follow. Jesus addresses these emotions in his statement that *"I*

will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” (14:16). This is the first occurrence of *parakletos* in John; it is a word that means “the one who exhorts, the one who comforts, the one who helps, and the one who makes appeals on one’s behalf.” Jesus identifies his request to God as the origin of God’s gift of the Paraclete, the Fourth Gospel’s unique description of the gift of the Holy Spirit. His description of the gift of “another Advocate” points to the teaching in the First Letter of John that *“if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”* (1 John 2:1-2). “Paraclete” is thus not simply another name for the Holy Spirit, but a particular way of describing the functions of the Spirit, functions held in common with Jesus. What the Paraclete does is not new but is a continuation of the work of Jesus. While the Paraclete is distinct from Jesus, the Spirit does not operate independently of him (*“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”* – 16:13). As the “Spirit of truth,” the Paraclete shares in the work of Jesus, because Jesus is *“the Way, and the Truth, and the Life”* (14:6). The work of the Paraclete is thus to keep the truth of Jesus present to the world after Jesus’ departure. As with the unity of God and Jesus in their work (*“The Father and I are one”* – 10:30), the relationship between Jesus and the Paraclete is also defined by the unity of their work.

- “We must learn to know the Holy Spirit and believe him to be as Christ describes him and sets him before the eye of the soul, namely, that he is not a Spirit of wrath and terror but of grace and comfort, and that thus the whole Godhead shows nothing but comfort. The Father wills to comfort us, for he gives the Holy Spirit; the Son gives comfort, for he prays to the Father to send him; and the Holy Spirit is himself the Comforter. There is therefore here no terror, threat, or wrath over Christians, but only gracious laughter and sweet comfort in heaven and on earth.” – Martin Luther.

The response of the world to the Paraclete’s presence echoes the response of the world to the Incarnation itself, a division between those who receive and those who do not:

- “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” – 1:10-13.

Knowledge of the Paraclete is defined as the Paraclete's abiding with the believing community: *"You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."* (14:17). The Paraclete ensures that the revelation of God in the incarnation of Christ does not end with Jesus' death and return to God.

The second promise of continuing presence is Jesus' promise of his own return. He reassures his disciple that *"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you."* (14:18). "Orphan" (*orphanos*) was a common metaphor to describe disciples left without a master. Jesus' promise that he will not leave his disciples orphaned recalls his previous use of the address "little children" and is an assurance that the intimacy of the familial relationship is not undercut by Jesus' departure: *"Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'"* (13:33). Jesus knows that in years to come his disciples will feel like "orphans." While Easter will be a joyous reunion, the resurrection appearances will not continue indefinitely. As *"the Spirit is the Advocate who brings the truth of that love and life to people in this time after Easter, which makes faith possible"* (Craig R. Koester), Jesus assures his disciples that the day will come when he returns to accomplish his promise to gather them together in *"my Father's house [in which] there are many dwelling places."* (14:2). Jesus' resurrection gives life to believers, because it is the ultimate demonstration that Jesus is indeed *"the resurrection and the life"* (11:25). While *"in a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live you also will live"* (14:19), the events of Jesus' hour, his departure and return, usher in a new age with God, an age in which the full maturity and intimacy of God, Jesus, and the believers will be experienced: *"On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you"* (14:20). *"It is through the Paraclete that the eschatological fulfillment of Jesus' hour becomes the experience for all believers, not just those of the first generation."* (O'Day).

It is within the context of assurance that God's presence will abide with the disciple community even after Jesus' departure through the presence of the Paraclete that Jesus returns to his initial teaching on the connection between love and obedience among those who would be his followers: *"They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."* (14:21). Discipleship is defined by hearing the Word of God and living in obedience to that Word. It has been modeled for us by generations of faithful people who responded to God's call by going forth in obedience so that God's will might be accomplished *"on earth as it is in heaven"* (The Lord's Prayer). In the letter of the Hebrews, the author points to ancestors in

faith who serve as role models for disciples of every generation who understand faith as *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen”* (Hebrews 11:1). The author points to Abraham, the patriarch of God’s people, who by faith *“obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going ... therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘As many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore’”* (11:8, 12). He points to Moses as one who by faith chose to *“share ill treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the sake of Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward”* (11:25-26). The author offers examples of faith from throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to describe how love and obedience combined in the lives of God’s faithful people so that they might offer us an example of how we may also *“run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (12:1-2).

- *“Obedience is the lifestyle of loving God. The disciples’ response of love and obedience to Jesus leads them into a deeper intimacy with the Father. By loving and obeying Jesus, disciples are given to know more deeply his reality as the risen Lord and the divine love given in him.”* – Martin and Wright.

Mothers’ Day is an occasion for us to express our love for our mothers and for all women who have provided motherly care for us. It may be love we share with our biological mothers, those who gave birth to us and nurtured us throughout our lives. It may be for an adoptive parent who loved and cared for us as their own child, or a grandparent or other relative who provided us with a home where we knew we were safe and were welcomed. We express our love on this day with cards, gifts, special dinners, and words in which we give our thanks to these women who have given so much to us. But while it is most appropriate to honour these blessed women on this day, we know that the true way in which we show our love for parents, family, and friends every day is not only through words but through actions, lives devoted to caring for one another and serving one another as our Lord taught us to love each other in both word and deed. For our parents and those in authority, it means that we heed the commandment to *“honour your father and your mother, so that their days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you”* (Exodus 20:12). As Luther explains in the *Small Catechism*, this means that *“we are to fear and love God, so that we neither despise nor anger our parents and others in authority, but instead honour, serve, obey, love, and respect them.”* Expressing our love through

acts of service and obedience is in keeping with Luther's teaching on how we are to respond to all that our Lord showers upon us daily *"out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit of worthiness of mine at all. For all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true."* While obedience to God's commandments is not the way in which we earn our salvation or justify ourselves before God – since all of this is a gift that God bestows upon us freely through our Lord Jesus Christ – obedience to God's commandments as well as to our parents and others in authority is a way in which we express our love for one another, following the example of Jesus whose love for the world was expressed through his obedience to the will of God to suffer, die, and rise again so that *"if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."* (Romans 6:5).

- "Action is a grateful response that flows from our awareness of God's presence in the world. Jesus' entire ministry was one great act of thanksgiving to his Father. It is to participation in this ministry that we are called." – Henri Nouwen.

While my parents never created a chore chart like I saw at my friend's house, I learned from that experience that living in obedience to my parents and fulfilling my expected chores was not a burdensome task but a way in which we express our love for one another in our families and in our communities. As God's people, living in thanksgiving for all that our Lord has given to us, may we respond with love and obedience, serving one another in the name of the one who loves us and abides with us always, Jesus Christ our Lord and the Paraclete who assures us that God's love abides with us always.

Amen.