

sermon-4/27/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Commanded to Love”
John 14:15-21

We continue this Sunday with John 14. As you might remember from last week’s sermon, this is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples before his crucifixion. It was written by John to his community some 60 to 70 years after that crucifixion. By that time, the community of faith was having to deal with a sense of God’s absence.

To be more specific, many in the early Church must have been dealing with their own pain and sorrow because of Jesus’ absence. They, no doubt, felt like orphans. As one commentator put it, they were living in a world that felt large and even alien. They were fearful. Persecution because of their faith and death were real possibilities.

This image of being an orphan is one in which many in our age can relate. We, too, live in a world that can feel dangerous and even frightening. It can feel like we have been left with no one to really protect us. After the events on 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, we know we can’t always count on our government to protect us from harm, or even respond very quickly or efficiently when bad things happen. Feeling like an orphan is part of the modern mindset every bit as much as it was in the first century of the common era.

We listen, then, with longing hearts to what Jesus says in John’s gospel. We, too, know what it is like to feel God’s absence. Sometimes we can’t seem to conjure up a feeling of God’s presence in worship, when we pray, and especially when we muddle our way through tragedy or heartache.

I have been reading a very helpful book called *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* by Ronald Rolheiser, an adjunct faculty member of Seattle University. In the Preface he writes, “We live lives of quiet agnosticism. Our faith often feels like doubt. Our everyday consciousness contains little or no awareness of God. . . . Our present cultural currency, certainly in the Western world, is not equipped to help us imagine or feel God’s existence. The air we breathe is agnostic, even atheistic.” The book is about how to recapture an awareness of God with us.

Our scripture passage for today has its own take on how to experience God’s presence. Let’s turn to Jesus’ words now. Jesus says we can experience presence, his presence, God’s presence, when we obey his commandments. It is not that we obey and God has to be present. It is more that our obeying opens our eyes and hearts to that presence that has been with us all the time.

What are Jesus’ commandments? The answer to that is very simple. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. In the very next chapter of John’s gospel, we read this in a very abbreviated form. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

Jesus was obedient to God in his love for us. Jesus is not asking anything from us that he did not already have to give himself. Obedience is not a very popular word these days. It smacks of rules and regulations, control and being made to feel like a child. But, as one commentator said, Jesus was revealed as the Son of God primarily in his obedience, and not in his power, in his ability to perform wondrous signs and miracles.

We are then asked to be obedient to Jesus' command to love as he loved. That is the hard part, is it not? We are to love sacrificially, even to the point of giving our lives for one another out of love.

This reminds me of the saying, "What would Jesus do?" We are to enter into life and love asking that very question. How would Jesus love? What would Jesus do? Will Willimon says we often dismiss such questions as naïve, simplistic, and unrealistic. He says, when we dismiss those questions, "what we really mean is that it is very difficult, costly, demanding." It is a copout then to call simple questions like, What would Jesus do? naïve. We should at least wrestle with what that calls us to do.

Another commentator says doing what Jesus would do, being one with Jesus is "not merely a hot-tub experience of mystical togetherness." Instead, it involves "ethical rigor" and loving in a way that is sacrificial. We call that kind of love agape. It is loving like Jesus loved.

I am reminded of a very sweet, little movie called "Lars and the Real Girl." I want to warn you, it starts out quite weird, but then it turns into a wonderful little film. At one point one of the brothers in the movie asks his older brother how he knew when he was a man. The brother was not all that articulate. The question threw him. But, eventually he said he knew he was a man when he decided to do the right thing, to take care of his family, even when it was not convenient, or easy, even when it hurt. That seems to be what Jesus commands his disciples to do when he commands them to love one another as he loved them.

The obvious question that comes up here is: how can you command someone to love? Isn't love a feeling? How can you command a feeling? And the obvious answer is: you can't. No one can command us to feel any way. So, love must be something other than a feeling.

Basically love is a decision to act a certain way. It has very little to do with a warm, emotional feeling. I think those in a long term relationships understand this. Those warm, fuzzy feelings of love, kind of like having a crush on someone, are pretty fickle. They come and go. But, even when we are not feeling "in love" we can act lovingly. That is true love.

When I perform a marriage ceremony, I don't ask, "Do you love the other person?" Instead, I ask "Will you love them in sickness and health, etc.?" Love is an act of the will. It is a decision to put the other's well-being before your own.

One commentator said about marriage, “Real, deep, abiding love is the result of marriage rather than its cause.” We may decide to get married because we are “in love,” but true love is something that is learned, experienced, and chosen over time. The same can be said of loving others in obedience to Jesus’ command to love.

The good news in all of this is that when we choose to love in obedience to Jesus’ commandment, that is when we will experience God’s presence. Choosing to love opens our eyes to that presence hidden from the eyes of the world that has not given themselves to love.

I know it has been true for me, and I suspect many in this room would agree. The clearest experience of God’s love, God’s tenderness, God’s word has come to us in being loved by another, or in our own taking the risk to love sacrificially. Such loving opens us to a depth dimension of life I call God. As I John says, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

It is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of truth, as Jesus put it, that enables us to love and see clearly. That Spirit abides in us. It is all around us. As Paul says in our Acts passage, we live and move and have our being in the Spirit that is God.

Ultimately, because of that Spirit, we are not orphaned. We are not left to deal with a large, alien world alone and defenseless. We have a counselor, an advocate, a comforter to help us and be with us.

I don’t know about you, but I wrestle with God’s seeming absence periodically. Sometimes it is very painful. I wonder if there is any truth to the presence of God, especially when our culture puts very little stock in anything we can’t own, control, manipulate, or see physically.

But, when I give myself to loving my family, or a dear friend, or even someone in the Church, the presence of God mysteriously becomes real. Our loving as Jesus loved brings healing to the other. It also brings a deep sense of presence to us if we have but eyes to see. Amen