

May 17, 2020 Love and Obedience John 14:15-21 Caledon East UC Rev. Ross Leckie

"If you love me," Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel reading this week, "you will keep my commandments." And later: "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." Love and obedience. According to Jesus, the two are inseparable. We can't honestly claim to love Jesus if we don't obey him. That sounds like quite a challenge to me. Do you find it jarring? Is it just me, or are we *supposed* to find the juxtaposition of love and obedience in this text a bit overwhelming? I suppose we ought to begin by asking, "*What* commandments?" What exactly has Jesus commanded us to do? Well, back in chapter 13, John gives us the answer: "A new command I give you," Jesus says. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." In fact, this commandment — Jesus's "Maundy Thursday" mandate that his disciples love one another — is the only recorded commandment in John's Gospel. Everything else we say and do as believers in Christ comes down to this. Prayer, evangelism, repentance, generosity, asking, seeking, offerings, truth-telling, honouring, serving, feeding, sharing... all of it, in the end, comes down to love. The essential question, the burning question, is this: Do we love one another as Jesus has loved us? Or do we not?

What's painful about this commandment, of course, is how easy it is to get it wrong or bring it out only when it suits us. When I look at my own life, it's not too hard to name why I perpetually fail to obey Jesus's dying wish. Love requires us to be vulnerable, and I'd rather not be vulnerable. Love requires trust, and I'm naturally suspicious. Love spills over margins and boundaries, and I feel safer and holier keeping my borders just where they are, thank you very much. Love takes time, effort, discipline, and transformation, and I am just so darned busy to do it well.

As writer Debie Thomas correctly points out, Jesus didn't say, "This is my *suggestion*." He said, "This is my commandment." Meaning, it's not a choice. It's not a matter of personal preference; it's a matter of obedience to the one we call our Lord. Maybe now it's easier to understand why Jesus's bringing together love and obedience feels so jarring. Essentially, he is *commanding* us to love other people, whether we want to or not, whether we like them or not, and we are *not* used to thinking about love in terms of obedience to a command. Can we be ordered to love?

My guess is, most of us would say no. Shaped as we are by Hollywood, by romance novels, by the flippant use of the word, love today, we tend to think of love between people as spontaneous and free-flowing. We *fall* in love. Love is blind, it happens at first sight, it breaks our hearts, its course never runs smooth, etc. etc. etc. Real love, many of us might say, has nothing to do with calculated obedience. Real love is an emotion. A feeling.

In one sense, our instincts are correct; authentic love can't be manipulated, simulated, or rushed without suffering distortion. Those of us who have children understand full well that "commanding" our bickering kids to love each other doesn't work. The most we can do is insist that our children behave *as if* they love each other: "Share your toys." "Say sorry." "Don't hit." "Use kind words."

But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — aren't the same as what Jesus is talking about in John's Gospel. Jesus doesn't stop at saying, "Act as if you love." He doesn't give his disciples (or us) the easy "out" of doing nice things with clenched or indifferent hearts. (Nor would I want him to; nothing feels as hollow as a "loving" act performed mechanically. Moreover, I doubt that the people who flocked to Jesus would have done so if they sensed that his compassion was thin or forced.) He says, "Love one another as I have loved you." Like really. Nothing artificial about it. Authentic feeling, honest engagement, generous action.

In our weekly on-line newsletter that Barbara Helander edits and compiles, I pointed us to that familiar passage in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...(1 Corinthians 13)

Honestly, doesn't it sound like Jesus is asking for the impossible? At the same time, though, don't you yearn for what he's describing? Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, and to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus's seriously? What effect could Caledon churches together have on our neighbourhoods if we Christians obeyed orders and together cultivated this "impossible" love?

I ask these questions fearfully, because I don't always know how to answer them, even for myself. I mean, I know fairly well how to do "love-y" things. How to act "as if." And maybe that's a valuable way to begin. I know how to make care packages for the homeless. Or bring dessert to the church potluck. Or send checks to my favorite charities. But do I know how to love as Jesus loved? To feel a depth of compassion that's gut-punching? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that I rearrange my life in order to pursue it? To empathize until my heart breaks? Do I want to? Most of the time — I'll be honest — I don't. I want to be safe. I want to keep my circle of affection small and manageable. I want to choose the people I love based on my own affinities and preferences — not on Jesus's all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating my heart? Preparing and pruning it to love? Becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain? Those things are hard. Hard and costly. And yet Jesus's words in this Gospel are crystal clear. It is NOT sufficient (or even meaningful) to profess love for Jesus while we hold ourselves apart from our fellow human beings. To love Jesus is to love others. All others. The lover, the friend, the neighbour, the companion. But also the refugee, the stranger, the misfit, and the enemy. The ones with whom we agree, and the ones with whom we emphatically disagree. The ones we naturally like, and the ones we don't. Even in this Covid-19 time.

If our reading this week ended with Jesus's call to obedience, I would despair, but mercifully, there's more to the story. We don't have to love all by ourselves. We don't have to do the impossible on our own. Jesus's desire is not that we wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own meager resources. Rather, his commandment is accompanied by a promise: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor (the presence of God-oftentimes called Spirit), to be with you forever."

Jesus not only claims that God's love is true; he also claims that God's love is the source of life. This love is both the source of our lives and the goal of our lives. Alan Paton, in his novel, Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful, pictures a scene that illustrates this life-giving power of love and the assurance that God's love discloses what is most true. Paton describes a situation in South Africa during apartheid, when laws prevented black South Africans from mixing with whites. At the death of a white South African official who had worked within the system to humanize life for the oppressed, the blacks were turned away from his funeral, despite the wishes of the family. It was a terrible insult. Anxious to bring some reconciliation, Isaiah Buti, a black minister, visited the white chief justice, whom he had reason to imagine as a friend to his oppressed people. He asked the judge to participate in the Good Friday service where the congregation would observe Jesus' practice of washing the disciples' feet. He asked the chief justice to wash the feet of a congregant who had been a servant in the judge's home and had cared for his children. The chief justice readily agreed, though he asked to participate in the service with no prior announcement.

When the time came for the judge to wash Martha Fortuin's feet, the judge came forward and washed and dried her feet. Before he rose to return to his seat, he took her feet and gently kissed them both. It was a gesture that set healing in motion, because in that simple extra expression of care, he disclosed the truthfulness and life-giving power of God's love. Of course, the act became known and the judge's career was affected, but he had no regrets, because he too experienced the life-giving power of love that helps us recognize each other as neighbours.

The Advocate is God's own Spirit, God's own heart, living within us. This Spirit, Jesus promises us, will be in us, making possible the startling, counter-intuitive obedience which is love. This Spirit will abide within and among us, creating holy places where authentic, self-sacrificial human love can take

root and flourish. The Spirit's resources are inexhaustible. Long after our natural stores are depleted, the Spirit of God will love in, among, and through us.

As is so often the case in our lives as Christians, Jesus's commandment leads us straight to paradox: we are called to action via rest. Called to give the love we receive. Called to become the beloved children we are. The commandment — or better yet, the invitation — is to drink our fill of the Source, spill over to bless the world, and then return to the Source for a fresh in-filling. This is our movement, our rhythm, our dance. Over and over again. This is where we begin and end and begin again. Love me by keeping my commandments, Jesus says. These are finally not two separate actions. They are one and the same. We love because we are loved. We obey Christ because we are in Christ. The love we are commanded to share is the love we are endlessly given. "You in me, and I in you." This is the definition of love we are called to live. Amen.

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Thomas, Debie, Journey with Jesus, weekly webzine, "Love and Obedience," May 10, 2020

Paton, Alan, Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful, New York, Scribners, 1981, 229-35