

“*This is my commandment,*” Jesus says—“*LOVE one another... as I have loved you!*” It is, perhaps, as clear and easy-to-understand a “command” as you will ever find in the Bible—*if only* it was as easy to *DO!*

Jesus wasn’t big on issuing commands. He was more apt to offer a beatitude or a parable to teach an important lesson... or issue an invitation to “come and see” / to “follow him” and learn from him... or call people to “repent / turn around” and find forgiveness / life.

In fact, this is the **ONLY** “commandment” Jesus ever issued—and he says it more than once... here in his “Farewell Discourse”—at his last supper with his disciples—after he stooped down and washed their feet as an example of servant LOVE... and again here, as he talks about himself as the vine and his followers as the branches “abiding in him”... being tended / pruned with care by God, the vine grower, so that they/we might bear good fruit.

Even when Jesus was put on the spot by a religious leader... and asked what was the first / greatest of the commandments, he “summed up” all the commandments with LOVE □ LOVE God... LOVE your neighbors—“*There is no other commandment greater than these,*” he said in Mark 12:30-31... “*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets,*” he said in Matt. 22:37-40.

Now, if we pay attention, at all, to Jesus’ life and ministry—to his words (his parables and sermons)... and his actions (his *example*)—we are “taught” a lot about what we should do / how we should live. BUT this was the one (and only) thing that was important enough for Jesus to phrase as a command—that we are to LOVE one another... as he has loved us!

Last words matter. They are precious. They say what is most important. Of all that Jesus might have said, on this—his last night with his disciples—he chooses LOVE ... and relationship.

How about you? If you could say just a few “last words” as you knew you were dying, *to whom* would they be addressed? And *what* would they be?

I’m guessing that somewhere in those “last words” would be: “I love you!”... “Thank you!”... Maybe some words of assurance: “You’re going to be ok”... “I’m ready”... Maybe a request: “Take care of your brother / sister”... “Be happy”...

Chapters 13-17 in John’s Gospel are Jesus’ “last words” of his earthly life. In this holy ground context, Jesus says, “*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you...*”

LOVE is the heart of Jesus’ teaching!

And this is a particular kind of LOVE that he “commands” here—it is *agape* LOVE... the unconditional / self-sacrificing LOVE that he, himself, exemplifies.

It is the kind of LOVE that Jesus showed / offered to others—those who accepted him and those who did not... those who were easy to LOVE and those who were not.

Jesus’ self-emptying LOVE points back to the self-emptying LOVE of God... and forward to the kind of self-emptying LOVE expected of us. God’s LOVE was shown in the fact that Jesus was sent into the world. This divine self-emptying, first by God and then by Jesus, is the kind of LOVE to which we are all called. We are to LOVE one another in the way Jesus loved us. We are to truly value / cherish one another ... to even lay down our lives for one another, if necessary...

Perhaps it is the radical nature of this LOVE that requires a commandment. Because this kind of LOVE does not come naturally or easily. We human branches in Christ need the Spirit's help to hone practices like forgiveness (without which we will, sooner or later, find reasons not to LOVE most everyone)... We need to continue to grow in kindness / compassion so that we might reach out to / serve those in need in LOVE / to LOVE those we don't particularly like.

*"No one has greater LOVE than this,"* Jesus says, *"to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

Keep in mind—Jesus says this on the eve of his crucifixion. He is about to embody the LOVE he describes here. This *is* what he does!

*"You are my friends... if you do as I command you,"* Jesus continues... (and what he "commands" is to "LOVE one another... as I have loved you").

This word translated "*friend*," here, actually comes from the root word for LOVE. In Greek, a *friend* is literally, "*one who is loved*." So *friendship*, here, is more than just a connection of shared interests / goals (like on a softball / baseball team or even in a congregation)... it is more than a BFF / buddy or pal that you like to hang out with... definitely more than someone you "connect" with periodically via phone / Facebook / Snapchat / Facetime / or whatever. *Friendship*, in the way that Jesus uses it, is grounded in a deep and abiding LOVE—a LOVE that is constant and enduring... a LOVE that chooses us (often, long before we choose it)... a LOVE that looks, always, for the well-being of the other... a LOVE that crosses boundaries and societal barriers... LOVE that goes to the end—even, as Jesus showed us, to the point of "giving one's life for."

*"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,"* Jesus says, *"abide in my LOVE."*

Jesus' idea of *friendship* is defined by / shaped by God's LOVE for him. Jesus is "*one who is loved*" by God—chosen, claimed, embraced, and held all the way from the manger to the cross... to the empty tomb and beyond. As that LOVE shaped and defined Jesus' life and ministry, so now Jesus' LOVE is to shape and define the life and ministry of his disciples / followers (his *friends*) – both then... and now.

As God, the Father, loved Jesus... as Jesus has loved us... so, now, we—his disciples / his branches / his *friends*—are to abide in his LOVE... which, in turn, enables us to LOVE others as we have been loved.

*Abide. Remain. Dwell. Stay. Continue. Live.* If you remember from last week these are all possible translations of the Greek word that Jesus uses here when we urges us to *abide* in him / his LOVE. And they all tell us one very important thing: Jesus, our Lord, wants us to know / experience / enjoy a deep and intimate relationship with him... he wants to cultivate, so to speak, that kind of relationship with him... as the true vine.

As we reflected last week, branches that try to "go it alone"—try to live apart from the vine... without the sap of Jesus (and his LOVE) flowing in and through them—they soon wither and die. But branches that remain "in the vine"—drawing life and LOVE and sustenance from Jesus... (and submitting themselves to the vine grower's loving pruning shears where necessary)—they live fully... and they produce fruit—the kind of fruit that lasts... the fruit of LOVE.

Dear friends, at the core of the Christian faith is the understanding / belief that we can only be complete in Jesus Christ. He, alone, is the source of life. He, alone, can help us overcome our weaknesses... forgive our failures... heal our brokenness... and give us life—abundant life—as God intends – for all!

But for this to happen, we need to “*abide in him*” / “*stay connected to him*” / “*continue in him*” and his LOVE... as he abides in us / stays connected to us / continues in us.

What does this look like?

We all know that friendship—deep / true friendship, anyway—doesn’t just happen. Friends talk... and listen to each other; they ask questions... discuss important (and unimportant) happenings; they share joys... and concerns; they spend time (quality time) together... and are genuinely interested in each other.

True / deep friendship requires time and attention and commitment... and a sharing of the self.

If that is true of human friendship, is it *not* true of our “friendship” with Jesus as well?!

Following Jesus isn’t a religion... and it is more than going to worship. It is a personal relationship—a personal relationship of LOVE and loyalty and commitment—to the One who loves us more than we can ever truly understand... to the One who doesn’t call us servants / slaves... but who calls us “*friends*”... and asks us to share his LOVE with others.

Sometimes we forget that, I think. Sometimes we forget... that what Jesus wants us to be, first and foremost, is his “*friends*” (in the truest sense)—“*ones who are loved*” □ to LOVE him and to be loved by him... to let our LOVE and service / our fruits grow from that LOVE.

That is what our Gospel reading reminds us of today.

- How are you expressing LOVE to those around you? and not just to those you like / agree with?
- Are you selective about who deserves your LOVE?
- Is your LOVE unconditional? Or are there conditions attached to it?
- Is LOVE your go-to posture as you live in this world as the hands and feet of Jesus... as his *friends*?

“*Abide in my LOVE,*” Jesus says. It is the one ingredient that always uplifts. Let LOVE flow through every fiber of your being... every interaction and intention of your lives.

LOVE is what confirms our vertical relationship with God... only when it extends it horizontally to those around us!

“*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my LOVE.*” Jesus says.

“*LOVE one another... as I have loved you!*”

This is a radical challenge that Jesus puts before us today... and every day.

Pray for the grace to offer such LOVE to those you encounter...

*Loving Lord, we give you thanks for every precious gift and blessing that you shower on us so abundantly; but especially we thank you for the precious gift of relationship – with you and with each other. Help us to be your loving branches. Help us to be aware of the needs of others... and to love and serve them as your “friends” – as ones whom you love. In your name we pray. Amen.*