

May 17 2020, By Our Love

When you love someone, really, really love someone, doing what is good and right comes so much more naturally and easily. Parents can be a good illustration of this: it may be a challenge at times to be a parent, but the love one feels for one's children makes it a "no-brainer" to do what's good for them even when it's not easy.

In any case, Jesus is speaking to a *group* and not to an individual, and preparing them for what is to come. In his farewell address, as Jesus summarizes his teachings one last time, he also reassures his bewildered disciples that they will not be left on their own, to fend for themselves, to rely on their own resources and their own wits. Undoubtedly this was a good thing; they couldn't have managed any better than we could on our own!

He will not leave them orphans, Jesus tells them, without a loving Father/Mother God to care for them. The word "orphan" can also refer to the disciple of a departed teacher. However, you can also use the parent/child image to describe the feeling of security that children long for when they're left alone. They want to be reassured that someone greater,

stronger, smarter is not only present but in charge. And they want to be reassured that *this someone loves them*.

As usual, we get the sense that the disciples are as lost as we would have been, back there, on on the one side of Easter and Pentecost soon to come. The way John tells it, he is heading off to a family reunion with his father that no one else is invited to, and he is leaving them in charge while he is gone. And even with Easter, and Pentecost, and centuries of faith between them and us, from where we sit, it has been so long that some of us wonder if we have not been orphaned after all. Perhaps that's how the disciples felt, how terrified they must have been, after leaving everything behind for this Teacher, and then finding themselves definitely outside the mainstream because of that decision.

They couldn't just slip easily back into their lives; things would never be the same. And yet it wasn't clear to them exactly how things were going to be: that was beyond the power of their imaginations. And so too we are left to our imagination, will our lives ever be the same again after this threat of Covid-19 passes? We need words of hope, courage and love.

Jesus' words about love and obedience may seem like just that: words in a lovely speech long ago. But they aren't just pretty words. Jesus

backs up his claims with a promise to send the Holy Spirit, to be with these disciples, and with all of us today, two thousand years later.

In two weeks, Pentecost Sunday will provide ample opportunity to reflect further on this Holy Spirit, but for now, we return to that hushed conversation between the departing Teacher and his anxious students. They are the future of the church, such as they are, and Jesus speaks to them not as individuals, each with his or her own private relationship with him, but as the church.

However, this church is the community of faith that is not timebound or limited to one little group of disciples: it includes all those generations, John's community and ours as well, who are listening in on the conversation.

So, what does Jesus tell his disciples to do? He tells them to keep his commandments. What mattered to Jesus was love, and it's no surprise that "love" is right there, in the very same sentence with "obey my commandments."

We might respond, first, that the commandments that mattered to Jesus were those two about loving God and loving our neighbour. And, we might add, he expanded (by his words and deeds) our understanding of

those commandments to include things like forgiveness, praying for our enemies, caring about the poor and the marginalized.

What would this obedience look like in our faith journeys today: would anyone be able to pick us out of a crowd as followers of Jesus, because of our love? I think of my days at church camp and the song “They will know we are Christians by our love”, that we sang earlier. This is more than individual acts and momentary flights of spirituality – it’s an “extraordinary” way of life, that follows the way of Jesus.

If we live and love as Jesus did, we will do so with clear consciences, with gentleness and reverence. The love that comes to us through the Spirit and will overflow into the lives of others. We will be **agents of God's** love in the world. Indeed, those we encounter will sense that the Spirit animates our individual and our collective

I just love that phrase, “**agents of God's love in the world.**” It’s so active and inspiring for everyday life. Of course, hypocrisy (in so many forms) is undoubtedly the number one reason people are turned off by religion (or at least by religious people), but I think that we need to find ways to share the Good News of the Spirit who has been “called alongside”

us, to help us when we feel weak and broken and not up to the tasks of healing, loving, and courageous witness that The Way involves.

Or is it, perhaps, that in our own lives, at this moment, we are so damaged, so hurt, even absorbed by chaos, that our call is to live this day in trust, in hope, to persist, one day at a time, even when all seems hopeless around and within us? This may be an internal, an inside problem for the church and for us as individuals seeking spiritual meaning.

And so, I listen as my friends, inside the church and out, describe a fraying of their own hope. Will the homeless find homes? Will the addicts be helped? Will those with mental health issues receive help they need? What is the response of the church to that fraying? If faith can be described as trust, what is hope to you? How does the Spirit strengthen your hope? What difference does your hope make in the world?

But, we are not left alone; we are not orphans; we are Easter people. A church full of 'Easter people' is a place where grieving or searching souls can be comforted, encouraged, and strengthened because they sense God's presence and God's Spirit in our midst, inspiring and sustaining the life we share together, nourished for ministry in the world God loves.

If we want to know whether we are loving Jesus, perhaps we can hold up our life together in the light of this claim. The words we're hearing often in the midst of our isolation because of the pandemic are "We are in this Together." Also, we are "Stronger Together." Dr. Bonnie Henry always says: "To Be Kind, To Be Calm, To Be Safe & To Stay Home" How can we be the church, together, and share God's love while we are so physically far apart?

In today's text, we can learn more about what love means to Jesus through other parts of the legacy He left the disciples. He said to them, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you **another friend** to be with you forever" (John 14:16). Out of Jesus' love for His followers and for God's love of both Jesus and humanity, a friend, or helper as it is translated from Greek, would be sent to Jesus' followers – that friend is The Holy Spirit. Don't forget that another close friend is Jesus who was also a friend sent by God to the world, to reconcile it, to love it, and to draw humanity closer to God through his life, death, and resurrection.

It was as if Jesus knew His followers would need assistance living a life of love as He, the ultimate embodiment of love, did. Luckily, for them and for us, the Spirit they were given would be with them forever: it was *with* them and *within* them. The Spirit would be part of His legacy,

reminding His followers of His legacy and guiding them as they strive to live into it.

So here, to love is to be an advocate, a friend, to give oneself for others as Christ. This definition of love is illuminated throughout the Gospels. We are to continue loving our neighbour and seeing them as God sees us all, in word and in deed. This Spirit is still moving among and within us today as we continue Jesus' work of love! We too have not been left alone in the task we are called to as believers.

But how are we to live into Jesus' legacy? How do we reflect, live into, and embody love? We are to advocate as a church. We are to preach and teach messages of love. We are to advocate through the hospitality we show to those who are most active in the church, towards those who visit once in a while, and towards those who need a warm place to sleep or to receive food. We also show love as a living church outside of the church building, being a public witness of God's love. We must strive to dismantle systems that keep people in poverty by advocating for human rights. We must listen to people in the community who are deemed voiceless as we meet them in the community or when they enter our churches. We must journey with persons as they seek to grow deeper in their relationships with God and with their neighbour. We must create disciples of love.

This responsibility can be overwhelming. I am sure the disciples were overwhelmed by the life they were summoned to live. However, like the disciples, we have the Holy Spirit as our advocate, friend. The times we feel powerless or unequipped for a particular task, or for delivering God's message, we too can ask God for the Spirit of Truth as Jesus did.

This reminds me of one of my favorite hymns by Daniel Iverson that we will soon sing together:

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living, God fall afresh on me.

Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

This is our prayer. To be God's vessels of love, not only holding it within us, but pouring it out for others to receive as we receive. *Melt me*: work within me to be more loving. Remove aspects of myself that keep me from loving fully, from forgiving, and for asking for forgiveness. *Mold me*: into the person you created me to be. *Fill me*: with your love, compassion, indignation, courage and wisdom. *Use me*: to continue your ministry of love in the world, working beside others as models following your example, inspiring the church and the world to create not only a present reality of love, but a future one as well.

The Spirit and Jesus both reside in us, empower us, and equip us. We are one in love, with God and with each other. May we remember through all our trials and challenges; hopes, dreams and joys, that there are many ways in which we can still grow in our ability to love with Christ and the Holy Spirit by our side. Amen.