A New “Commandment”?

Co-missioners,

Last week’s post by Matt Metevelis (“Better Medicine”) prompted Steve Albertin to submit a sermon he preached three years ago on the Gospel appointed for the Sixth Sunday of Easter in Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary. A lot of us will be listening to this come May 9th. Some will be taking their own stab at preaching on it. It’s one of those texts that are commonly used to push the ideas Matt critiqued. We think Steve exemplifies an approach to the text that avoids this trap and leaves hearers with the better medicine Matt was calling for. Look in particular for Steve’s ruminations on conditional sentences.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

“Love One Another”: The Command that is not a Command
A Sermon on John 15:9-17

by Steven E. Albertin



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Some things in life can be commanded and some cannot. A general can command his army to charge into battle to defend its country, but cannot command them to love their country. A boss can command his workers to meet certain production quotas, but he cannot command them to love their jobs. A parent can command that her child eat her spinach, but she cannot command her to love her spinach. We can command many things from people, but one thing we can never command from them: their love. We love because we choose to, because we want to, because we *get to*.

Then why does Jesus say in our Gospel for today, “This is my *commandment*, that you love one another?” Isn’t this an oxymoron? Isn’t He commanding what cannot be commanded?

This sounds a whole lot like The Golden Rule. “Treat others in the same way that you want to be treated. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*If* you do a favor for someone else, THEN you can expect them to do a favor for you. *If* I scratch your back, *then* you must scratch mine.

Many also think that this is what Jesus teaches: *If* you want others to love you, *then* you first must love them. However, if we look at what Jesus says in today’s Gospel, we see something very different. There are no conditions in what Jesus says! There are no “if’s” or “but’s”. There are no threats of loss or promises of reward.

In fact, what Jesus says is no commandment at all. There is no carrot and stick. There is no challenge to do something in order to get something. Instead, Jesus invites us to put to use what He has already given to us.

The context of Jesus’ words makes that clear. Jesus speaks to His disciples in the Upper Room on the night of his betrayal. Trouble lies ahead. One of them will betray him. All of them will abandon him. His disciples are afraid and confused. Jesus responds by assuring them that He will not abandon them. He has chosen them. They are his friends. He will lay down his life for them. They need not be afraid.

It is such fear that keeps us from loving. When we are afraid of the future or threatened by a stranger, when we have something to hide that we do not want anyone else to see, we throw up walls and hide behind doors. We can only think about “what’s in it for me.” We are impatient with those who are different. Then, like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we walk by on the other side of the road concerned only about ourselves, afraid that taking time to help the guy in the ditch might cost us.

It is to such frightened and worried disciples that Jesus speaks the comforting words of today's Gospel. We are his friends. He has chosen us. He will not abandon us. He loves us so much that he will lay down his life for us.

Jesus goes to the cross, bearing the fears and secrets we have wanted to keep hidden. Jesus carries all that saps the life out of our hearts all the way to the grave, suffering the consequences for us so that we might have His life! God raises Jesus from the dead so that we might be free from all that would make us cower in fear, walk by on the other side—and keep us from loving.

With God on our side, what is there to hold us back? We don't have to be worried about "what's in it for me." Instead, we can forget about ourselves, giving ourselves away for the sake of those in need.

I call these ***commands that are not commands***—or the "second use of the Gospel." If the "first use of the Gospel" is the announcement of God's unconditional love for us in Jesus, then the "second use of the Gospel" is Jesus' "loving commandment" to put that love to work, to love one another *as* He has loved us. There are no threats of punishment or promises of reward. This command is a "get to" because of what Jesus has already done for us. There is no cajoling or arm-twisting. It is as natural as a fish choosing to swim, as a bird choosing to fly, as a dog choosing to bark, and a human being choosing to breathe. It is what you do when this is what you are.



When Jesus speaks in conditional sentences, as he does in today's Gospel, he uses a particular kind of conditional sentence. There are two kinds of conditional sentences: condition *contrary to fact* and condition *according to fact*. In *condition-contrary-to-fact* sentences, if a condition is fulfilled, then, contrary to fact, things change. "If you eat your spinach, then you get your dessert." The fact is that you have not eaten your spinach. However, if contrary to that fact, you eat your spinach, then you get your dessert. Then there are *condition-according-to-fact* sentences. If you are Ryan Brunkhurst (our music director who has great keyboard skills), then you play the organ and piano. If you are Victor Oladipo (the Pacers' new star who has incredible physical skills), then you dunk the basketball, make three pointers and fake defenders out of their shoes. If we are loved by Jesus (which is a fact), then according to that fact, we love one another. It is what we do when we are loved by Jesus.

It is like winning the lottery. What do you do with a winning lottery ticket? Go bury it in the back yard? Of course not! A winning lottery ticket begs you to do something, to cash it in and put it to use. You now have power to do things you could not do before.

It is like Christmas morning and your children see gifts under the tree. What do you say to them? You speak "commands," but these are not ordinary commandments. These are words are part of the gift. You say, "go," "open," "enjoy" the gifts. There are no conditions, no "ifs," no "buts." The Christmas gifts would no longer be gifts if you first had to clean the bedroom or wash the dishes. Instead, these friendly commands invite us to open

what has already been given.

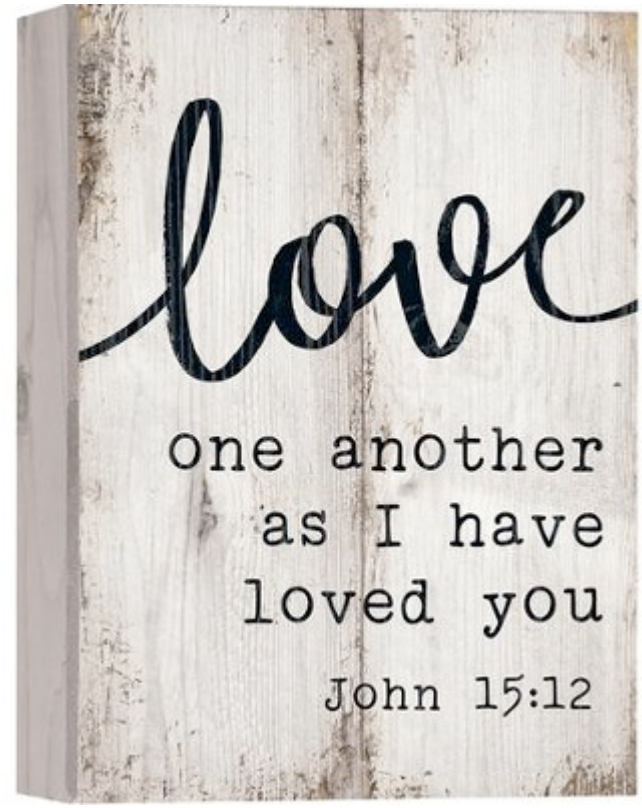
This is love that is not concerned about following a command. There is no worry about getting it right. There is no regard for self or what's in it for me. It's all about caring for the "other."

This love is so special that the New Testament virtually invents a new word to name it. It takes a very rare word for love, *agape,* and makes it the centerpiece of the story of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. First-century Greeks used a variety of words to describe that for which our English has only one word: "love."

There is *philos* love, the love of one friend for another. But friends only love those who want to be friends in return. Friendship ends when one of the friends is not living up to their end of the deal.

There is *storge* love, the love we might have for a hot dish of popcorn or a chocolate ice cream Sundae. This love loves those things that we like, that please our taste buds or our eyes or our sense of pleasure.

There is *eros* love, erotic love, the romantic love people have for one another. But this love too is only directed to those worth loving. You make my heart go pitter-patter, not because you are ugly or disagreeable but because I find you attractive, beautiful or handsome.



But *agape* love is like none of these. It is love for the *unlovable*. This love chooses to love someone simply because it wants to. *The beloved becomes lovable because of the love of the lover!* It is like the love of a mother for her children who loves them even when they are misbehaving, disrespectful, rude and downright unlovable. It is the love of Jesus for sinners and outcasts who rightly deserve none of it.

In my congregation in Fort Wayne were two German immigrants, Elizabeth and her husband Henry. They loved each other. They loved to talk of life in the old country. Henry loved to have me stop by in the afternoon and drink a beer as he reminisced. However, one day Henry was struck down by a cruel stroke. Elizabeth could no longer care for him. She had to put him in a nursing home.

Elizabeth's love for her Henry and her dedication to his needs were amazing. Every day she went to the nursing home to care for him, feed him, dress him and assist him with the most basic of his needs, even changing his soiled clothes as he lay in bed. The staff scoffed at her dedication and quietly ridiculed her for caring for her husband when he didn't even know it was her! Was she trying to work off some guilt? Was she trying to impress someone? Was she simply a little crazy? What was in this for her?

During one afternoon visit, I entered the room and saw Elizabeth

singing into Henry's ear a German song. I did not know the song, but I knew enough German to recognize a few words. She was singing that old familiar song many of us learned as children. "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Then it became clear to me why she so loved a man who was incapable of giving her any love in return. It revealed why her love made no sense to a nursing home staff that could only understand commands and rules and doing something because of what you get in return.

This is what Elizabeth *wanted* to do. She would have it no other way. She was keeping the commandment that was no commandment for her. How do we say it around here at Christ Church? It was a "get to" and not a "have to."

What makes the difference? Jesus. Because of him, we are free to stop counting, calculating, and measuring. Because of him, we do not have to keep score. Because of him, this is what we do. Today's Second Reading from I John puts it well, "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Such love is not demanded. Such obedience is no obligation. Such behavior cannot be coerced. It is what we *get to do*.

It is what happens when a commandment is no longer a commandment but an invitation to enjoy a gift, the gift of Christ, the gift that is like no other.