

“How to Love” – John 14:15-24

Our reading from John’s gospel this morning picks up where we left off last week, part way into Jesus’ farewell discourse to his disciples. Hopefully you’ll recall from Curtis’ fine preaching that Jesus and his closest followers have just finished supper, and Jesus has announced to them that he is going away. The disciples are rocked by this news and the disturbing predictions of betrayal and denial that accompanied it. Jesus has already reassured them that even though they cannot come where he is going, he will return some day to take them to be with him. We enter the scene here, with the obvious questions hanging in the air: “but what happens between now and the day you return, Lord?”; “what will we do?”; “what are we to do?”; “how will we ever be able to go on?”.

To those confused and frightened disciples Jesus offers two promises to answer those unspoken questions. First he promises he will ask the Father to send them the ultimate advocate and helper, the Holy Spirit. Not only is this the first promise Jesus makes here, this is the first of five times in this gospel that we hear him make the promise that the Holy Spirit will come to his followers, and be with them and in them, and answer all of the questions they might ever have. He promises not only they but the whole church that they plant would be sustained forever through this divine breath of life. Five times Jesus offers a reassurance to everyone who follows and believes in him that the words and truth of the Father would continue to come to them and be explained for them through the work of this Advocate, this Spirit of truth, this Spirit from God, this Holy Spirit.

But there’s more – Jesus also promises not only will the sustaining Spirit be with them, he himself will return and be with his followers, his church, bringing the gift of life eternally with the Father. To those who love him he promises not only his own love and comforting and sustaining presence but also the love of God the Father.

What reassurance! What promises! The gift of life, and of the Spirit, and of being connected with God, all in return for loving Jesus. How sweet is that?!

Beware, though – word of caution is in order here – this is one of those dangerous phrases of scripture that people pick up and use as a club to beat up on others. The verse or phrase they use as a weapon of “un-love” is, “if you love me”, but just as they turn love into victimizing they reverse the meaning of the phrase. In the bible the word “if” here is not conditional. Reversed, and used as a club, the words become “if you don’t love Him” and are used as a threat or an excuse to do spiritual violence. What such unloving folks do is miss the point that Jesus uses the phrase “if you love me” to bracket his two promises – markers at the beginning and at the end to highlight his definition of what Jesus means by ‘loving him’, and he even restates it in the middle. Two promises of life in return for loving him, surrounded and intertwined with three definitions of what it means to love him. We can rejoice and celebrate the gifts of the Spirit and of life with God in Christ that are promised, but we really do need to understand what he means by ‘loving him’, being one of his disciples.

First off, we need to understand that the kind of loving that Jesus talks about here is not simply being all gushy about Jesus. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” he tells us. He is not talking about mere words of love, even highly emotional “I love you, Jesus!” kinds of utterances. Three times around these two

promises Jesus connects love with commandments, and obedience. It's not about emotion. You cannot command emotion. No matter how hard you try, even with the threat of cruise missiles raining down, you cannot order someone to feel love. To be sure, you can get feelings in response to orders and commands, but they probably are a long, long way from the kinds of feelings that are ordered or expected! You cannot order someone to feel a particular kind of way, "I command you to be happy, and contented, and satisfied!", and you cannot order someone to feel emotional love. Jesus makes these promises to those who love him obediently, who are 'doing' love, who understand love is action, not merely words or feelings. Think about the difference in these two domestic scenes: in one the husband, sitting on the couch after eating a superb meal prepared by his wife, hollers to her in the kitchen as she's doing the dishes, "love yah, `hon!"; in the other he quietly appears at her side, dishtowel in hand, to help. We have all kinds of sayings and adages that reveal that we do indeed understand the difference, such as "actions speak louder than words." Jesus offers these assurances of life to those who love him with actions of obedience, keeping his commandments.

But just as we need to be careful not to accept a limited definition of love as being merely emotional, we also need to be careful not to settle for a limited definition of what Jesus means by keeping his commandments. There are people who take Jesus' admonition to "love him by keeping his commandments" very, very seriously, but unfortunately stop at only ten commandments, missing the all-important 'eleventh commandment' of Jesus ("I give you another, that you love God with all your being, and that you love one another as I have loved you"). These people are so busy loving Jesus by obeying righteous rules that they appear to everyone else like a prickly cactus – no, fire ant might be a better simile, because a cactus is purely defensive – it doesn't actively attack you! The really unfortunate part is that their actions have the opposite effect of what Jesus was calling for, driving children into defiant dysfunction, causing relatives and friends and neighbours to pull the curtains and pretend not to be available, and making strangers think that if eternal life means spending forever with this kind of person, who needs or wants it?

If we love Jesus, and the assumption both here and in what Jesus says is that yes, of course we love him, we will want to understand what his commandments are. There is that eleventh commandment I mentioned a moment ago, that based on our love for and relation with God in Christ, we love each other as Jesus has loved us. Jesus gave this as a 'new' commandment not to replace the previous Big Ten, but to supplement them and put them into a new context.

To answer the question of how we are commanded to love calls for us to understand how Jesus loved us, and several words to describe his love for us come immediately to mind: **compassion**, **acceptance** and **sacrifice**. **Compassion** for the sick, the lame, the hungry, the imprisoned, the outcasts, the unloved and unlovely is glowingly evident in every step he took from his baptism in the Jordan to his declaration to the thief on the cross. **Accepting** women, children, men, gentile and Jew alike, rough fishermen as saints, eating and drinking with sinners caused Jesus to be challenged by the unloving righteous, but here two thousand years after he rose again we know that Christ was the winner of that challenge. At the peak of his ministry of proclaiming God's love with compassion and acceptance, surrounded by crowds cheering his entry into the holy city, Jesus set out on the last steps of the ultimate way of loving us, steps leading to his

sacrifice on the cross. A sacrifice in and of love, that brought from the Father life anew, not just for Jesus but for all who live out their love for him as the risen Christ. It seems pretty clear then that Jesus makes his offers of both the Holy Spirit and of his own abiding presence to those who live out their love for him in actions of compassion, acceptance and sacrifice.

Christ promised to be with those who love Him, and Christ is present with us, right here, right now. That is why we are here, to meet with him, to draw upon His promise of being with us, to hear what He has to say to us, to hear what He continues to call us to do in living out our love for Him in service.

We are called to be disciples of Jesus, but we are not expected to be disciples in our own strength. We are also powered to be His disciples, energized and given life through the promised Advocate, Helper, Holy Spirit. We are sustained and comforted by the very presence of Christ with us, and in us, and us in Him. We don't know fully, can't know completely where this journey with Christ will take us, but we can be sure that it will be interesting, and fulfilling. Moreover we can also be sure that He will fulfill His promise of support, strength, and even life eternal as He accompanies us. He has called us to be His disciples, and He has powered us to be His disciples, and we love Him for it.