

Love Is A Commandment - A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter
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Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."
John 15:9-17

In the past week I have seen a number of news articles about people who have laid down their lives in various ways to help others. There was the man who jumped off a bridge in Ocean City, Maryland to save a toddler in the water below who had been thrown from the family minivan in a multiple car crash. There was the young family out boating that rescued this same man and the toddler from the water and got them to safety. Then there was the rickshaw driver in India who decided to load an oxygen tank onto his vehicle and give free rides to COVID victims who were so weakened by the virus they could hardly walk to seek care. And when a tornado in Texas overturned tractor trailer trucks on the interstate, bystanders helped the drivers escape from their cabs. These are examples of love in action. These are examples of the kind of love Jesus is talking about in our Gospel this morning.

Love one another as I have loved you, Jesus commands. This is not a Valentine's Day sentimental kind of love, but a radical love, a difficult action. When we hear Jesus commanding us to love one another, to love God and our neighbor, we probably sit comfortably in our pews and think that this is manageable most of the time. We might be sure we would jump off a bridge to save our child. Would we be as certain we would jump off a bridge to save someone else's child? The man in Maryland did just that, leaving his own child in their parked car on the bridge.

Let's be clear. Jesus commands us to love. This may or may not involve martyrdom or death defying leaps off of bridges. But this love Jesus commands is more than sentiment, more than romance, more than loving only those dearest to us. This kind of love that Jesus commands gets complicated, and it can become difficult.

We know how hard, how impossible really, it is for us to command others to love. We know how we bristle when we are commanded to love those whom we just can not love. I imagine we all have a list of those people in our heads right now.

Ask a 9-year-old boy to love his annoying little sister and you are not likely to get very far. Think about your own resentment, gritted teeth, and clenched fists when your parents asked you to share or say you were sorry. Jesus is not interested in love doled out of resentful hearts. Jesus is asking for authentic love. Sounds impossible, doesn't it?

Commentator Debi Thomas asks, “Imagine what would happen to us if we took this commandment seriously? How would we have to change? What could Christendom look like if we obeyed orders and cultivated an impossible love?”

It’s been a long time, over a year now, that we have lived in pandemic mode. Love seems harder than ever, and we are exhausted. There has been so much loss, grief, and suffering, and even if we have personally escaped much of it, we are all too aware of it in the world around us. It has been our greatest challenge to move through this suffering without the usual support of church worship and fellowship, gatherings with family and friends, and real hugs.

So how are we to obey Jesus when he commands us to love? Where do we find the energy, and do we even want to try? Some days it seems too overwhelming, and we don’t even know where to begin. Jesus offers us a starting place.

Jesus says, “Abide in my love.” Abide in MY love.

This is the good news for me when I am exhausted, and I share it with you. When we feel like we are flat out of love, running on empty, cannot do or say one more nice thing to anybody, we can abide in the love of Jesus. We can stop, sit down, be still, and simply receive the love of Jesus. We can take whatever time we need to just sit in the love of Jesus, who loves us in our best and in our worst moments, and we can abide in his unrelenting love.

Jesus has told us he is the vine and we are the branches. All that we are, all that we have, and all that we can give is dependent on the vine, on Jesus. The vine and branches are in God’s care. They rely on the love and care of the vinegrower, who is God. A growing vine responds to sun, rain, and careful cultivation. It cannot exist of its own will but is dependent on the forces of creation. It must abide in God’s love.

Most days, it seems impossible to follow Jesus and do it very well. Even the first disciples failed at this over and over. But abiding in Jesus is not to *be* Jesus. Abiding in Jesus is to know where the source of all love is to be found. Jesus is not commanding us to love out of our own strength and determination. He’s asking us to abide in him, in the place where deepest, divine love originates.

When loving one another seems all but impossible, abide in the love of Jesus. Impossible things will take practice. As a way of practicing, I invite you to find an object that reminds you of Jesus and put it on your bedside table. It can be anything from nature – a rock or a shell or a feather, or it might be a cross or an icon. Each morning when you wake up, take a moment to let this object remind you of God’s abiding love for you. Move through your day knowing that Jesus abides in you. At the end of the day, before you fall asleep, take a moment to recall the ways God’s love was with you in impossible moments, and the ways you shared the abiding love of Jesus with others.

When we abide in the love of Jesus, we will be given all the love that we need. We will draw from an infinite reservoir of love that can be shared, that can be poured out in impossible ways, wherever it is urgently needed. This is how we love one another as Jesus has loved us. Amen.