

It may feel rather backwards chronologically, but our gospel for today doesn't come from one of the post-resurrection Easter appearances of Jesus, but from his final conversation with the disciples on Maundy Thursday. It was written however, for a community that was surely in need of Jesus' good words.

The writer that we know as John, was addressing a church that included very few, if any people who had actually met Jesus. By his time, most of the disciples were dead. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, which was a sign for many people that the end of time had come. But then it didn't.

Life went on and that was, in many ways, the hardest part of all. Jesus hadn't **returned** even when all the signs seemed right. This community of believers felt pushed to the very edge of despair. The gospel writer knew the dangers of that kind anguish, and so John pulled together many of the things that Jesus had said into this one section of the Gospel known as ***The Farewell Discourses***. It's a bit like *The Last Lecture Series* in some colleges, where professors are asked what they would say if they knew it was their very last time to give a speech or lecture.

In his final discourse, as they sat around the Passover Supper table, Jesus shared the same message over and his message was all about love.

- *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*
- *A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.*
- *Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.*
- *I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

+++

"But how can we do that?" the disciples must have wondered. There had to have been times when loving each other was tough – even when Jesus was with them. We know there was some bickering about who was Jesus' favorite. There was that whole thing with James and John's mom asking Jesus if they could sit in the seats of honor when he came into his kingdom.ⁱ That must have been awkward!

Any time you have that many people working together there are going to be differences of opinion about where to go, what to do, and how to manage it all. And there may have been a cultural belief that true friends would be willing to literally give their lives for each other, but that doesn't make it easy!

How could John's community love the way that Jesus called them to love when their memory of him seemed to be fading? And how are we supposed to get it right? Jesus modeled how to do it by obeying God's commands and abiding in God's love, but can we keep Jesus' commands and remain in his love, especially when he says that the key to it all is to be willing to sacrifice ourselves? Are we able to keep those kinds of commands?

And do we really have to?

I mean, really?

Let's be honest. We live in a society that has as a primary question, "What's in it for me?" We are very transactional.

- *I'll do this for you, if you'll do this for me.*
- *If the reward doesn't require extra effort- then why bother?*

- *If the prize is truly free – with no strings attached – and no hidden agenda - then why work for it? Just accept the grace and move on.*
- *If God is going to love me, no matter what - then why worry about being good?*

Do I really need to follow Christ's commands? If I am going to get to heaven, forgiven and redeemed, why get all excited about abiding or not abiding?

+ + +

About twenty years ago, we had reached the end of the school year and it was time for the eighth graders to be confirmed. The expectations that we had set for the students was that they completed a certain number of sermon notes – which meant that they had to be in worship. They had to listen to the sermon and answer a page worth of pretty basic questions.

They were supposed to acolyte a certain number of times during the year. And finally they were supposed to write a paper about their faith before meeting with the pastor and a member of the church council.

I had spread sheets and stacks of sermon notes. I read every paper and had to set up appointments for about two dozen students- matching them up with an available council person. It worked pretty well – unless of course, the kid didn't complete all the required work. And that year, there was a boy who fit into that category. He drove me nuts. He was cocky and inclined to give me a bit too much attitude. He didn't show up to worship that often. He didn't do sermon notes. He was only in class about half the time. And yet, his parents expected that he would be confirmed.

I was the fairly new, associate pastor and the kid's dad was on the church council. His mom volunteered for a lot of different things and I felt stuck. He hadn't done all the work. There were rules. There were expectations.

And yet Confirmation is about affirming our baptism. It's about affirming our faith. And faith and baptism are all about grace. If this kid wanted to be confirmed, did I really have the right to say "no." It was awful.

After a couple of very difficult days, I decided that the right thing to do was to confirm him. It was the loving, gracious thing to do. It was what I believed Jesus would do.

And our church secretary was livid.

It wasn't fair! Her daughter had done all that I had asked. She'd even finished it up early. She hadn't missed a single class. She'd done more than we had required - so why should this boy be confirmed? Why should he get confirmed when he hadn't done all the work? The only answer I had was this- her daughter had an experience that this boy had missed out on. She had something that he didn't get.

Her mom however, didn't see it that way. And I think it's because she saw the Confirmation program as being a burden. It was work. It was something to get through. It required effort and maybe even suffering.

Who'd want to go through Confirmation?

- There's a tendency to view Jesus' commands in the same way. *This is going to be work. It's going to require effort. It might result in suffering.*
- *I might need to lay down my life for a friend? How good a friend? And who are my friends?*
- *Love my neighbors as myself? And who are my neighbors?*
- *Love my enemies and pray for those who hate me?*

People listen to Jesus' commands and it sounds like no fun at all. They think that church is all about the things that I've GOT to do. At least that's how it sounds. But if we see it that way, we miss so much. Remember what Jesus said,

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus asks us to keep his commands so that our joy may be complete. And this is not just any joy, but the joy of Jesus the Christ. It's the kind of joy that fills you up and overflows.

Sometimes I think it's a matter of changing your attitude. Over the years I have found myself saying, "I've got to preach in Chapel this week." The truth was that I didn't have to preach in Chapel. I got to preach to a group of people who were hungry to hear the gospel and who were deeply attentive to what was being said. It was an honor and a privilege. It was a "get to" not a "got to."

Every job has get tos and got tos. Babysitting can be a lot of fun. You get to play with babies and feed them a bottle. You get to read stories and play games with little kids. It's great. But you've got to deal with dirty diapers and kids who just won't go to sleep.

Get tos and got tos.

My husband worked for Olive Garden as a server. He had to deal with grouchy customer and lousy tippers. He was on his feet for hours on end, picking up heavy trays and dirty dishes. That part is not fun at all. BUT he would also get to taste every new dish that was on the menu including the wine list.

Being a Christian shouldn't be something we view as a Got To. We get to experience forgiveness and grace in the sacraments. We get to share the love of God with our neighbors. We get to abide in Christ's love. His commandments are not about the things we've got to do. They are about the love and joy that we get to share with each other and with our world.

¹ See Matthew 20:20-28 for that story. In Mark's version it is James and John who go straight to Jesus with their request.