

A New Commandment

Fifth Sunday of Easter – John 13:31-35

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, April 24, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*

The other day, as I was thinking once again about this morning's portion of John's Gospel, which is also part of the Gospel for Maundy Thursday during Holy Week just a few very busy weeks ago, as I was thinking once again about Jesus's mandate, his "new commandment" to his disciples on the night before he was to die for all of us, as I was thinking once again about God's love and our *call* to love, I was reminded about a little book I first read, oh, a dozen years ago at least, called *Dear God: Children's Letters to God*. The author, developmental psychologist, David Heller, went all over the country interviewing children and collecting prayers and letters they have written to God. Somewhere over the years, I lost track of my copy of the book, but as I was thinking again this week, I came across a list I made one year for Mother's Day. I thought that I might get us *all* thinking once again about love this morning by reading you just a few of those letters. But be warned, as usual, children say the darnedest things sometimes, *and* the wisest:

Dear God, Thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma and grandpa. They are real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Phil. I guess you didn't finish working on him. Sean (age 12)

Dear God, My mom is acting weird because she is getting old. Can you take back a few gray hairs? That would help bring back the house to normal. Thanks for what you can do. Mike (age 9)

Dear God, You light up my life. So do mom and dad. I hope you like this. I am not sure what it means. Luv (with a "u"), Toni (with an "i") (age 7)

Dear God, My mom tells me a story about you every night. Last night she told me how you always remember your mother on her birthday. And you give her divine gifts. I think she was kidding me and herself. Love, Holden (age 7)

Dear God, Girls are weird. Except for my mom. Love you, Timmy (age 7)

Dear God, My mom and my father are divorced. For 3 years. Nobody's perfect. But why did you pick us? I wish we were all with each other. Maybe you could have them get along on weekends. Please, Stephen (age 11)

Nobody said loving one another was easy. But did you hear the standard that Jesus uses in issuing this commandment? "Love one another," he says, "as I have loved you." "As I have love you," he says. That's a tall order. I could probably go on for the rest of the day talking about that kind of benchmark. But a couple of weeks ago, when I went on a little longer than usual, I promised I'd make it up on the next one, so I'll offer a shortened list.

First of all, Christ's love for us is unflinching. Here, just *barely* south of the Ohio, I don't hear it nearly as often as I did in our years in Alabama or in Georgia, but I am still at least occasionally reminded that in the South you can get away with saying just about *anything*, about just about *anyone*, if you just add, "Bless her heart." At its best, I suppose, this verbal appendage is an acknowledgement that we love the one we're talking about *in spite* of everything. But all too often, it's used more as a dismissal, a way of washing our hands of actual involvement with the

situation at hand, or worse yet, a way of washing our hands of the *somebody* at hand. Thanks be to God, Christ does indeed bless our heart, regardless of the situation at hand. But with all our foibles and our follies and our faults, rather than dismiss us as the unalterably flawed creatures we are, and then moving on, the Lover of our Souls passionately *pursues* us, *every* time, down *whatever* path we have taken. Christ's love does not walk away – nor will he be pushed away. And we are commanded to love as he loves us.

Second, Christ's love for us is unlimited. I have told you before, I think, about my childhood babysitter. Diane Cleveland, and her project, having read Jesus' call to his disciples to forgive not *seven* times, but seventy *times* seven times, to keep track of the precisely four hundred ninety forgivenesses she owed each person she knew. I think I eventually got up to two hundred, something. Thanks be to God, Christ's love isn't like that. Because of the depth of the love that Christ has for all of us, and for each of us, the hurts and the harms and the hatreds with which we have wounded others, and in the process wounded Christ and offended the righteousness of the God of Creation, those sins are thrown into a limitless *void* of forgivenesses, "as far," the Gospels say, "as the east is from the west," from which they never return. Not just once. Not just seven times. Not just four hundred, ninety times, but forever and for always. And we are commanded to love as he loves us.

Finally, if you're going to love like Christ loved us, you've got to show it. You can write all the wonderful love notes in the world, you can send cards and flowers and even chocolates, you can use all the pious rhetoric of love and service that there is. But if you don't match that clutter and that noise with actions that affect your life, actions that affect the life of the one you claim to love, let me tell you friends, that's not love. Time and time again, Jesus told the crowds that came to hear him about God's love for them. Time and time again, Jesus told the authorities and the smart people and the prosperous people about God's love for them. Time and time and time again, Jesus told his closest friends about God's love for them – about *his* love for them. And then, on the night after he issued them this commandment to love each other as he loved them, he stretched out his arms on the hard wood of the cross and *showed* them how much. And we are commanded to love as Christ loves us.

You've already heard me say it over and over again – and you're likely to hear me say it a thousand times more – we are loved by the Almighty Lord of all there is, with a love that left heaven to show it, with a love that became one of us to show it, with a love that went to Calvary and the *grave* to show it. And that is *precisely* that is *precisely* the love which we are commanded to have for one another. A love that refuses to turn aside. A love that refuses to count the cost. A love that does what it takes – day by day by day – to *be love*.

One more. Dear God, Do you think there's enough love today? I feel there's a shortage. Love, Ken (age 9)

"I give you a new commandment, just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed!*