

Weekend of Sunday, May 6, 2018
6th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: John 15:9-17
Sermon Title: “Commandments, Service, and Spirit”

Theme

On the night of his arrest, Jesus delivers a final testimony to his disciples to help them in the days ahead. Here, he repeats the most important of all his commands, that they love one another.

Text

[Jesus said:] ⁹“As 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. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I 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. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Sermon

One of the criticisms that non-Christians often have about Christianity, which they associate with “church,” is that it is all about rules, laws, and commandments. And if a God-seeker, was to happen into a mainline church this Sunday, I fear their accusations would be confirmed in their mind. Good preaching, like you are about to hear, however, will clear up that misunderstanding.

Back to the issue of so much talk about rules, laws, and commandments. In the First Reading from Acts, the Apostle Peter was giving his testimony to some Gentiles. Gentiles in the Jewish understanding are anyone who is not a Jew. The point could be made that those Gentiles are the equivalent of our God-seeker. And furthermore, last week when I met with my colleagues for the pastor’s Bible study, we all agreed that it would have been more helpful if this passage would have begun with verse 34, because it is there that the stage is set for what follows.

So beginning there, Peter’s said to those Gentiles, **Acts 10:34-35** “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

Though Peter was a good rule, law, and commandment abiding Jew, after the Resurrection and the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit revealed to him that no one, not even Gentiles, are excluded from the love of God; and God desires that all come to salvation through the knowledge of his saving grace demonstrated on the cross of Christ.

But Peter clarified that God’s grace is not cheap. What was won for all humanity at great price, demands a response, and that response is that once we transform from **God-seeker to God-follower** we ought to ‘fear him and do what is right is acceptable to him.’

Now that word “fear” in that text is often misunderstood and though this is a digression from my main point, it is an important point. The word that has been translated into English as “fear” is

fear ~ φοβουμενος ~ *phoboumenos*

“reverential fear of God, as a controlling motive of the (disciple’s) life, in matters spiritual and moral, not a mere fear of His power and righteous retribution, but a wholesome dread of not pleasing Him.” (W.E. Vine)

So to the God-seeker it may appear as though Christianity is all about rules, laws, and commandments, but to those of us who are God-followers, it is a love relationship – we desire to live God-honoring lives. So the rules, laws, and commandments are not a burden but instructions given to us by our loving heavenly Father on how we can thank and love God back for his love, grace, and mercy. Another way of saying it is rules, laws, and commandments are how God says we can be in a right relationship with him.

Allow me to remind you that Mother’s Day is next weekend. I always have trouble knowing how to express my love and appreciation for my mother. Sherry’s Berries insists on delivering to my mother’s front door that she never uses, so they sit there and rot. My younger brother sends an enormous bouquet. What to do? Well this year I bought her several premium car washes at a local car wash so she can better take care of her car. I think it’s a winner and I called her to tell her to expect them in the mail and to point it out to her that it was my gift that came first.

So, like finding a way to appropriately show my love and appreciation for my mother, Peter said to appropriately express love and appreciation for God we ought to ‘do what is right is acceptable to him.’ And when those God-seekers heard Peter’s testimony and teaching, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter was mystified by this and came to the conclusion that God through the Holy Spirit was doing a new thing here. And Peter the good rule, law, and commandment abiding Jew, said, “We should baptize them!”

John, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” came to the same conclusion regarding how to respond to the love, grace, and mercy of God in the Second Reading. He wrote,

¹ John 5:3 ... the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.

And where did Peter and John get this idea? From the Lord Jesus, of course.

The Gospel Reading comes from the infamous night of his betrayal and follows last week's gospel reading directly. You remember, in it Jesus said his Father is the vinegrower, he is the vine and we are the branches. Our job as branches is to produce good fruit, and to do that pruning will be required. In that passage Jesus used the word *abide* and its forms seven times. In the Gospel Reading for today he used it three more times. Do you think *abiding* is an important concept to Jesus?

Jesus followed that teaching up by saying that we are to *abide* in his love. And then, more pointedly he said,

John 15:10 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. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

So, do you love and appreciate God revealed in Jesus Christ? Then I have some advice, taken from scripture on how that can best be demonstrated, which is my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for this week.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

- 1) **Know the rules, laws, and commandments of God through study of scripture.** In order to keep them, we have to know them, and the only way we can know them is to know God revealed in the Jesus Christ through study of scripture.
- 2) **Keep the rules, laws, and commandments of God.** They are given to us by our loving Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ and his apostles as the preeminent way to demonstrate our love and appreciation.
- 3) **Abide in God revealed through the triune expression Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** That means that along with study of scripture to know how God wants us to demonstrate our love and appreciation, we need to *actually/really* demonstrate our love and appreciation through right living with our only concern being pleasing God in all that we do.

Yes, I can see how these readings look like mandates for keeping rules, laws, and commandments to those seeking God. But those of us following God, for the Christian disciple, mature in faith, it is a prescription of pleasing God, which results in finding favor with God. And isn't that the ultimate goal of the Christian?

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, on our own we do not know how to how express our love and appreciation. But in your compassion you sent us your Son, our Lord Jesus, as an example of godly living. Help us to learn from him and your apostles through your Holy Spirit, so that in all we do, we may find your favor. We thank you for your rules, laws, and commandments. Help us to see them not as burdensome but as your prescription for pleasing you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen