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Weekend of Sunday, May 17, 2020
6th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A
First Reading: Acts 17:22-31
Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:13-22
Gospel Reading: John 14:15-21
Sermon Title: “If, ... Then”

Theme

In final words to his disciples on the night of his arrest, Jesus encourages obedience to his commandments and speaks of the Spirit, who will be with them forever.

Text

[Jesus said to the disciples:] ¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Sermon

So here we are in the middle of May. For many, May is a beautiful month to get married. My parents, for example, were married on May 2. The spring flowers are usually beautiful and the whole earth is in full bloom and love is in the air.

I've presided at a few weddings at Fellows Riverside Gardens and that venue is usually beautiful this time of year. But the weather can be unpredictable. Can you imagine trying to have a beautiful outdoor wedding last week when it snowed?

Zion had a wedding scheduled in June, but COVID-19 caused the couple to reschedule for August. Let's hope we can get it done then.

As a pastor, I've presided at lots of weddings. You might think that by this time in my ministry, with so many weddings, a wedding would become commonplace to me. Much of the service is, except for one part. Now pay attention closely here, because I am going to say something that only the attentive ear will pick up. It's that part of the service called the Declaration of Intention where I, on behalf of the church, ask the couple, "John, *will you* love Susan?" then "Susan, *will you* love John?"

Now you might think that a more appropriate question to be asked at a wedding would be, "John, *do you* love Susan?" "Susan, *do you* love John?" I mean, that is the reason we are gathered right? Because John and Susan love each other – presently, at that moment. If they didn't we wouldn't be at their wedding.

But no, what I ask on behalf of the church is, "John, *will you* love Susan?" "Susan, *will you* love John?" There is a difference there. Do you hear it? Do you get it?

Love is defined in the liturgy of marriage as an act of the will, not something the bride and groom *already have* but a promise of something they *will do*.

How that definition of love flies in the face of just about everything we think about love! For us, love is a feeling. We speak of *falling in love* as if love is something we stumble upon. And oftentimes that is the case. I didn't plan on meeting Carol on the night we met. We just happened to be at the same place at the same time. And then, over ice cream that night and a follow-up phone call and roller skating, we fell in love.

We can't command a feeling like that. It just happens to us. In the same way, we can't command the person with clinical depression to be happy and expect that kind of treatment to work.

But that's just what Jesus did in today's scripture. Our Gospel Reading comes from the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John. Once again we are on the infamous "night of his betrayal." Jesus and his disciples were together at the table. Jesus was preparing to leave his disciples. He hinted at the fate that awaited him, but he also spoke to them about their fate as his followers.

And in speaking about his followers, which includes us, Jesus made two surprising statements. He said,

¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

²²They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.”

Jesus links love with obedience. He asked us to demonstrate our love for him by keeping his commandments.

In my head, it's the same kind of thing we ask of a bride and groom. Don't tell us how you feel about each other in the present moment. We know you love each other now. You both look beautiful and a lot of money has been spent on the bride's dress and hair and makeup, and a tuxedo for the groom. It's easy to love each other at that moment. But years from now, that is when love matters, and that is why we, the church ask, *will you not do you love each other.*

One of the things that most successful marriage partners learn is that love – real, deep, abiding love – is the *result* of marriage rather than its *cause*. Strange but true. A couple, standing before God and the church at their wedding, may think that love is the cause for their wedding. They are here, in the church, having a wedding, *because* they are in love.

But one of the wonders of marriage is that in making and keeping the promise to love one another – for better for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us part – love deepens, the two become more in love over the years than when they made their promises to each other at their wedding.

That's because successful marriages take practice. And we practice when we look at each other with love and appreciation *even* in the morning when we are afflicted with morning breath and morning face and bed hair. We practice love when we forgive even when the other has not offered an apology. We practice love when we accept the other even when we are disappointed in them, and vice versa.

One of the dearest verses in John's Gospel is, of course, 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." Jesus is about to demonstrate the depth of that love by obediently moving toward the cross, loving us even unto death. And on the way there, he *commands* us to love.

"If you love me," he said, surely meaning something like, "because you love me," then "you will keep my commandments." It's not so much a matter of proving our love for him by keeping the commandments, but rather our keeping of his commandments is the fruit of our love for him. Either way, Jesus' linking of command and love puts some substance and shape into this rather vague and mushy word *love*, doesn't it?

I've heard married couples note this when they say, "We didn't know a thing about real love when we got married. We were young and silly. But over the years, we've learned what real love is."

My Mom and Dad never struck me as love-birds. Maybe that's just because I was one of their kids and to think about such things was just gross. It might also have been the stress of raising five active children and never having much time to devote to each other. But I did notice that after all the kids were gone, my Mom and Dad discovered things, hobbies, and interests that they had in common and enjoyed pursuing together. I observed that in their later years, they seemed to love each other more and were happier with each other than they probably were before kids. And so then, as my Mom drove my Dad to the hospital for what he probably knew would be the last time, he turned to her and said, "We've had a good run, haven't we." My Dad's way of saying, through the thick and the thin of marriage, in the struggle to be loving, love itself has been the gift of their being loving.

So the church, at a wedding, does not ask, "John, *do you* love Susan?" but rather, "John, *will you* love Susan," speaking of love in the future tense – when the two get

old, and less attractive, and crotchety, and move too slow, and get forgetful, and maybe even need Depends. Real love takes practice and patience.

One thing that most of us discover in a successful marriage is that the more we work at keeping the promises - the more faithfully we hold to what we promised to do, the less we have to consciously work to keep those promises. Faithfulness just becomes part of us. We become a faithful person through our practice of faithfulness.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

And thus Jesus speaks of love. There is today a promise. If we will dare to keep his commandments, dare to love Jesus by being obedient to Jesus, walking in his way, following him faithfully, then we will love him. Our love will grow and deepen as it is tested and proven in life's daily challenges. "If you love me," he says, then "you will keep my commandments." The converse also is true. Because we keep his commandments, we will love him, as he loves us. Love is not only the reason for our obedience to Jesus, but the fruit of our obedience as well.

Prayer

Invisible God, Make us obedient to your command to love. To love one another, our brothers and sister in faith. Love others with whom we seem to have nothing in common at all. Love even those who seem to irritate us and cause us to avoid them. And even to love ourselves when we seem to let ourselves and others down.

Lord God, more than anything else we want to be found faithful. Send us your spirit so that we might be faithful to your Son's command to love. We pray this in his name. Amen