

COMMANDED TO LOVE

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE, John 15: 9 – 17

- Today's reading, from the gospel of John, is part of what is known as Jesus farewell discourse. Before Jesus dies, he shares the Passover Meal with his friends, he washes their feet, and now he is saying goodbye, he is leaving them with words of guidance and assurance.
- We pick up today's reading where we left off last week. So it's important to hold in our minds the image from last week- of a vine, - Jesus is the vine; we are the branches- -
- Jesus is rooted in God, the Father, there is a continuous flow of life from God through Jesus into us and through us. As branches, we are the fruit bearing part of the vine.
- But we can only bear fruit by being rooted in God. This is important because what we're commanded to do in today's scripture, the fruit that we're commanded to produce, is impossible in our own power.
- Let us listen for the Word of God as it comes to us today....

SERMON

There's an unusually long line up of saints at the pearly gates, so it's taking St Peter an especially long time to check out all their credentials- they've done so many good things. And being saints they're waiting patiently in line.

When a man comes up from behind the line, and saunters to the front- he's dressed in a white coat and has a stethoscope, - he just walks past St Peter, in through the gate.

There's a ripple that goes through the line of saints and one of them can't contain himself, he goes up to St Peter and, in saintly fashion, asks why that man just barged ahead of everyone and didn't have to check in.

"Oh", says St Peter, "That's God- he thinks he's a doctor."

As human beings, WE have a tendency to want to ELEVATE ourselves above where we are- with US it's all ambition, striving, UPWARD mobility, seeking power, imagining we have more power than we do. GOD'S way, however, shown to us in Jesus, is the opposite.

Paul says of Jesus, "Though in the form of God, he EMPTIED himself, taking the form of a slave, (quite a downward journey from God to a slave!), and being born in human likeness, being found in human form, he HUMBLLED himself, and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross.

For Jesus it's DOWNWARD MOBILITY all the way. And this is his intention and best hope for those who follow him, that we should do the same.

In today's reading, the disciples are likely still reeling from the shock of having their rabbi, their master, whom they call Lord, strip down to his underwear, and kneel at their feet, to wash and dry their feet, as though he were their slave.

They're hardly ready for him to tell them that THEY must now do the same for one another. He says, "This is my commandment: love one another AS I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friend".

We may be accustomed to associate these words with soldiers, sacrificing their lives, as Jesus did on the cross- and this is certainly a valid interpretation. But if we look at the Greek word translated as "lay

down”, we may glean a new understanding of these words, that have more to do with the way we LIVE than with dying.

The Greek word translated as “lay down” - actually does not mean “to die”, but “to be horizontal, to prostrate oneself, to bow down, to submit to another.” It is servant love, like Jesus bowing down to wash feet, where we take the posture of one who serves rather than one who tries to dominate..

Interestingly, the same Greek word for “lay down” a few lines later is translated as “appointed”. Jesus says, “I have appointed you to bear fruit that will last”. Actually he says, “I have laid you down to bear fruit”.

Not elevated us,(darn it), but laid us down- it’s from a lowly position of humility and servant love that the fruit that God desires will grow.

So much of what goes on between human beings is a power struggle. Many married couples will testify to this, and how it gets in the way of loving.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he addresses married couples. He says be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. In this day and age when we read this passage from Paul, we get all hit up about the fact that Paul adopts the convention of his day- that men should be the head of the household.

So we roll our eyes and throw out his whole teaching, including this treasure : to be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. It only works if it’s mutual.

Paul says women are to be subject to their husbands, but he also says husbands are to love their wives as Christ has loved the church- a similar idea that we have in today’s scripture- that we are to love in the SAME WAY as Christ has loved us, namely as a slave! Paul paints a picture of TWO people submitting to one another.

In talking about this teaching, Tony Campolo imagines an ideal young couple, where the wife says to the husband, “all my ambitions, dreams, hopes, I surrender for your wellbeing,” and he says, “No, “All my ambitions, hopes and dreams, I surrender for your wellbeing” and they have their first fight.

Jesus says “there is no greater love than this: to lay down one’s life , to prostrate oneself, for one’s friend”. It’s not an easy teaching. To be vulnerable, to lay aside our pride, and our self interest. Even for one whom we love.

How much harder to do so for someone who is difficult to love- and we all have those people in our lives.

Churches have the hardest time living this teaching- because churches are made up of people who have not chosen to be with one another-

We’re not here because we looked around, assessed each other and said, yes, this is someone I want to journey with. Though we may well find wonderful kindred spirits here and make life time friends, we’re actually here because God has drawn each of us into this community.

Jesus says to the men and women sitting around him, “you think you chose me, but you didn’t- I chose you. I chose each one of you. Each one of you. Remember that. So LOVE one another AS I have loved you”

What might the church look like, if we submitted to one another in love? If we looked to the wellbeing of each other? Would there be conflict? The thousands of schisms that have torn the church apart over the centuries?

Jesus knew how hard it would be for this motley bunch of people to love one another and to hold together, once he was no longer with them physically. To help them he says something curious and extraordinary, though to our ears it probably sounds ordinary.

He calls them friends. Jesus, whom John has told us is the Word made flesh, who was with God and who was God, Jesus, God in the flesh, calls them friends. The only other person in the whole of biblical history who was ever called a friend of God was Abraham. David, Moses, Joshua- all were called servants of God.

And here Jesus says, I no longer call YOU servants, I call you FRIENDS. Again there is this downward movement of God, coming alongside of human beings to call us friends. Why?

There's a story about Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, that may illustrate what Jesus is doing. (seems suitable to tell a queen Victoria story on the Victoria day long weekend!)

Early in their marriage, the queen and her husband quarrelled about something. Albert walked out of the room and went to his private quarters. Victoria followed, found the door locked, and began pounding on it.

"Who's there?" Prince Albert asked. "The Queen of England," was the reply. But the door remained locked. More pounding followed, but then there was a pause. The next sound was that of a gentle tap.

"Who's there?" Albert inquired. The queen's reply: "Your wife, Albert."
Prince Albert opened the door immediately.

(Faber Book of Anecdotes, Bits & Pieces, November 10, 1994, pp. 6-7)

When we're commanded from above to do something, we resist; but when a friend asks us for a favour, there are many things we will do, for the sake of our friend. Jesus offers us this motivation for doing what we might not wish to do, like love someone we really don't like at all.: to do it for him as a friend

Now, here's something else that is curious: even in calling his disciples friends, Jesus nevertheless frames what he says as a commandment. We don't normally command our friends.

It may be helpful to understand that in Hebrew thinking a command, a mitzvah, is not like a General giving orders. Commandments are not rules or regulations.

The root of the Hebrew word Mitzvah, means "landmark". A commandment gives us direction, points the way. When one is travelling through the wilderness one is very grateful for landmarks! Without landmarks we wander endlessly, even die.

Earlier in Jesus farewell discourse, he said "Don't let your hearts be troubled- you know where I am going, and you know the way," Thomas cried out in panic, "Lord we're don't know where you're going, how can we know the way?"

Well, what Jesus gives here IS a landmark- it's a gift-that enables us to find our way to where Jesus is. When we love as Jesus loved, when we love, in Jesus' servant way, it will be Jesus' love that is flowing through us, his presence, his life, will be in us, just a sap flows through the vine to the branches.

A commandment from God is a blessing and a gift. Not only is it a landmark to show us the way, but it is also a promise that we WILL be able to walk that way.

You see, every word that God speaks carries with it the POWER to make that word happen. When God says "let there be light", there IS light.

I think of Peter, in the midst of a storm at sea, Jesus walking over the water towards the boat, and Peter says, "Lord, COMMAND ME to come to you over the water. COMMAND me!"- Jesus command will be powerful enough to enable Peter to do the impossible.

"Come", Jesus says. Peter steps out of the boat and he WALKS on the water, When Jesus says, love one another, it is also a promise, "you WILL love one another, I am with you and in you and you in me, and I will enable you".

Now when Peter steps out onto the water, he takes his eyes off Jesus, his focus shifts to the wind and the waves, fear overcomes him and he begins to sink.

This is a good image for us in our trying to love a hard to love person- we need to keep our eyes, not on the person with all their perceived faults, which make it hard for us to love them, but on JESUS, whom we CAN love, and his love will flow through us as sap from the vine to the branches.

As part of this fruit bearing vine, it helps to remember that vine growth is slow- so we need to slow down- avoid human kneejerk reactions. Allow Jesus love some time to flow through us.

Vine growing requires patience. AND pruning- cutting back the branches, humbling ourselves, and waiting. Focusing on Jesus and his love, until that love flows through us, and it will. This is Jesus promise.

He also promises that this way of servant love will bring joy. He says "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.

If we're looking for purpose, if we're looking for joy we don't need to look any further than this passage of scripture- Jesus has shown us the way: To love one another as Jesus has loved us. To love with a servant love.

This purpose and joy that Jesus promises, does not depend on our life's circumstances: it doesn't matter whether we're working or not or what we're working at, whether we're able bodied or disabled, whether we're young or old, healthy or sick, as long as we have breath, we can love-

Our words, our actions, our thoughts, our attitudes, our prayers can all embody servant love. This is how we are to be a friend to Jesus, and this is what will bring us Joy.

To God be all the praise the honour and the glory, Amen.