

**Sixth Sunday of Easter (a)**  
**Acts 17:22-31 1 Peter 3:13-22 John 14:15-21**  
**Saint John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**May 17, 2020 (Online Only, Quarantine)**

Our gospel passage for today starts out with Jesus telling his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” So right off the bat, he’s putting together love and obedience. When I was younger, I had a hard time putting those two things together in my mind: love and obedience. Following someone’s command sounds more like a boss/employee relationship, and we know that’s not always going to be an enjoyable thing, and when I was younger I didn’t see how that could be part of my relationship with Jesus. I hear the word obedience and it doesn’t make me feel good. The idea of love, on the other hand, makes me feel good right away. The popular idea of LOVE is that love should always be something that flows naturally and easily, no strings ever attached. According to popular culture, in the movies and on TV, there shouldn’t be any drudgery or feeling of sacrifice or pain attached to the word “love.” If there’s any pain at all, according to pop culture, there’s something wrong. It means we’re not with the right person or we’ve made the wrong choices, so it’s time to find the nearest exit. I remember the tagline from one of the most popular movies of the 70s: “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.” That was the popular culture wisdom. And the ideal of love as something that lifts us up beyond all sacrifice and pain is still very much with us. And it can make it hard for us to hear what Jesus is saying in today’s gospel. “If you love me, you will follow my commandments.” Jesus always puts love and obedience—love and discipleship—together, you can’t separate them.

Love used to make me immediately picture a young couple finding perfect harmony in each other, that natural fit where everything seems to happen easily; their lives are going to flow together; they’re going to be on top of the world together and they’re all poised to dive into the wide-open future together. And that’s a real thing. Praise God for blessing us with that amazing sense of invincibility when we meet our soul mates. But that picture of young love which is so idolized now only captures a tiny part of what love is. Last fall I was riding my bike up through the middle of Columbus on the Olentangy Trail. I stopped in a park by the river for a drink of water. And there on a wooden bench sat an elderly couple; they were in their 80s at least. They sat there shoulder to shoulder, kind of gently leaning into each other, and they were holding hands. And I don’t know who they were, but I could see the lines...the worries and cares of age, all the struggles they had faced in life...etched in their faces. They looked exhausted. But there they sat on the park bench, just a few trials left, with the leaves falling, and it was like, all the storms of life were behind them, all the words and arguments and struggles were past, and now they watched the river flow by, holding hands in silence, joined so completely and powerfully by everything they had experienced together. I like to think of that as a picture of us and God, when it’s all over.

Through Christ, right now, we have this new starting point with each other, and with the world around us. Not only does he save us by doing something only God can do; by defeating the power of sin and death and evil. He also shows us, by his life and actions

on earth, what love is, what it is to be human. He shows us the life we were created to live in this world. An everlasting relationship of listening to him, being tuned in to his rhythms, and following him, abiding with him. And his love does not conform to the popular notion. Our relationship with Jesus doesn't lift us up out of this world. He doesn't promise us any kind of worldly security. Instead, he gives us himself. And then he calls us to follow him out there, follow him deeply in to that broken world, to suffer with him all its storms and pain and injustice and suffering and death. No need to candy coat what Jesus is telling us through all the gospels. That's the obedience part. Love certainly involves feelings of joy and freedom and fulfillment. But in this life the path of love leads through all kinds of storms and trials. As people who love as Jesus loves, as he commands us to love, we can live every day expecting that. When you love, life is going to hurt. It's not about getting out of anything; it's not about never saying you're sorry. It's about who's holding your hand, it's about whose shoulder you can lean into as you go through the storm. It's about regularly admitting we're weak and wrong. Love means being able to say we're sorry seven times a day and more when necessary, knowing that there's a power of grace and forgiveness out there that's a lot bigger than anything we can drum up. And that grace is for us. Jesus paid everything to open that door into abundant life for us. So we can confess our fear and sins and failings and move forward through that door, and try to the utmost of our ability, even though we're broken, to be the people we were created to be; creatures who pour ourselves out in love, who offer up everything we are and have to him. We can do it because we know our Father loves us and will feed us and fill us up with his life.

Everything recorded in scripture about Jesus shows him pouring his life out every step of the way in obedience to the Father till finally, he's nailed to the cross. Healing people, standing up to evil and injustice and oppression. He shows us that the road to everlasting life doesn't lead around trouble. It goes through trouble. And he's still telling you and me to come with him. When he says, "if you love me, you will keep my commandments," it's not about staying pure and perfect to please God. It's not a boss/employee relationship where we're going to get a promotion, or lose our job when we mess up. He is our Savior. The boss here is the One who poured himself out on a cross for us, and lifted us up to be his own brothers and sisters. But even when it's hard to love, even when loving him and loving each other leads into suffering and facing hard truths about other people and hard truths about ourselves, even though the cross is looming over us—even when it doesn't feel good—we can think *obedience*. Obedience is just love when it doesn't feel good. We can keep following in his way of love, confident that the future belongs to us because of Jesus. That's his promise. Sometimes it looks like there's no way through the obstacles in front of us. We just cannot see the way. That's when immediately, we can remember what Jesus says—he is the way. He is there with his resurrection power in that insurmountable obstacle. He has busted through that impassable door. That means you and I can take the next small step.

In these last two weeks of the Easter season, Jesus points us towards Pentecost...the coming of the Spirit. We'll be talking about that amazing power God has poured out upon us, to get up and walk and be his people. But today's message is really simple. Jesus is comforting his disciples who are afraid they're going to be left alone without

him, to face the hardships of life. It's a good message for us, who've been feeling a lot of restrictions lately. My wife Karen and I were talking about how easy it is right now to feel like we can't be all we're supposed to be. Even if we want to pour ourselves out in love, even when we're as busy as ever, there's something about this situation that makes us feel limited. Hey, this is part of living with love for God in a broken world. Thank God we feel this frustration. Thank God we feel these limitations. It means we're alive. It means we want to follow. It puts things in perspective. Right now it's just about small steps. Focusing on the next small offering of praise we can give to God. I think he's training us all. We can leave the mountain of trouble to him, and take the next small step in his love. We will not be pinned down by this situation.

I just want to end by assuring you Jesus cares about how we feel. Just because we've been talking about love as devotion and action, and not just feelings, doesn't mean feelings have nothing to do with love. I can tell you, as the years have progressed, I can barely talk about Jesus without feeling raw emotion. I can barely read the words of the beautiful hymns we sing at church without wanting to cry with gratitude. By the time I retire I'm going to be a blubbing idiot in the pulpit. In the end we'll be sitting by the river with our Savior, and the joy, the happiness, the peace...the feeling...is going to be beyond words. And it won't be because we were able to get around all the trials and sorrows of this life. It'll be because we went through them all with him.