

LOVE ON COMMAND
John 14:15-21
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 10, 2015

In a few weeks we will be celebrating Pentecost over the Memorial Day Weekend so as we prepare for both I thought I'd remind you of a story of sacrificial love in keeping with today's reading from John's Gospel.

In 1943 a U.S. Navy transport, shipping G.I.'s across the North Atlantic to Europe was torpedoed by a German U Boat. Soldiers and sailors were quickly ordered to abandon ship. In the confusion four chaplains, two Protestant, one Catholic and one Jewish, worked together to help the men get into the lifeboats, and then selflessly gave up their own life jackets when none were left. Survivors later reported seeing the chaplains locking arms and praying with the men left behind as the ship slid under the sea.

John reports Jesus saying in the Upper Room, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." However, demonstrating that love comes from obeying your thirst for God.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments and I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of Truth... You know him because he abides with you and he will be in you." (John 14:15-17)

When we celebrate Pentecost we remember when the Holy Spirit transformed frightened disciples into courageous Apostles, empowering them to start a chain reaction of transformation and reconciliation continuing to this day.

Reading the Acts of the Apostles you sense the sudden dramatic change in Peter and the others as they shed their fears and insecurities and take up where Jesus left off. Jesus taught them well and now the Holy Spirit turned their lessons into actions.

Notice Jesus promised the coming of "another" Advocate, the implication being someone would fill the void Jesus left behind after he ascended into heaven. On behalf of the Father and Jesus the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostles to get out of the Upper Room and into the streets of Jerusalem and beyond.

No doubt the disciples missed Jesus terribly, all the same, they knew they weren't abandoned and orphaned. Now they had another advocate, someone else to embolden and above all love them, especially when faced with the challenges of being Christ's ambassadors in a hostile world.

Almost 2,000 years later those four chaplains experienced this same inspiration as they chose to stay with the men left behind to pray and encourage them when they needed it most.

What's more, those four chaplains modeled for their men what it means to keep Christ's commandment. Notice Jesus didn't say, "Keep the Ten Commandments." Certainly Jesus wasn't implying the Ten Commandments were null and void. The Commandments remain necessary guidelines defining our relationships with God and each other but they're only life-giving through Christ. Jesus' commands "love God, your neighbor and yourself," and "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends," gives a sense of completion to the Ten Commandments by breathing a new spirit into them.

Remember, Jesus didn't come to abolish the law, but to bring it new life. Unfortunately, as you know, the Pharisees couldn't or wouldn't accept Jesus' new teachings so they fought him tooth and nail, determined to keep things black and white.

Pleasantville, a movie made in 1998, is a comedy drama about a brother and sister mysteriously transported into a black and white 1958 sitcom called Pleasantville, where they become Bud and Mary Sue the son and daughter of George and Betty Parker both stereotypical 1950's husbands, wives and parents.

Bud and Sue, not knowing what else to do, reluctantly assumed their new roles but by doing so unintentionally brought a new sense of humanity and compassion previously unknown to the citizens of Pleasantville. As a result of their presence, things in Pleasantville slowly but surely began changing from black and white into living color until everything and everybody in town was given a new sense of reality.

But not the town fathers, who saw the transformation as dangerous and immoral. Like the Pharisees in the Gospels they aggressively abused their power and authority to fight it refusing to admit theirs was a lost battle.

Sound familiar? The scribes and Pharisees saw any transformations in their people's lives brought about by Jesus as dangerous and immoral because they refused to even consider that possibility that Jesus wasn't destroying the law, he was saving it.

Why couldn't the town fathers of Pleasantville (not to mention the Pharisees) open their eyes to see this transformation? Listen again to Jesus, "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees nor knows him." (John 14:17)

Even the brightest and the best of us need to have the scales fall off our eyes maybe even shot off before we can appreciate the truth setting us free. Jesus came to give us a choice and unless we open our eyes to see and then recognize God's emerging Kingdom, we will stay blind and lost in the dark. At the same time as long as human

society continues to organize itself outside of God's authority the world God loves will stay the same.

But whether or not the world chooses to see, the Spirit of Truth will continue to bring the world the Spirit of Christ into the world. Because many allowed God to let them see, God's people experienced rebirth.

So what separates the citizens of God's Kingdom from the citizens of the world? When you embrace Christ and his law of love, your friendship with God deepens and becomes life changing. The old religion that leaves you burned out, and frustrated is replaced with a relational faith setting you free to love God, your neighbor and last but not least, yourself. Maybe the old religion keeps you following the rules, reminding you to behave yourself, but by keeping Christ's command to love and be loved, we become more fully alive and human because the Spirit of Jesus, living in us, transforms us.

I'm not suggesting transformation is retroactive and painless. Expect to experience ups and downs, success and failure. Sometimes you'll make God happy and smile, other times you'll make God frustrated and angry. But even when you're at your worst, by the grace of God, you are still loved and like the Prodigal Son you too can come to your senses, knowing you can return home only to find your Father has been waiting with open arms all along.

Did the Pharisees realize this, that God is not only to be obeyed but also loved? Let's be honest, we sometimes find it hard to say "I love God" until we recognize the face of Jesus in the people we find ourselves loving and serving. That's when we can fall in love with God, not in the abstract, but in the real and personal. And by keeping his commandments to have compassion for the least of these in their hour of greatest need, with no expectation of reward or payback, that's when God's love rises up and overflows on to the other and then back to you.

Living in color is better than seeing only in black and white. Living Christ's law trumps keeping legalistic rules and regulations, if only to save yourself from being punished. Laying down your life for others, instead of only living for yourself gives you a sense of purpose and affirmation that will take you into eternity.

This is the essence of Christ's gospel of peace and reconciliation. When you stop fighting God when he wants more from you than you're willing to give, when you stop believing you got God and yourself all figured out and you're finally ready to admit you need God more than anything else, that's when you really start living large. And you'll know you've made it, despite yourself, when you see changes, not only in you but in the people around you because you laid down your life for your friend.

So, keep Christ commandments and Christ will keep you. That's the truth that sets us free.