

Keeping the Faith

A Sermon Preached by the
Reverend Gale W. Robb
April 27, 2008
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Acts 17:22-31
John 14:15-21

This past week, Sandy Crum loaned me a book for my upcoming travels entitled, “The Year of Living Biblically,” in which the author, A.J. Jacobs, decides to follow the Bible literally for a full year. He begins by reading the whole Bible, cover to cover, five hours a day for four weeks. And he writes, “As I read, I type into my PowerBook every rule, every guideline, every suggestion, every nugget of advice I find in the Bible. When I finish, I have a very long list. It runs seventy-two pages. More than seven hundred rules. The scope is astounding. All aspects of my life will be affected – the way I talk, walk, eat, bathe, dress, and hug my wife.”¹

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” So the disciples are told during the long good-bye at the Passover meal, the night before Jesus was betrayed and handed over to Pontius Pilate. “Of course, I love you, Jesus. But does that mean all of the commandments, or just the one about loving one another? After all, there are hundreds of rules in the Hebrew Bible alone, including those pesky purity laws. And I’m having trouble just keeping the big ones – the Ten Commandments! So how about I just work on a couple of them?”

It seems that there always has to be a bargaining point. It reminds me of the old story about the disciples listening to Jesus teaching the Beatitudes. When he finished, Simon Peter said, “Do we have to write this down?” And Andrew said, “Is there going to be a test on this?” And Philip said, “Do we have to turn this in?” And James said, “Are we going to be graded on this?” And John said, “The other disciples didn’t have to do this.” And Matthew said, “I don’t have time to do this.” And Judas said, “What if we don’t get it done on time?” And Jesus wept.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” The disciples were full of questions – “How can we know the way? How will you reveal yourself to us? What does he mean by ‘a little while’? What is he talking about?”

But wouldn’t we, too, have those same kinds of questions? Wouldn’t we have the same fears of not knowing the way, of being left alone, of being orphaned? It was, after all, a time of great uncertainty, of great anxiety and fear. The disciples knew that the time they had with Jesus was coming to an end, and they were naturally fearful of the future. And if you stop to think about it, they’re just variations of the questions that we’ve all asked: “How will I get through this?”

¹ A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007, p. 8.

“How will I manage if he dies?” “What will become of me?” And, thankfully, the answer is always the same, “I will not leave you orphaned.”

So, “if you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Now in this 21st century American culture with our independent spirit, we are not known for being very good about following orders. There is something in us, in human nature, that really rebels against being told what to do. From a very early age, and those of you with two year olds will resonate with this, we don’t want to be bossed around. Have you ever heard kids say to each other – and often to an older brother or sister – “You’re not the boss of me!” Even as we get older, however well we take directions, there is probably that little voice somewhere deep inside that wants to make it conditional, that wants to keep those options open, that wants to tip that balance of power in our favor. We are a culture that puts a high value on our freedom of choice. Whether it’s choosing what to have for dinner or where to have the car washed, we think of it almost as a God-given right, forgetting that for most of the world, those kinds of choices are completely foreign.

Most of you probably know by now that I grew up in the military, and I can tell you that I know all about taking orders and following directions. It’s always been a source of some amusement for my family. They will tell you that I am very good about following rules and directions. If the sign says, “Don’t park here.” I don’t park there. But, I have to admit, somewhere deep inside is that little voice that says, “Okay, but . . .” It seems like we’re always looking for permission to negotiate, to bargain, to buy time, to tip the balance.

Except in this case, when there is apparently no room for negotiation. Jesus doesn’t say, “Keep my commandments if you feel like it, if it’s not too much trouble.” He says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” In fact, one translation reads, “If you love me, you will obey my commands.” Now there’s a word that makes us uncomfortable; we don’t much like being asked to “obey.” And Jesus doesn’t say, “If you love me, prove it by keeping my commandments.” He simply says, “If you love me, this is what love looks like.”

For a first-century Jew, love was more than a feeling or an emotion. It was not sentimentalized or romanticized on Valentine cards or set to music. It didn’t make hearts go pitty-pat or knees go weak. It was very much an “action” verb. Remember “action verbs” from elementary school? They walk, they run, they move, they jump! Love meant living in faithful obedience to the law. For the Gospel writer, there was no distinguishable difference between love and obedience. That’s what love looked like. It was the way one lived in relationship with God. And the disciples certainly understood what living in faithful obedience meant. Think of Simon Peter at the end of the Gospel, when the resurrected Jesus asks him not once but three times, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And when Simon Peter answers, “You know that I do, Lord,” Jesus replies, “Feed my sheep.” If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Theologian Gail O’Day says, “The disciples can still love Jesus, but neither by clinging to a cherished memory of him nor by retreating into their private experience of him. Rather they can continue to love Jesus by doing his works and by keeping his commandments. That is, when they move outside of their own private experience of Jesus, when they live what Jesus has taught

them and demonstrated in his own life, they will find themselves once again in his love.”²

What does love look like for us? How do we keep the commandments? Usually when we think of Jesus giving commandments, we think of that in the singular sense – the one commandment to love one another. The Gospel writer wants us to understand that “commandments” mean Jesus’ message as a whole, which is to believe and live a lifestyle of faith, at the heart of which is abiding love. It’s certainly not any easier now than it was two thousand years ago. We are centuries away from the disciples, but we are not that much different from those who heard these words the first time.

Nor are we much different from the Athenians that Paul denounced for their worship practices, in the lesson we read from Acts this morning. Many of us live lives that are stretched as far as we can go. We are overloaded, over-scheduled, and overwhelmed. We find ourselves tempted by false gods that promise an easy answer. We can barely feed our own sheep, much less somebody else’s. We struggle all the time to bring our lives into balance, to be better stewards of the creation, to seek justice and make peace. Yet it remains a world where chaos seems to reign much of the time, where violence and oppression are unrelenting. In a world where children still starve to death and people wander homeless, we might indeed ask who *is* keeping the commandments. Or perhaps, how is it even possible to keep the commandments?

It is when we are at the point of asking those questions that we hear Jesus say, “I will not leave you desolate, I will not leave you orphaned.” There is still the promise of God’s presence in our lives. The writer of John’s Gospel puts it this way: “I will ask God, who will give you another Advocate to be with you forever.”

There is no adequate English translation for the Greek word that is used to describe this presence. It is called the *parakletos*, which we can translate as Paraclete, but that’s not a word we often hear or use. Words to describe it are as elusive as the Spirit itself. We call it advocate or counselor, comforter, proclaimer, helper. A little later in the same passage, the paraclete is called the Spirit of Truth, truth being Christ himself, so we are meant to understand the oneness of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For the early community of believers, it was the Gospel’s way of describing the permanent presence of God among them at a time when they desperately needed that reassurance. It is how we know the continued presence of God in our lives at a time when we also need that reassurance.

Pastor and writer Dianne Bergant helps us understand at least the role of the Spirit in our lives. She writes, “It is the Spirit who strengthens us, comforts us, guides us, and inspires us. It is the Spirit who enables us to interpret the signs of the times in ways very different from the ways of the world. It is the Spirit who works through us for the transformation of the world. It is because the Spirit has already been given to us that, in the midst of our journey of life, we are able to live the promises into fulfillment.

² Gail R. O’Day, *John: New Interpreter’s Bible*

And then she goes on to say, “Love prompts us to pattern our lives after the model of Jesus, the one we love. This means that we will live with clear consciences, with gentleness and reverence. The love that comes to us through the Spirit will overflow into the lives of others. We will be agents of God’s love in the world. Our lives will be evidence of the presence of the Spirit in our midst.”³

As a faithful people, we are called to keep the commandments. If we take this passage seriously, and I think we do, it’s not an option. Keeping the commandments means living a life of loving and faithful obedience – keeping the faith, as it were. It means loving with our whole selves, acting out of that love in relationship with one another and with God’s creation. It means crossing the road to help the Samaritan, and feeding sheep – even if, as someone said, the grazing must be done in our own front yards. It means welcoming the lost child home, looking for one lost lamb, forgiving the one who hurts us most deeply, and inviting strangers into our homes and our hearts. It means speaking for those who have no voice, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

The bottom line is that because God is faithful, so also are we. Because God loves and forgives, because God never stops seeking the lost and welcoming us home, because God does not leave us orphaned, we will keep the commandments. May it always be so. Amen.

³ Dianne Bergant, *Preaching the New Lectionary, Year A*.