***HOW DO YOU SAY, “I LOVE YOU?”***

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Text: John 14:15-29

How do you say good-bye? Red and Eileen Datt were members of our church in Slippery Rock. One evening they had folks over for dinner who stayed and stayed and stayed, missing all the subtle hints that it was time for them to leave. Finally at a little after 10:00 Red said, “Eileen, let’s go to bed so these nice folks can go home.” It reminds me of that country song, “How can I miss you if you won’t go away?” Sometimes folks just don’t know when to leave and that can make it hard to say good-bye. More often saying good-bye is hard, because parting is such sweet sorrow. The first day of kindergarten can be a hard day for some parents, even if it is a great day for the child. Driving away after dropping off your child for his or her freshman year of college can be a hard good-bye. Sending a spouse off on a long tour of duty in the military can be heart-rending. Sitting at the bedside of a parent or spouse who is dying can make saying good-bye a challenge, even if you know the dying is a merciful thing. How do you say good-bye, especially to those you love?

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says good-bye to his disciples in a series of lengthy passages known as “the farewell discourses”. The passage I read this morning is from one of those discourses as Jesus tries to say good-bye to his disciples and prepare them for ***their*** life after ***his*** death. He has told them what is to come – his betrayal and death and hints of resurrection – but the disciples don’t really get it. Perhaps they can’t understand or perhaps they just don’t want to contemplate his leaving them. Thoughts of his leaving seem hard to imagine with him sitting there with them. But Jesus knows what is coming, and so he tries to prepare them, to leave with them words that will guide and reassure these disciples whom he loves when he is no longer there to do so.

Like those disciples, we are those who are left behind long after Jesus has departed, and so his advice to his disciples is advice to us as well. As with so much of Jesus’ teaching, it begins and ends with love – love of God and love for one another. Jesus is wrestling with how to say good-bye, and in doing so, he insists the disciples wrestle with how to say “I love you.”

In the 21st chapter of John’s gospel a risen Christ puts a version of that question to Peter three times, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Three times Peter answers, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Feed my lambs,” says Jesus. “Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Actions speak more clearly than words. For Peter to love his risen Lord he had to do more than give lip service; he had to live and act faithfully by loving others. The same is true for us. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments!” says Jesus. “They who love me will keep my word… They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me,” he says. Three times in the space of eight verses in the portion of that farewell discourse we read today, Jesus makes clear what is required to show your love for Christ. If you love him then follow the commands he gives – love God with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself. On these hinge all the law and commandments, says Jesus.

Obedience to Christ is not just rule-following. It is not some demand that constrains us in order to satisfy God’s will for power and control over our lives. Obedience is an expression of love for God. Jesus offered that perfect expression of love in being obedient in his death on the cross. He never violated God’s command to love his neighbor. He didn’t strike out at those who arrested him. He didn’t condemn those who persecuted him. From the cross he asked God’s forgiveness upon those who crucified him, “for they know not what they do”. In Jesus we see love expressed in obedience that brings the wrath of the world down upon him as he violates the law – eating with sinners and reaching out to the outcast and healing on the Sabbath. Jesus crosses societal boundaries in order to bring redemption to the seemingly unredeemable. He loves without end, without condition, without exception, never forsaking his mission, never compromising his message.

Across the ages Christians have sought means to express their love for God. Great cathedrals have been built, great music written, sacrifices made; lives have been offered in martyrdom and in lifetimes of committed service. But the measure of love continues to be that of obedience*. If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* Your presence here is one expression of your love for God, but what you do the rest of the week says even more about that love. As you think back on your life or on this last week and the choices you made, how would Christ know that you love him? More importantly, how will Christ know that you love him tomorrow and the next day and the next…?

In his book *Credo* William Sloane Coffin, a noted preacher and social justice advocate who is writing near the end of his life suggests:

*Socrates had it wrong; it is not the unexamined but finally the uncommitted life that is not worth living. Descartes too was mistaken; “Cognito ergo sum” – I think therefore I am? Nonsense. “Amo ergo sum.” I love therefore I am. Or as St. Paul with unconscious eloquence wrote, “now abide faith, hope, love these three; and the greatest of these is love.” I believe that. I believe that it is better not to live than not to love.*

It is better not to live than not to love the God whose heart overflows with love for you, he says. At the heart of the Gospel is God’s love for us, and our call is to respond with love, to live in love. The question then becomes, what do you love? The psalmist says, “Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name.” Give us whole hearts. Give us hearts not split between love of money, power, leisure, work, status, fame, fortune, self, and the Hoos or the Hokies. Give us hearts wholly devoted to loving God. Give us faithful hearts, obedient hearts!

One of the soldiers who participated in the abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was quoted as saying about his actions: “The Christian in me says it’s wrong, but the corrections officer in me says, ‘I love to make a grown man [humiliate] himself.’”[[1]](#endnote-1) Obeying the corrections officer in him led to persecution and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners, acts clearly contrary to God’s call to love our neighbors and enemies. God’s demand for loving obedience is not suspended in times of war or fear or anger – despite what any presidential candidate may claim. God demands obedience in all times and all places from all people, despite the temptations to disobey.

An old Cherokee told her grandchild, “A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil; he is anger, envy, sorrow, jealousy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority and ego. The other is good; he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person. The grandchild thought for a moment and then asked, “Which wolf will win?” “The one we feed,” replied the old Cherokee. If we feed that wolf with hate, prejudice, greed, narcissism and selfishness, we can hardly expect love to win within us.

The disciples were concerned that Jesus wouldn’t be there to feed the loving wolf within them, to guide them in making good and faithful decisions. They were afraid of being abandoned and left to figure it out on their own. So Christ reassured them of his continuing presence through the Holy Spirit. Christ gives us the Spirit to inspire us, to teach us, to comfort us, to reassure us, and to remind us of what Christ asks us to do and be. God gives us freedom to choose, to choose what we will do with our hearts, to choose whom we will obey, to choose whom we will love*.* What then are you choosing? Who are you choosing to love – with your lips and your life? *If you love me, then keep my commandments*, says Jesus. *And the greatest commandment is this: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.* It is your choice, a choice you make every minute of every hour of every day. Choose love! For, that is how you say to Christ, “I love you?” - by choosing to love God and your neighbor and even your enemy – every day, all day, this day! Amen

1. Spec. Charles A Graner Jr. quoted by Spec. Joseph M. Darby in “Punishment and Amusement”, Scott Higham and Joe Stephens, *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2004, p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)