

Acts 10:44-48
Psalm 98
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17

Easter 6B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
May 9, 2021
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Obedience and Love

Dear God,
You have called us to love, which sounds easy but is often hard.
You have called us to obedience, which sounds hard but is sometimes easy.
You have called us to obedient love, which sounds like an oxymoron, but really isn't.
You have called us to loving obedience, which sounds crazy but leads to peace.
So help us, dear God, to love, and help us to obey.
Help us, that is, to look to the needs of others and respond with the compassion we see in Jesus.
Help us to ask whether what we are called to do, choose to do, or want to do is motivated from love.
If it is, give us the power to do it and keep at bay those forces that would hinder us from obeying your command to love one another.
And if it is not, prevent us.
It's that simple, and that difficult. Help us, dear God. Help us.
Amen.¹

That was an adaptation of a prayer written by one of my favorite thinkers and preachers. I love it because it is so simple and rings so true. Love and obedience, two notions we wouldn't necessarily connect so closely, are inextricably linked in our readings today. As it turns out, they are inextricably linked in our lives, too. But I'll confess, it took me quite a while to be able to make that connection and to get this sermon going! When sermons won't start, I tend just keep on reading what other people think. More commentaries, more sermon podcasts, more word searches in Hebrew or Greek, more from the social science commentaries.

So after a very long time of pondering and praying about all the ideas and directions swirling around inside of me, I finally figured it out. I couldn't get this sermon to start because I have a little trouble with obedience. And sometimes I even have a little trouble with love. And when I'm having trouble with love it's often because I'm unwilling to be obedient. As I said, I have a little trouble with obedience. See what I mean?

You've likely heard me say that sermons aren't so much written as they are given, and that what I'm most often given to preach is what I am working on or pondering – and always what I, myself, need to hear. So it's no wonder this sermon wouldn't start! This sermon wouldn't start because it needs to be about obedience. And apparently for the first several hours of this process, I've been decidedly unwilling to be obedient!

¹ David Lose

I don't imagine I'm the only one here who has a little – or a lot of trouble with obedience. Obedience seems like such an archaic concept, too hierarchical, and not at all considerate of everyone's wants, needs and feelings. Obedience feels authoritarian and in our culture, we're encouraged to be our own authorities. That's instilled even in little ones who can tell us very plainly, "you're not the boss of me." There is nothing in our culture that encourages obedience, quite the contrary. Thinking outside the box, being an entrepreneur, following our own stars at any cost are the things that will lead us to success, we're told, the things that will make us rise to the top, become extraordinarily successful, conquer the world.

I think we have a tendency to connect obedience with constraint, to assume that to be obedient is to be restricted or to lose our freedom. And heaven knows, in our culture we're all about personal freedom. I won't say that we're necessarily committed to everyone else's freedom – freedom from poverty or hunger or homelessness or violence. But the society we live in is all about our own personal freedom. Yet if we listen to Jesus, or to John's letters, if we listen to our hearts, we will find that contrary to societal norms, obedience is the only thing that will actually lead to perfect freedom. And even more importantly, we will find that obedience is the only way we are able to abide in God's love, the only way we will be able to love as Jesus loves.

Listen: *"If you keep my commandments,"* Jesus said, *"you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love."*

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.

Do you see how obedience is an essential component of love?

This is not to say that we fully give ourselves away, but it is to say we fully give. It is not to say that we wholly surrender our will to the will of someone else, but it is to say that surrender is involved. When we love someone, we are naturally inclined to consider their needs, their wants, their desires, in our decision making and in our actions. We cannot love without some measure of surrender, without relinquishing something of our own will.

That said, Jesus is not offering us an if/then proposition. *If you keep my commandments then I will love you and my father will love you too.* I think what Jesus is saying, is that in keeping his commandments we will realize, recognize, remember that we are always and forever, tenderly held in God's loving embrace. Think about it. When are you most sure that you are God's own beloved? When do you feel most lovable?

We don't feel so beloved when we are self-involved, or concerned only with our own wants or needs. Because when we're only concerned about ourselves, it's usually because we're feeling insecure or unworthy or unimportant, undervalued, ashamed, or even rejected. And these are precisely the times we most need to experience God's love. When Jesus said *"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love,"* he didn't mean *If you behave yourself I will love you.* He meant when we keep his commandments, we experience his love.

And what are his commandments? Remember where we are in the story – it's Maundy Thursday, the last night of Jesus' life, the night he gave the new commandment. *"I give you a new commandment,"* Jesus said, *"that you love one another as I have loved you."* Jesus taught us a lot about how to live in the world, but he gave us only that one, new commandment. That we love each other the way he loves us.

I think what Jesus is telling us when he tells us to abide in his love by keeping his commandments, is that we will know God's love by loving. That we will know God's love by allowing ourselves to be loved. It's a little tricky because love is sacramental and sacraments are always tricky. Our prayer book catechism tells us that *Sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace* – lots of us know that part of the definition. What many of us don't know is the second part of a sacrament's definition, that sacraments are *given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace*.

Sacraments effect what they are. Can you see why it's tricky? It's because sacraments are outward signs – water in baptism, bread and wine in eucharist, rings in marriage, laying on of hands in ordination, oil in confirmation, reconciliation and last rites – all of these are outward signs of God's grace that were given by Christ as the very means of receiving that grace. It's hard to explain. The best I can do is to say it's a little like what happened when my sister Becky and I saw each other for the first time in over a year during our recent vacation. We are the dearest of friends who not only live two states away from each other when we would actually prefer to live next door to each other, but like you, who've been separated from so many you love, we too have been separated by this very long pandemic. When Becky and I finally saw each other, we fell into each other's arms and both of us began to cry. Our tears and our embracing were outward and visible signs of the love we have for each other. Our embraces are also ways we experience the love we have for each other. Our tears and hugs are signs of our love just as they increase and express our love. A sacrament does what it is.

"I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another," Jesus said. As it turns out, to obey God is actually to love God and to love one another. So it necessarily follows that if we keep Jesus' commandments we will abide in his love. This is, I think, what God wants from us and for us... to abide in God's love so that we in turn will experience love, practice love, manifest love, overflow with love. *I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.* Love is who God is and love is what God does. It turns out that's true for us too. To obey God, is to abide in love. To abide in love is to love.

Love and obedience. Both are sacramental in nature and both are grounded in surrender. Because to love as God loves is to give wholly of ourselves, to be utterly single-minded in our motivation, to let loose of winning and losing and being right. To love as God loves is to be obedient in offering ourselves to build up the body of Christ, to become wholly who we are, wholly who we were created to be. We were created by love, for love. What on earth could be more heavenly?

My dears, I have said these things to you so that God's joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. Amen.