

Year C, May 26, 2019
6 Easter
Christ Church, Mexia

The verses that we just heard are part of Jesus' farewell address, which runs from John 14 through John 17. In this discourse, Jesus promises His disciples that He will send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate to be with them forever. In the process of explaining that to them, He makes a somewhat cryptic statement. He says,

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

Within this single statement, Jesus has given us a formula for happiness that is both easy to understand and difficult to do.

The passage begins with a response to a question asked of Jesus by Judas in verse 22. Back in verse 19, Jesus said, "In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." Judas asks how it is that Jesus will reveal Himself to them but not to the world. The answer is love: it is love that unlocks the secret of Jesus' presence in the post-resurrection world. This love needs to be understood as something that is a part of Jesus' group, something that is attached to them and to the person of Jesus. It is not an abstract concept that they have gotten hold of. It is a tangible reality in their lives. Richard Rohrbaugh tells us in his book, "When love is understood in this way (as an attachment), then there may or may not be affection, but it is the inward feeling of attachment, along with the outward behavior bound up with such attachment," that results in love. This attachment, this love will produce obedience to Jesus' teachings.

In the way Jesus explained this, we also find another reality concerning loving Jesus and loving God. Notice that Jesus said that those who love Me will keep My commandment. The love of God will result in the keeping of His commandments, His word. It is a result. First, you love, then you obey. But, look at the next statement. Jesus says those who do not love Him, do not keep His word. There is no sequence here. Not loving and not keeping the word are happening at the same time. One does not lead to the other. So those who love are keeping the commandments, are doing what God had asked of them. Those who do not love are not keeping the commandments and are not doing what God asks.

What is the point here? The point is the same point that the entire epistle of James is trying to make – love is nothing unless there are works, actions to demonstrate it. Suza Scalora, in a recent article in the *Huff Post*, said, "love requires action because, without action motivated by love, nothing changes." Jesus is getting to that same idea in His statement. As we read last Sunday, Jesus said in John 13, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." But how will everyone know that we have love for one another or love for God? Not by what we say. Not by how often we go to church. But instead by how we treat one another and the community around us.

That is the true test and the real demonstration of love: what we do in God's name. That is how we love God – by doing the work that He gave us to do, keeping His commandments.

But Jesus says that He is giving us a new commandment. Loving God isn't new. We first run into that over in Deuteronomy where we are told: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Jesus is now expanding on that commandment by adding the concept of loving one another, loving our neighbors. The Greek word for neighbor is best translated as "the one near." The word has a wider range of meaning than the English word "neighbor." In Jesus' time, there were no farmhouses scattered over the agricultural areas of Palestine; the populations, gathered in villages, went to and fro across the countryside in their work. Based on the teachings of what a neighbor should do and how they should act toward others, domestic life was touched at every point by a wide circle of neighbors. The term for neighbor, therefore, had a very comprehensive scope.

Now, we come to the tricky part. Doing works in God's name can be easy. We can easily go down and mow someone's lawn, read to a sick person, deliver a meal to a grieving family, or donate money to buy new clothes for a homeless child. But Jesus has to go and gum up the works by saying that not only are we to do those things but we are to do them because we love our neighbor. Love my neighbor? Love that old toothpick chewing, unfiltered cigarette smoking, National Enquirer reading, chili with beans eating hillbilly around the corner? But that is what Jesus says. Why do we have trouble loving our neighbor? One evangelist said that the easiest thing in the world to do is love people. The hardest things to do is love a person. That is what Jesus wants us to do. I believe that psychology can help us understand why we have trouble loving our neighbor. We have trouble loving our neighbor because we first have to love ourselves. Our ability to love someone else is directly affected by how we can love ourselves. To genuinely love someone else, we have to come to an understanding of the value of who we are. In this marginalizing world, we are bombarded almost daily with messages that unless you fit into this group with these characteristics, you are not quite right. To have true worth and value, you must drink this energy drink, use this deodorant, drive this car, or fly this airline. It is only when we can get beyond the propaganda of Madison Avenue that we can begin to see ourselves as God sees us, and then we can love our neighbor as ourselves. But how does God see us?

One of the Old Testament stories that I love because of what it teaches is the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The people of the world came together to build a ziggurat, a tower that would reach skyward. In verse 3 of the chapter, we learn that they made the tower out of bricks. What is a brick? It is a uniform block of clay hardened by drying in the sun or burning in a kiln. In the US, bricks are 2¼ x 3¾ x 8 inches. The point is that every brick looks like the next. They all conform to a set standard. When man built his monument, he wanted all the parts to look exactly alike. Everything has to look like me.

However, in I Peter, God says,

Come to [me], a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in [my] sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood...

The phrase living stone refers to uncut, natural stone. Each is different. Each is unique. They are not forced into a manmade mold but instead remain as they were first created. When God builds His sanctuary, it is with living, natural stones.

In the original passage, Jesus said that He and the Father will come “to make our home with them.” This is a reference back to chapter 14 where Jesus promised the disciples that He is going to prepare a place for them in God’s house where there are many “dwelling places” or mansions. Traditionally, chapter 14 has been interpreted as a reference to Jesus’ second coming. Charles H. Talbert has alerted us to the fact that in John, the Father’s house is a reference to the Jerusalem temple. Since for the evangelist, Jesus is the new temple, “in my Father’s house” is an alternative way of saying “in me,” or “in the Father,” or “in us.” God dwells in us and uses us, uncut, natural stones to build His house. That should make us feel pretty good about our worth and value. God wants us as we are. The world may see us as “the other,” but God sees us as living, vibrant, brilliant stones waiting to be a part of what God is building. When I can get my head around that, then I can love my neighbor, and I can love my God with everything that there is about me. I am somebody. I am a building block in the Kingdom of God.

We think of the Kingdom of God as being perfect. But, this morning, I will tell you that I believe that the kingdom is not perfect. I think that there are holes in the kingdom. I believe that this morning, there is a Richard-shaped hole in the Kingdom of God that only I can fill. I believe that there is a Ben-shaped hole in God’s house that only Ben can fill. I believe that there is a Leslie-shaped hole in the sanctuary of the Lord that only Leslie can fill. I believe that there is a Joy-shaped hole in the tabernacle of Jehovah that only Joy can fill. I believe that there is a hole in the Master’s plan that only you can fill. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And Love your neighbor as yourself.

Now, to the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.

Amen.