

“Be Kind and Love One Another”
May 14, 2023

I John 4:7-12
John 14:15-24

Our church moderator, Tina Koepnick, has been telling a great story recently—and with her permission I want to share it with you.

As you might know, Tina is not only our Moderator, she is also a church school teacher. And on a Sunday morning a few weeks ago, the children in the class were presented with various situations and asked how they might handle them. They wrote down their responses and then shared them with each other.

In response to the first situation, one child wrote: “Be kind and love one another.”

Another had written: “Be kind and love one another.”

A third suggested that the best approach would be to “Be kind and love one another.”

In response to the second situation, they said: “Be kind and love one another.”

And so it continued—always: “Be kind and love one another”—to the point that it almost seemed like a joke. Except that it wasn’t.

Now, this could seem like an example of group-think—all of our children being taught to think alike, to repeat what they had been told by their teachers.

Except that it wasn’t.

What happened, I think, is that the children had been listening—over weeks, and *really*, over years, to the Teacher, to Jesus who tells us: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

“Keep my commandments,” Jesus says. A little earlier he gave his followers what he called a “new commandment,” the commandment that we remember each year on Maundy Thursday: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

A little later it sounds as though Jesus is repeating himself when he says “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.” But perhaps we can hear this more as clarification than repetition. We listen—and we begin to sense that to love Jesus *is* to keep his commandments; to keep Jesus’ commandments *is* to love him.¹ The two actions are more closely connected than we might have imagined.

This is the case for those of us who would follow Jesus even to this day. The words of Jesus invite us, not into a private, mystical communion with God, but into a public community of love that exhibits the love that God showed in Jesus—a love that welcomes the stranger, a love that accepts the outcast, a love that forgives the sinner.

Jesus speaks to a group, not simply to individuals. This is somewhat obscured in English translations by the word “you.” Jesus is using the second person *plural*—“you, the whole lot of

you.” His concern is with how *all of us together* will behave toward one another and how we will live in the larger world.

“If you love me,” Jesus says, “you will keep my commandments.” If *all of you* love me, *all of you* will keep my commandments. There is no place here for some warm, fuzzy, individual “love of Jesus” apart from our love of one another. There is no place here for the ill-will that characterizes so many congregations (ask your friends). There is no place here for the exclusivity that favors some over others.

Jesus calls us to respect one another, to seek the good the community of faith—simply put—to “be kind and love one another.” As a congregation we can’t rely on a few people to do this—even the children. We are—all of us—called to love. We are—all of us together—called to keep Jesus’ commandments.

Suddenly being the UCC—the *United Church of Christ* is not as “freewheeling” as we often think it to be. To be a part of this congregation takes some discipline so that in what we do we might *all* keep Jesus’ commandment of love. It is a great calling and a high challenge that we take on in covenanting to be a member of this congregation. Christianity is a demanding way of life. It requires much and gives even more. A liberal, open-hearted Christianity calls for the best in us as individuals *and* as a congregation.

When we talk of love, we are helped by the use of the Hebrew word *shalom*.

This is often translated as “peace”—but it refers to more than just a state of calm or an absence of violence.

Shalom is the well-being, the health, the wholeness of an individual. Love is a deep and abiding commitment to the *shalom* of another person. And it is a commitment that leads to action.

At one time or another, each of us has probably experienced that kind of love ourselves.

Perhaps it came from your mother or father

Maybe there is a teacher who would not give up on you.

Or you have had—or still have—a spouse or friend whose commitment to your well-being, to your *shalom*, is unshakable and seems to be unlimited.

Someone loved you with a love that is real, a love that is in deed and in truth.

And in turn, you have learned to love others: to make their causes yours, to seek their good because you also have that same deep and abiding commitment to the *shalom* of another.

Such love does not, cannot, arise from human capacities. It comes from God’s initiative. We love because God first loved us. As the theologian Paul Tillich put it: “God’s abiding in us, making us God’s dwelling place, is the same thing as our abiding in love, as our having love as the sphere of our habitation.”

God and love are not two realities. They are one.

Keeping Jesus' commandment to love one another does not necessarily come easily. As we seek to follow Jesus, we sometimes find that we are not following our own impulses. So we need each other to help all of us keep the commandment.

In the Congregational tradition we often emphasize the responsibility that each individual has before God. And that is an important part of our tradition. It is one of the deepest roots of democracy in our nation—and in these days that emphasis on individual responsibility in our tradition can be a gift to our nation.

And yet, our Congregational tradition is not about isolated individuals but the whole people of God assembled in a particular place and time—the *congregation*. And love for one another is commanded of the whole community.

Perhaps now, we can better understand the words of Jesus when he suggests that his absence will result in a deeper sense of connection between him and those who would still follow him. "I will not leave you orphaned. I will not abandon you," Jesus says. The Spirit of God will come to those who "believe," that is, to those whose lives show a commitment to the way of Jesus Christ.

My guess, however, is that there have been times when you *have* felt abandoned— orphaned—by God. There, no doubt, have been times in your life when God was known most deeply by God's absence. Such times carry many names: the dark night of the soul, a dry season, the winter of the spirit. Maybe you came here this morning in spite of feeling abandoned by God. Maybe you came here *because* you feel abandoned.

It's crushing to feel abandoned by God—to carry the sense that the lives of others are somehow more favored, to suspect that even in their difficulties and trials other people draw closer to God and God to them, while you are left to your own devices.

At least that's how it has felt to me.

Because we can feel the despair of abandonment, the absence of God, these final words of Jesus come as good news. Jesus speaks of another Comforter who will come to us in his absence—the Spirit of Truth. Just as Jesus was himself a Comforter to those who were with him, so the Spirit will be our Comforter, our Counselor, our Advocate.

Again, we need to hear in plural. As one person put it, "The promises of [God's] presence are promises made to the *community*, not to the individual...Jesus does not promise the Comforter, or his own return, or the [abiding presence of God] to individuals but to a community who lives in love." When we follow Jesus' model of love, it is possible for the relationship with Jesus to extend beyond the first generation of followers, because that relationship depends not on physical presence but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the community. And that love is present when we keep the commandments of Jesus.ⁱⁱ

Are you beginning to get a sense of how important *you* are to this community?

Are you beginning to get a sense of how important this community is *to you*?

Your love is a sign of God's love among us. The love in this community is how you can know that you are loved.

The Spirit comes to the congregation so that, knowing we are loved, we will be able to love one another.

The Spirit comes to the congregation so that as we love one another, we will know that we are loved by God.

Reflecting on this morning's lesson from the Gospel of John, the great 20th century New Testament scholar, Rudolph Bultmann, asked: "Can the disciples still love Jesus when he is gone? Can the *next generation* love him, without having had a personal relationship with him?"ⁱⁱⁱ

How can we love Jesus after he is gone? How can we have a relationship with Jesus when he is not here?

We look to something beyond ourselves, something greater than our own lives, something that transcends our everyday, predictable reality. We stretch who we are and what we do into that new reality.

We look forward to the new things that God is doing among us and in the world rather than being trapped in the past.

In our brokenness, amidst the brokenness of our world, we hope—and we act on that hope as we continue to seek justice.

As we attempt this Easter lifestyle, we find that we are not abandoned. God's Spirit is with us and among us.

How do we love Jesus after he is gone? By following in the ways of Jesus Christ, made known and to be made known to us as we live out all the instructions we need: love one another as Christ has loved us.

How do we love Jesus after he is gone? The children of our congregation know—and continue to teach us: Be kind and love one another.

ⁱ Gail O'Day, "John," *Interpreter's Bible*, v. IX, pg. 745.

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, pg. 613.