

# Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2020

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Pasadena, California

Gospel: John 14:15-21

[Jesus said to the disciples:] <sup>15</sup> “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. <sup>18</sup> “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

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If you have ever wondered what it means to be a true follower of Jesus, our Gospel of John reading today states it quite clearly for us: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Later, Jesus also says: “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me...”

What are these commandments that Jesus is referring to? Well, just one chapter earlier, Jesus tells the disciples: “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.” In other words, to love others, no matter who they are, is to follow Jesus’ commandments; and, in turn, show love to God.

This seems simple enough to follow, and yet, why is it so hard for us? If we Christians truly loved the way God loves, then why do we have Christian groups who condemn certain groups of people? Why are there Christians protesting safer-at-home orders? Why are some churches willing to reopen their sanctuaries before the science says it’s safe to do so? Why do some Christians get greedy and selfish? Why do some Christians do harm to others?

Well, of course, the obvious answer is that we all succumb to the power and lure of sin. Martin Luther has discussed in his teachings the fact that our very nature is to sin and turn away from God. Because of this, the Lutheran understanding is that we cannot, by our own power, turn away from sin. In other words, if it were solely up to us, we would choose to give in to sin. All we need to do is look through



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daily news articles to find evidence of this fact. Every day my Facebook newsfeed is overwhelmed with articles about people unwilling to follow safer-at-home rules, I'm sure yours is as well.

But there is good news. Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive help in following the commandment to love, and that help is the Advocate; the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that keeps us grounded in God's love, which frees us to love one another. It is the Holy Spirit that ties us into a loving communal relationship with God.

It begins with baptism, which causes our old nature to die when we are immersed in the water of the font. Think of it in this way, if the breath of God is our life force, then when we are immersed in the waters of baptism, and we can no longer breathe, the life force leaves us. We die a metaphorical death. However, when we emerge from the water and breathe again, the breath that enters us is the new breath of God, which gives us new life. When we are immersed in the water we die to sin, and when we emerge from the water we rise to new life.

This new life is also enriched with the Holy Spirit who continually reminds us that we have been marked with the cross of Christ, which means that we have been claimed as God's beloved. This mark is our new identity and our new nature. Now, thanks to baptism and the Holy Spirit, we are indeed free to follow Jesus' commandments; we are free to love as God loves.

What keeps us in a loving and abiding relationship with Jesus is the love of God. God's love pours out on all of us, which then not only enriches our lives but encourages us to enrich the lives of others. Think of it this way, when a loved one does something truly special for you, not only does it fill our hearts with joy, but it also makes us want to respond with love in return. This response doesn't feel like an obligation, but something we want to do to show our love in return. Martin Luther once stated that, when we truly understand the love God has shown us through Christ's death and resurrection, we will not be able to do anything but respond to it with sharing that love with others.

And the good news is that God's love for us never stops flowing. We will never lose our advocate, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will continue to direct us to God's amazing love in our lives, which will continue to empower us to show love in return. Even on the days where our love feels drained, the Holy Spirit will find ways to remind us that God's love is an endless spring of living water. Even on those days where it feels like we did more harm than good to those around us, the Holy Spirit will remind us that God's forgiveness comes without cost. Even on those days where the despair of the broken world seems like it will never change, the Holy Spirit will remind us that the hope of redemption, the hope of healing, the hope of wholeness, the hope of resurrection is present among us.

What we are seeing in our nation is a response to the upset of earthly powers. COVID-19 has shown us that our current systems are in need of drastic change, for they are unfair and exclude many people.



When something upsets the power dynamics that are in place and shows us their flaws, a reaction occurs. For some who have enjoyed the benefits of power and privilege, their fear of losing it causes them to react negatively in a way where they will do anything and be okay with harming anyone as long as it will help them maintain their power. But there is another reaction that occurs, one that stirs up the hearts of people in a way that they begin to cry out for justice and a plea to fix our broken systems so that all people can experience the right to live and thrive. One reaction comes out of a place of sin; the other reaction comes out of a place of love.

I have been seeing both reactions happen in this country right now and it saddens my heart that there are people in this country who care more about getting a haircut than helping to save the lives of vulnerable people. Yet, our response as followers of Jesus is clear. To stay safe at home is to love others the way God loves us, which is loving Jesus and following his commandments. Yes, it is very hard at times. It is kind of ridiculous that our pets can currently get groomed but not us human beings. But, we are staying at home to show this broken world that the church follows Jesus; the church chooses to love because it is grounded in God's love.

Part of the issue is that we need to remember that we aren't staying at home just to protect ourselves, we are also doing it to protect others. Sure, some of us may be strong and healthy enough that, even if we were to contract COVID-19, we would easily survive, but would the person who is immune-compromised, whom we brushed past in the grocery store while asymptomatic, survive?

God's love, while given to each of us, has never been meant to be an individual thing. God's love has always been a communal love that is fully expressed in community. God's love is at its highest when we are communally loving God and communally loving neighbor. Right now we accomplish this by protecting everyone through practicing safe social distancing and following stay-at-home guidelines. Yes, it is true that it may mean that we have to continue to sacrifice worshipping together in person, having fellowship together, and making music together for quite a while longer, but in doing so we are showing others that the love God has for all people is the love that we ground our lives in. In doing so, more and more people will come to see the freedom found in the communal love that we have with Jesus.

Amen.

