

*“For the Love of God”*

*John 14:15-21*

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*“For the love of God.”* How often have we heard or uttered that expression in frustration or fear? It usually ends with an exhortation to act, as in “For the love of God, stop lying to me” or “For the love of God, get hold of yourself” or simply the generic, “For the love of God, do something.”

The saying is, as you might imagine, blasphemous, taking God’s name in vain, which is why people often say “For the love of Pete,” (probably a reference to St. Peter) to circumvent the blasphemy. One might hope that appealing to the love of God is effective in coaxing the desired behavior, especially if it is meant not blasphemously but literally as in today’s Gospel when Jesus says to the disciples: *“If you love me you will keep my commandments.”*

For the love of God, keep my commandments.

For only seven verses of scripture in today’s Gospel, there’s a lot here. For starters, which commandments does Jesus want us to keep? There were 612 in the Jewish law, including the big ten ones and a host of others that governed relations with the poor, marginalized (like widows and children) and the stranger and alien. Many were important, some less so. All of them, Jesus said, are summarized in loving God with heart, mind, soul and strength; and one’s neighbor as oneself. Keep the love commandment and the other things will fall into place.

Simple, right? *Not!* Loving is easy when the other is lovable. Yet all of us, somewhere along the way, aren’t so lovable. Lest anyone wonder, this is most assuredly autobiographical. I am not always lovable. Neither are you.

This is not said with malice or with any specific person or situation in mind. We can all supply our own examples. It is rather a statement of truth, *veritas*, reflected in Jesus saying throughout this *Gospel* “*Verily*

*I say unto thee,*” that is, “Friend, I’m telling you the truth.” He is leaving the disciples with this truth in his last extended conversation with his followers before his betrayal and arrest. Loving isn’t always easy but it is what we are commanded to do.

Friends of mine used to joke, when a family member was challenged for rude or inappropriate behavior, with the rejoinder, “*Well, it doesn’t make me a bad person.*” There is that sense in Jesus’ promise here, too. However we stumble in loving and being worthy of love, Jesus promises the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, to be with us forever. This is the Gospel writer’s phrase for the Holy Spirit which Jesus says we already know because he lives with and in each of us. By this spirit we also know the potential for goodness within us all.

This also is truth, for how could we know when we fail to love if we did not also know what love within us looked like and what love in action looks like? The Spirit of truth does live with and in us. We know what the Spirit looks like because we know what love looks like.

I had the privilege of visiting the 9/11 Memorial Museum a week ago yesterday before it opened to the public. Although most attendees were family members of those killed in the attacks, I was a guest of my son who works for the 9/11 Memorial Foundation. Since he was only able to obtain one ticket, I went alone. I do not recommend it if you were living at the time of the attacks. Memories of that terrible day come flooding back when one views tapes of the news report, tapes of the actual attacks and artifacts, such as the stairwell that carried so many to safety and first-responder vehicles, crushed like children’s playthings, by falling debris.

But, oh, those first-responders! Men and women coming from far away, from off duty, from homes and families and lives to give theirs so that others might live. Such love! Such love for people they never knew and would never know. Yes, it was a call to duty and all in a day’s work for those whose day’s work daily has the possibility of death. But that does not make it any less loving. Would that we seek to live such love for others. Please see the museum if you can.

There is one other thought here, for those of us who are mere mortals and not first responders. It is this promise of which I have written in today's "Grace Notes." Jesus says "*I will not leave you orphaned.*" In his book *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, sociologist Peter Berger tells the story of a priest working in the slums of a European city. Someone asked the priest "*Why do you do it?*" The priest replied, "*So that the rumor of God may not disappear completely.*"

We are surrounded by testimonies that the rumor of God has not disappeared: from the kindnesses we perform for one another; to the prayers we engage on behalf of one another; to the word fitly spoken to one another which, as Proverbs declares, is "*like apples of gold in a setting of silver.*" (Proverbs 25:11)

We are surrounded by those who serve in the name of love. This is not limited to forms of serving we typically associate with faith, like worship leaders, teachers of children and adults, those who pray and sing and anoint. Christ's love is also shown by those who serve as Trustees, and on the Church Council and in the various committee ministries of the church. And it is shown in the mission to Haiti and UMArmy, and Fair on the Green, and the Oyster Festival.

These travelers with us in the journey of faith remind us that the rumor of God has not disappeared completely; and that it is for the love of God that we are surrounded by the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us for comfort and strength.

A catechism is a teaching tool of the church with questions and answers about key beliefs of our faith. The first question of Heidelberg Catechism is "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The answer is as true today as it was in 1562 when the catechism was written: "My only comfort is that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."

For the love of God let us yearn to love others as did the one to whom we belong and who first loved us, Jesus Christ.