

Sixth Sunday in Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
17 May 2020

John 14:15-21

There are two stories that I would like to share with you briefly this Sunday. The first is the story of a Southern family which had been lovingly led by their mother for about 30 years, since the death of the father. The mother was left with three young girls of 5, 7 and 10 when her husband died in an auto accident. From that moment on the mother sacrificed her entire life for the sake of the girls. She worked two jobs for many years, refused to re-marry out of concern for the girls, managed to purchase a nice home for the family, and even managed to save quite a bit of money by the time she died at the age of 79.

At her deathbed she implored with her girls, "If you love me, you will love each other for ever." Unfortunately, the woman did not leave a will and the girls soon became entangled in a legal fight over money and possessions. For years they would only speak to each other via attorneys, they failed to visit each other, and their anger and bitterness took over their lives. The pain of having failed to love her sisters the way her mother wanted was so strong that six years after the death of the mother, the youngest daughter committed suicide. Yet, despite this second tragedy, the two oldest sisters never reconciled and continued to fight for years.

The other story is that of Michael Jordan and it took place in 1993 as Jordan led the Chicago Bulls to an NBA championship. You may recall that Jordan's father had been murdered just a few weeks before and Jordan was playing this game for the man who could not be there to share in the joy -- the man who had taught him life's basic values. To love his father was to keep his father's teachings and to keep the teachings was to love him. After winning the game, Michael knelt by the side of the court in prayer and wept for his deceased father. This personal moment of incredible intimacy with his departed father was witnessed by hundreds of millions of people around the world. Later that day, Jordan vowed to do all in his power to honor his Father's teachings for the rest of his life by loving God above all things, by playing fair, and by being grateful for every blessing in his life.

These two stories are incredibly related, yet opposite. In the first story you see how the devoted love of a mother who sacrificed everything for her daughters was not sufficient to unite the sisters in love after her death. In the other story you see a young man who believes loving his father means following his teachings, his values, and his determination. Loving his dad means doing the things he taught him, remaining true to the end, holding on to his commands, his instructions, his example, and his life.

In the Gospel today Jesus tells his disciples in the Upper Room, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." This is also a bedside request, as the

woman in the story I told you. Jesus knows he is about to die. Soon he will leave his friends. He now looks at them and says, "Show your love for me by following my commands." But, what commands is he talking about? There are two major instances where Jesus talks about commandments. In one instance someone asks him which is the most important commandment. Jesus responds that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength -- and our neighbor as ourself (Mk 12:30). This is usually called, "The Great Commandment." During the Upper Room conversation he gives the disciples a "New Commandment" and that is that they love each other as he himself has loved them.

When Jesus today says follow my commandments this is what he means. Love God and love others. And, by others he means ALL others. Not just the people we like. Not just those who are nice to us, those who soothe our wounded egos, and cater to our every desire. Not just those who allow us to treat them in whichever way we want, and are always there to cheer us up and support us. Not just those who would give up their lives for us. It means ALL people. Including those who hate us, those who resent our authority, those who seek to do us harm, those who malign and ridicule us, those who ignore us, those who triangulate us, and those who gossip about us.

I am often struck by the intimacy of this encounter between Jesus and his disciples just before his arrest and crucifixion. In a way, this command today was first given to the future leaders of the church. "If you love me, you will follow my commands ... I will not leave you orphaned... I will give you another Counselor... I am in the Father, and you in me, and I in you..." These are powerful words that speak of a unity between the Father and the Son and between the Son and his Church. Yet, today, many in our church are more concerned about building walls of separation than about working for unity. Today, many groups within the church huddle around a particular issue, a particular Theological concept, a particular form of worship... and they say to themselves, "We are the true Church and no one who is not us is the church. We are the true followers of the Gospel and there is no salvation outside our group. You either stand with us and worship our way, or you have no part in us and we have no part in you." Our church today has become overly individualistic, overly litigious, and overly concerned with human power and authority. Today, Jesus reminds us: "If you love me, you will follow my commandments, by loving God and loving others... by working for unity... by serving others the way I myself have served you... by being willing to die for your brothers and sisters."

This is extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible. Perhaps this is the reason Jesus uses the expression, "I command you" three times in this sermon. He knew this would be difficult, yet he also knew that no one can say "I love Jesus" while hating his brothers and sisters. He knew that loving him means loving difficult people. He knew that mutual love between Christians is the most powerful evidence to the world of our relationship with our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Christ knew that this commandment would be exceedingly difficult to follow. It is for this reason that today he offers us an amazing gift to help us to do this. Today he

gives us his Holy Spirit, the other advocate to be with us, to walk alongside us, to guide us in our journey. God's Holy Spirit offers us the gift of help, the gift of hope, and the gift of intimacy. Jesus knows that he is about to leave his disciples. They will look for him and will not find him. They will despair without him, they will lose hope, they will be tempted to give up, they will soon feel abandoned and lost. It is for this reason that he gives them another Helper, to keep helping them to the end of the age. The Holy Spirit is for the Disciples what Christ himself was for them in human form. They will no longer see Christ, but they will have a helper that will never leave them. This Helper will be with them in their hearts and in the community of the church. This Helper will be there making it possible for the disciples to love God and love each other.

The Holy Spirit also gives the disciples the gift of Hope. This is the greatest gift God gives his church. Even in the worst of circumstances we are not defeated if we have hope. Hope is revolutionary. The Disciple who believes in Jesus knows that he will see him again someday and this assurance gives him hope to endure even the most adverse conditions. This hope gives him strength to love and to give himself up for others, even in the midst of adverse circumstances or exhaustion. The disciple knows that if he loves God and cares for others he will never be without hope. There is nothing that will separate him from the love of God!

The third gift the Holy Spirit gives his church is the gift of intimacy with God. For those who love God and one another, there is a profound intimacy with God. They become a part of God and God becomes a part of them, even as the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. This intimacy is such that we are no longer strangers, but children adopted. Heirs of God's kingdom. Our mutual love for each other celebrates the fact that in Christ Jesus we are all brothers and sisters. This is an intimacy with God that will never fail because nothing can ever separate us from his love for us.

Today Christ commands us to love each other, even those we don't like, but he today gives us the tools to do this. He gives us his Holy Spirit to help us, to give us hope, and lead us into a deeper level of intimacy with God and with each other. May God's Holy Spirit lead you into reconciliation, forgiveness, and mutual affection today and always. Amen!