

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 14, 2022

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## Obedience

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What causes you to obey someone? Why do you follow instructions? Have you ever broken the law? Do you obey traffic signs? Other traffic laws? How about the speed limit, ever go faster than that? And if you have done any of those things, what made you feel as though you didn't have to obey that law or instruction?

In many ways obedience is at the heart of Maundy Thursday. It's even in the name of the day itself! Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum* which we translate into English as "mandate." Maundy Thursday is less about the washing of feet (though that is important too!) and more about the mandate, or command, that Jesus institutes in the Gospel reading for this sacred day.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this "new commandment" sounds familiar. It should...it's not really all that new after all, is it? We hear in the Gospels, repeatedly, the command to love God and to love our neighbors. And it's not just in the Gospels! We can find that same theme in the entirety of Scripture! It's even found in the opening to the *shema*, one of the foundational verse of Judaism: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."<sup>2</sup>

So what makes Christ's command on the eve of his Passion new or different? Why does Jesus call this new when it seems quite old instead? Well, I think it's different in two important ways. First, it links our love for each other to God's love for us. Not only are we to try to love our neighbor as ourselves, but we are to try to love one another with the same **sort** of love that God loves us with...namely *agape* love, or the unconditional, unmerited,

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:34 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

overabundant, unrelenting, and gracious love of God. The sort of love that accepts people for who they are and also tries to support people in becoming more fully who they are meant to be, blessed and beloved children of God, who bear the image of God and a spark of the divine.

The second difference, and the one I want to focus on now, is that this command is not given with the usual enforcement mechanisms of obedience behind it. Think about the laws and commands of humanity. Reflect back on those opening questions I started with. Why do we obey? What's the enforcement mechanism? I would argue that for humanity, the way we typically get obedience from others is through coercion and threats. Ultimately, what is the enforcement mechanism behind most of our laws? If you break one you go to prison (though in our justice system, there are plenty of ways to circumvent that...if you're wealthy enough).

And it's not just with laws. We humans love to attach coercive and threatening conditions to other things too. And we start **young!** Be on your best behavior or you'll get a spanking! That early command lays bare the threat of violence behind much of how humanity deals with obedience. Be obedient to the law...to your boss...to your spouse...your parent...to whomever, or else there will be punishment. Follow the rules or go to prison. Follow the rules or you're fired. Follow my rules or I'll leave you. Be obedient or else. That's how humanity does commands and obedience.

Now, I suspect you can find other reasons people follow the rules...good order, civil society, it's a part of our culture, whatever. But when all of these fail or when a person gets desperate enough, obedience is ultimately demanded through threats of coercion or violence. However, this is **not** how Jesus operates.

What's the enforcement mechanism behind this command of Christ? There isn't one! Jesus isn't interested in conditional obedience or relationship. Relationship built on threats is no real relationship at all. Obedience based on "or else" is **not** loving and it is **not** Christ-like. So how does Jesus make a claim of obedience on the disciples, and on us, if there's no enforcement? For that we need to jump ahead to the next chapter in John's Gospel.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”<sup>3</sup> “Hey Pastor Jon! That sounds conditional! You see, Jesus is using an “or else” to get obedience!” You might be thinking to yourself.

But here’s the thing, we don’t have to interpret that statement as conditional. Now, it **can** certainly be interpreted that way, but it doesn’t have to be. That’s part of the trickiness of translating Scripture, there are often options to our translating! We can just as easily interpret this statement as causal rather than conditional. The verb translated as “keep my commandments” is in the future, indicative case, which means it is simply a statement of a future fact. Loving Jesus causes one to keep his commands.

Jesus seems to be saying that one simply cannot love Jesus without keeping his commands. And what are Christ’s commands? Love God, love neighbor...that’s pretty much it. Most of Jesus’ actions and teachings serve this one fundamental command (which is more of a statement of fact than anything): one cannot love God if one does not love neighbor, and vice versa.

What strikes me about this reality is how far from it the church, and many Christians, have strayed. We’ve found all sorts of ways to apply conditions to our love for one another (which means we’re also trying to apply conditions to God’s love too). And that is **not** in keeping with the commands of Christ. It is actively not loving God, which is a pretty bad look for the Church and for Christians!

Looking around our world today there seem to be many Christians who will only love their neighbor if their neighbor looks, acts, speaks, and thinks like they do. Rather than loving our neighbors many Christians seem to be opting for hatred instead. Hatred for neighbors who look different from the majority. Neighbors who might be black or brown-skinned. Neighbors who may be refugees or immigrants. Neighbors who may be Jewish or Muslim. Neighbors who may be conservative or progressive. Neighbors who may be gay or lesbian or asexual. Neighbors who may be non-binary or transgender.

Jesus placed no conditions on God’s love and then grounded our loving of God in loving our neighbors **in the same way** that we have been loved...unconditionally. The heart of Christianity is *agape* love, extravagant and unconditional. And any attempt by Christians to apply conditions to our

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<sup>3</sup> John 14:15

love, or to God's love, is an act of disobedience towards Christ. It is an expression of "un-love" towards God.

This day is marked by the command of Christ to love one another as Christ loves us. In a few moments we will participate in an intimate act of love, the foot washing. I pray that this loving act tonight, the love of God shown forth in the entirety of this Holy Week, and of Easter, be one in which you know, deep in your very bones, God's all-encompassing love for you. And I pray that out of this amazing experience of God's *agape* love, we can truly live out our obedience to God by loving our neighbors with that same *agape* love.

I do not wish to deceive you about this though. It is **NOT** easy to love as Christ loves. It means loving even those whom you detest, those who are absolutely your enemies. Scripture makes it obvious that despite God's desires, the cosmos has placed itself in opposition to God. Our world as it is now does **not** want to love unconditionally. I know I struggle with the command, the reality, that to love God means loving those I'd really rather not love. It's hard and we fail at it again and again.

So if our inability to love our neighbors as Christ loves them means we are not obedient to Christ's command. If our actions say that we do **not** love God because we are not loving our neighbors the way God loves them, then what hope do have we? All the hope!

Christ does not leave us to this work, this obedience, alone. Christ promises us the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. The Spirit which Christ sends to abide in us is the Spirit of God's love. When we're bogged down by the brokenness of the world and the brokenness within ourselves, there is the Spirit reminding us that we are loved, always and forever, no matter what. When we find it difficult, or even impossible, to love someone the way Christ wants us to, there is the Spirit with all the power and resources of God, drawing us back to loving obedience; even loving others when we are struggling to.

It can be quite the paradox. We love best when we get out of the Spirit's way. We can be obedient best when we merely rest in the loving embrace of God. When we remember the love with which we have been loved, then we can share it. When we remember that Christ is in us and we are in Him, then maybe, just maybe, we can do the obedient thing, the real thing, only thing that truly matters...love.

Amen.