

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 9, 2021 (6th Sunday of Easter, Year B)
John 15:9-17

One of the things I find interesting about the gospel of John, is that Jesus keeps saying OVER and OVER again, “Keep my commandments.” So much so, that we Christians start GRUMBLING about the REPETITION of it. “Enough already – we get it!”

So WHY do you think Jesus keeps REPEATING his commandment to love one another? Preached it so many times that we get BORED HEARING it? (Pause.) Hmm, because we don’t GET it, do we?. If people DID keep the commandment to love one another, what a DIFFERENT world we would live in!

In the biblical sense, “keeping” his commandment doesn’t JUST mean obeying it; it means keeping it CLOSE, holding it dear to our hearts, JOYFULLY responding to it. But Jesus keeps REPEATING it, because WE keep FORGETTING it. We say, “We HEAR you Jesus,” but REALLY, we aren’t listening.

This is Mothers’ Day, so this dynamic in our relationship with our children should sound a little FAMILIAR. A MOM would LOVE to say to her children, “Children, please do this for me,” and have them respond, “Oh YES, mother, we would LOVE to do this for you. Mother, your command is so precious to us that we will CERTAINLY DO what you ask. And mother, since YOU ask it, we will do it IMMEDIATELY.”

Wouldn’t that be nice? But that’s not how it goes. Usually, some, shall we say, REPETITION is involved! “Kids, will you please pick up your mess.” Nothing. “Kids, didn’t you hear me? You need to pick up your mess.” Crickets. “Hey, I’m talking to you! Clean up your up mess!” And at THAT point, the kids say, “Why do you always YELL?”

Even though WE are all GOOD kids, Jesus needs to KEEP REPEATING himself, because we’re just not listening. Sometimes we need to be told what to do OVER and over and over again.

Eventually children DO hear the command, and instead of saying, “Sure, it’s the LEAST we can do,” they DO the LEAST they can do. Have you ever had a child standing in front of you with a pile of dirty clothes or a stack of dirty dishes in their hands, saying, “What do I DO with these?”

So as GOD’S children, we TOO do ONLY what is REQUIRED of us, just our DUTY as Christians. Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another,” so we DUTIFULLY help people, we SERVE, because we are COMMANDED to love.

But do you think that’s what Jesus had in mind? If we ended there, something would be missing. We’d be forgetting what Jesus said right AFTER that: “This is my commandment, that you love one another AS I HAVE LOVED YOU.” Ah, now that’s different. Jesus did MORE than just the minimum. Jesus WALKED and TALKED with us sinners. He sat down to SHARE a meal with us. He SACRIFICED EVERYTHING for us. He DIED for us.

And we can’t forget Jesus’ words just BEFORE the commandment either: “I have said these things to you so that MY JOY may be in you, and that YOUR joy may be complete.” We don’t really FOLLOW Christ’s command to love one another, if we DO it in a loveless and joyless way.

Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants ... but I have called you friends.” Now don’t miss the SIGNIFICANCE of that. This is a CHANGE in status. It’s an honor to be called friend.

It’s like one high school senior I heard about, who had just graduated. She ran up to her favorite teacher and said, “Mrs. Peterson, I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me and taught me.” But the teacher smiled and replied, “Please, now that you’ve graduated, call me Carol.” Something had CHANGED. We’ve been RAISED to ANOTHER level.

Jesus says we’re not just SERVANTS anymore, we’re FRIENDS. A servant “doesn’t know what the master is doing.” Servants just do what they’re TOLD to do, because they HAVE to do it.

I'm reminded of our Affirmation students. So many of THEM only come to Affirmation class because they're TOLD to, because their parents MAKE them come. But by the time they complete all the requirements and affirm their faith, they figure out WHAT their faith MEANS to them. And for many of these kids, something changes. They find not only the Lord, not only their Savior, they find a friend.

Now FRIENDS—their MOTIVES are different. Jesus said, "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from the Father." AS Jesus' friends, we do things not just in Christian duty, but because we KNOW Jesus, and we know what he's LIKE, and what he wants us to DO, and BECAUSE he's our FRIEND, we WANT to do it. This is a DIFFERENT kind of relationship.

It's been said, a true friend is someone who KNOWS you, but LOVES you ANYWAY. I've received this e-mail from a few of MY friends. It defines what a "real friend" is. I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he called US friends. It says:

A simple friend has never seen you cry.

A real friend has shoulders soggy from your tears.

A simple friend doesn't know your parents' first names.

A real friend has their phone numbers in their address book.

A simple friend brings a bottle of wine to your party.

A real friend comes early to help you cook and stays late to help you clean.

A simple friend hates it when you call after they've gone to bed.

A real friend asks you why you took so long to call.

A simple friend seeks to TALK about your problems.

A real friend seeks to HELP you with your problems.

A simple friend wonders about your romantic history.

A real friend could blackmail you with it.

A simple friend, when visiting, acts like a guest.

A real friend opens your refrigerator and helps themselves.

A simple friend thinks the friendship is over when you have an argument.

A real friend knows that it's NOT a friendship UNTIL you've had a fight.

A simple friend expects you to always be there for them.

A real friend expects to always be there for you!

Jesus is a "real friend." He shares our tears. He hears our prayers. He bears our burdens and helps us with our problems. He can TAKE it when we yell at him. And he's always there for us. He knows all our secrets, and LOVES us ANYWAY.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He doesn't stop with what we EXPECT to hear, on ANY subject. He said, "This is my commandment, that you love ONE ANOTHER as I have loved YOU." Love ONE ANOTHER. It sounds wonderful and grand. Who could argue with that?

But as my affirmation students often say, "Pastor, I can't love everybody; I don't even LIKE everybody." To be honest, there are a lot of UNLIKABLE people out there, and when you're faced with someone who's cantankerous, obnoxious, difficult, stubborn, and seemingly UN-lovable, it's ANYTHING but easy. Even Jesus, in his humanity, once shouted, "How much longer must I put up with you?" How many of you spouses and parents have grumbled THOSE words? But Jesus never said we had to LIKE everybody; he called us to LOVE one another.

How can you love someone who at that moment you don't even like? How can Jesus command us to have a loving, warm FEELING for one another, when we KNOW that there WILL be,

in EVERY relationship, times of anger, and sadness, and conflict? How can we FEEL LOVE for all people? The answer is: we CAN'T.

Obviously, we need a GREATER understanding of love. CHRISTIAN love goes WAY BEYOND FEELINGS. Christian love is action.

Jesus said, "Love one another as I HAVE LOVED YOU." Now think about what that means. Jesus didn't just sit in heaven thinking warm and fuzzy thoughts about us; Christ's love isn't just sentimental or romantic; Christ came DOWN from heaven, and put his love into ACTION. He DID love. He loved us so deeply that he DIED for us.

As Christians we say an amazing thing: "We will love OTHERS AS CHRIST LOVES US." We pledge ourselves to GOD'S way of loving, to GIVE ourselves to others.

We can't always FEEL love, but we CAN DO love. To love as Christ has loved us means that, regardless of how we feel—angry, sad, happy, tired, dumpy, or nothing at all—we will CHOOSE to love, CHOOSE do the LOVING, KIND thing.

As we heard last week from the first LETTER of John, "We love because he FIRST loved US." (1John 4:19) Jesus no longer calls you servants; he calls you friends. And Jesus is a "real" friend. He CHOSE you. Sometimes he might not like the things you do, but he LOVES you ANYWAY. And He died for you.

"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." What a comfort to know we HAVE a friend like that. Maybe even enough to BE a friend like that.

When our children grow up, we don't NEED to repeat ourselves – as MUCH. And as WE grow in FAITH, GOD doesn't need to repeat himself as much either. We HEAR him, because we're LISTENING for him. We TREASURE his Word, and we JOYFULLY RESPOND to it.

As Jesus said, "I have said these things to you so that MY joy may be in you, and that YOUR joy may be complete." Appropriate words for Mother's Day. And EVERY day. Amen.