

I must say, I find it curious how Jesus approaches the whole subject of “love” in today’s Gospel. He *commands* us to love. **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”** Surely, to our modern ears, commanding love sounds ridiculous. Love isn’t something you can *command*. We look upon it as a feeling – an emotion. It’s something that comes over us, something that sweeps us away. You can’t *command* feelings any more than you can *command* the wind and the weather. What’s Jesus mean here, I *command* you to love?

Yet perhaps there’s something to this command. After all, the Gospels maintain that Jesus has the power to command the wind and the waves. Perhaps it *is* possible to command love too. Perhaps Jesus is liberating us from an enslaving definition of love that reduces it to no more than sentimentality and raw emotion. Maybe he’s on to something here.

If Jesus is the Lord of love, and if we are in Jesus, then perhaps love *is* subject to command. Perhaps we *can* command it – and it can be so. I’m going to suggest this morning that not only is this *possible*, it is the *standard* Jesus has set for the Church. If we are to be faithful to Jesus, then we have no choice but to love one another.

Needless to say, this is a standard that is far from having been met. As we have learned all too well just from some of the “parking lot conversations” of the past four or five months, if you want to see a really *big* fight, witness a *church* fight. It can get *ugly*. One side sees the other as ignorant. The other folk see the first as unwilling to go along with something they are *sure* God wants done. And they fight – sometimes to the death. Not, perhaps, the death of any of the combatants – but most assuredly the death of the congregation in which they’re doing the fighting.

I think part of the reason behind all this is that we’ve co-opted the modern day definition of love. We’ve reduced it to emotions – we’ve become enslaved to the notion that love is about emotions and nothing more. Now, I’m not saying we should ignore or deny our emotions. Jesus himself didn’t deny his feelings in the Garden of Gethsemane. At the *feeling* level, he wanted a different way. “Lord, let this cup pass from me.” But ultimately, Jesus summoned up a deeper level of love, he *commanded* forth that love, and said, in essence, “I will not allow my emotions to contradict my Father’s will.” I will not let my *feelings* keep me from doing the thing that love *commands* me to do.

I ask you: are you following the commandment of love? If you are feeling conflicted, are you reaching out to the person (or the group) with whom you are in conflict? Are you seeking reconciliation in Jesus' Name? In light of what we've read this morning, we cannot use the age-old excuse, "I don't feel like it." Our Lord said, "I *command* you to love one another!"

It comes down to this simple question: ***Is Jesus our Lord, or do we worship our hurt feelings?***

Let me share with you a story. Many years ago, I was involved with the youth program in the church I served on Cape Cod. It was a good group in many ways. We had a splendid couple as youth leaders and they did wonderful work with our high schoolers. But Jan and Fran were concerned (as I was) that the group had become hopelessly split into cliques. The friction within the group had gotten to such a point that we had to confront it head on. We called them together – and they just sat there looking bored and agitated. Finally, Fran could take it no longer. He gave them, well, I guess you'd call it a little sermon: "I think you've got to put all your negative feelings aside and do what Jesus told you to do: 'Love one another.'"

The kids snickered.

I thought to myself, "This is NOT working. They don't want a sermon!" Finally, one of the kids said, "How can we love one another? We don't even *like* each other!" Fran replied, "I'm sorry, did I say anything about *liking* each other? All you have to do is *love* each other. To *like* someone is based on *feelings*. To *love* someone like Jesus commande means we respect and honor that person as a fellow child of God. All I'm saying to you is this – cut each other some slack and try to respect one another." Then he said, "Now, I hope you will stop worrying about all of this and get busy doing what you are called to do in Jesus. Stop worrying about who hurt whom and whose feelings are bruised and just come together and do something good for someone else. You might be surprised how much this will help you as a group."

This was the turning point for the youth group at the Church of the Holy Spirit. The youth decided they'd do some service projects – and they promised they'd be civil to each other. They got involved in some local projects; they got involved in the local CROP walk. To be honest, I remember the conversation Fran had with them much more vividly than what exactly they did in response. But this much I do remember: They stopped worrying so much about their differences and started focusing on the kinds of things they should have been focused on all along.

One day, I just sort of stood back and watched as they busied themselves with one of the projects they had taken on in the wake of all this and I just marveled at what I saw. Here were kids who, a few weeks earlier, had been at each others' throats – and now they were working together and laughing and having fun with each other. And I couldn't help but think of the verse, "Look at those Christians, how they love one another."

Love practiced *despite* our feelings leads, paradoxically, *to* feelings – feelings of joy. Joy and happiness seem to come to us when we focus outside ourselves. And, my friends, this joy is none other than Christ with us. That's what he promised his disciples if they would listen to him. ***"I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*** Jesus promises the joy of his eternal presence when we resolve to love one another and serve in his Name. The joy of God comes to us as we forget *ourselves* long enough to become focused on *giving ourselves away* for God's love.

I've been struggling, as I know many of you have, with the weighty decision we have before us as to how to discern God's Spirit as regards the future of our Shared Ministry. Like you, I have a certain amount of anxiety over our finances, our spirit of community, concerns about whether or not the configuration that's been recommended to us is really the right answer. But I can't give in and I *won't* give in to negative *feelings* and *fears* that focus our conversation somewhere else that on who we're called to be in response to the command to love.

The Bishop's Committee and our TIGER Teams have done a wonderful job these past several months of helping us get the information we need to tackle this decision with integrity and transparency. We've had some extraordinary conversations around all this and look forward to sharing with you the answers – and sometimes NON-answers – we have discerned in our work.

But whatever comes of this process, it's not going to happen without *everyone* being on board. If we are to make a decision of love and integrity, and not fear and knee-jerk reaction, it will take extraordinary patience and resolve. None of it is going to be particularly easy. But your Bishop's Committee and I are committed to loving another – and loving all of you. And in that decision to follow our Lord's commandment we're already seeing the seeds of joy – a joy that endures. Won't you come with us?

We have ministries to celebrate and a mission to accomplish. Jesus commands you today: "Love one another as I have loved you" – and if you do so, "my joy will be in you and your joy will be full." Come with us – and enjoy the joy. Amen.