

Easter 6, May 9, 2021, John 15:9-17

Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love! You probably weren't counting, but can anyone tell me how often I repeated the word "love" just now? Nine times! That's right, nine times, the same number of times Jesus repeated it in the nine verses of this morning's gospel reading, not to mention the times he used "friends" from the Greek "philia" which is another Greek word for "love."

Do you think Jesus is trying to tell us something?

The two things Jesus talked most about are love and money, with money being number one. Perhaps that's because so many of us develop an unbalanced love of money that Jesus hoped to somehow set us on the right track. But since this morning's reading is focused on love, that's where we'll go today. I'll leave you to ponder your own relationship between money and faith, at least for now.

If you have ever participated in Maundy Thursday worship, part of this morning's reading should sound rather familiar. When Jesus tells his disciples, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you", it is an almost verbatim repetition of "New Commandment" he gives them in Chapter 13 of John's Gospel. That New Commandment and this reiteration of it both occur on the same night at the same event, Jesus' final meal with his disciples, The Last Supper.

Even though the Israelites were commanded in the Old Testament to love their neighbors as themselves, there are a couple of things about Jesus' commandment that make it "new." First is the WAY in which we are to love one another; "as I have loved you." Jesus loves us with unconditional, sacrificial, self-giving, self-denying love, love that goes far beyond being nice to the folks next door.

Second, this commandment is new in the way we understand it as a commandment in relation to "The Big Ten." The Ten Commandments, which are the foundation of all of God's law, are stated mostly in negatives. Eighty percent of them, in fact, are "Thou shalt nots", remember the sabbath and honor your parents being the only exceptions. Jesus' New Commandment, on the other hand, is emphatically positive, "Love one another, just do it, no whining, no complaining, no conditions, no "what ifs". "Love one another as I have loved you!"

"But", we ask anyway, "how can Jesus command us to love one another? Feelings and emotions cannot be commanded, can they?"

Once again I return to the Greek lessons we were required to take at the very beginning of my seminary education. There are at least three words in Greek that can be translated as "love" in English. There is "eros", romantic, emotional love like that between spouses. There is also 'philia', familial love like that of parents for children or siblings for one another. Neither of those kinds of love can be commanded because they are based on emotion and feelings. They may grow over time, but they cannot be forced.

The love Jesus commands, though, is “agape” love. It is active love that is sometimes translated as simply “charity.” Agape’ love is expressed in the ways in which we treat one another, the things we DO for one another. Put another way, Jesus could be saying, “Do the things people do when they care about others.”

That kind of love, agape’ love, can be commanded. We can’t be commanded how to feel but we can be told what to do! Likewise, we may not always have a lot of control over how we feel, but we CAN control what we do. That’s why Jesus can say, “This is my COMMANDMENT, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Jesus then goes on to illustrate the way he loves us by talking about the extremes to which agape’ love is willing to go. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

There is no greater agape’ love than to do what is best for others even when you know it will cost you some part of yourself.

Military personnel, first responders, and police officers know that at some point in their service to others their lives may be on the line. But Jesus’ love for us kept him faithful to his mission, his Father’s command, even though he knew for certain it would cost him his life. There is no greater love than that, and that is the love we are to aspire to as Jesus’ disciples.

Not many of us will be expected to literally die for someone else, but agape’ love for one another will most likely cost us something. It may cost us money or time, it might take a little swallowing of our pride, we may have to sacrifice some self-indulgence, or give up something we have been wanting for a long time, but love is what Jesus commands and love is what Jesus expects!

Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love! Jesus repeats himself for good reason, he wants and expects us to take this New Commandment seriously. It is a commandment, not a suggestion! Jesus is giving us these commands so that we may love one another. Amen.