

Sermon – John 14:15-21
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
6 Easter – Year A
21 May 2017

“If You Love Me”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*

1. “Honey, if you love me, won’t you please, please smile?” It’s a game that has been played for generations by burgeoning thespians and kids gathered around campfires, or at least it was in my youth. It’s a simple, silly game, in which the person who is “it” has to try, naturally, to get someone else to smile. The job of the person asked is to keep a straight face and reply, “Honey, I love you, but I just can’t smile.” While the asker cannot touch anyone, they can ask the question however they’d like: *“Honey, if you love me, won’t you please, please smile?”* You’ll note I wasn’t very good at the game. Still, it’s harmless enough, for the most part, yet I could never escape the fact that the premise was not simply silly but inherently odd. After all, if you loved them, wouldn’t that make you *want* to smile? If you love me, smile already! It’s simple cause and effect.
2. So it is with Jesus and his disciples, gathered in the Upper Room shortly before Jesus is betrayed: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” This, of course, is no game and Jesus is nothing short of serious as he uses some of his final moments to encourage the community of faith that will be enacted through his death and resurrection. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. It seems simple enough, almost banal, until we look into our own hearts and out into the world. We want to love Jesus; we try to love Jesus, but we fail time and again to keep his commandments. For that matter, to which commandments is Jesus referring? The ten given to Moses on Sinai? The 613 commandments that dot the Old Testament? If our love for Jesus is

reflected in our keeping of these, we're in trouble. And if our salvation is predicated upon showing love through our obedience to the law, well, the jig is up. The disciples themselves, upon hearing these words, utterly fail in their love for Jesus, forsaking and denying him as he walks the sad road to Calvary. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Is this bad news for us?

3. Jesus, however, is not focusing here on the law of the past, even though these laws are good and holy. Jesus is speaking of the new community that will be created through the giving of the Holy Spirit after his resurrection and ascension. And this is precisely the point: Jesus is creating *community*, the very Body of Christ grounded both in his fulfilling of the law on our behalf *and* his new commandment, given in the same Upper Room, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus is telling us that if we love him, we will love each other. It is striking that all of that "yous" in this passage are second person plural; as your team of pastors will Carolina connections would say, Jesus means y'all. There is no version of the gospel that can be boiled down to a "me-and-Jesus" mentality. Caught in the Spirit, we are not individuals of faith; we are the people of God, all of us, together.

4. For this is how God is, not a singular being, no matter how grand, but three-in-one, a community of loving relationships that constitute the unity of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In God's great love for us, by the saving work of Jesus and the sending of the Spirit, room is created for us within the divine life as we, in the poetic words of Auden, "come to the picnic with nothing to hide, join the dance as it moves in perichoresis, turns about the abiding tree." Perichoresis – that's your bonus word for the day. Simply put, it is the mutual in-dwelling, the making room for others, that exists already in God and occurs when the Spirit makes room for us in the divine dance that no longer knows sin, suffering, or death.

5. You are now y'all, and all y'all are able to love Jesus and one another *not* because you're such warmhearted people but because the Father and the Son have poured out their Spirit, the enlivening love of God, into your lives. You are no longer you own, for in the Spirit you live, and move, and have your being, *together*. You love Jesus because the Spirit loves Jesus, and the Spirit lives in you, in y'all. The work of the Spirit of truth is to give you faith to believe, and believing, to love. And so the Spirit advocates for you, comforts you, calls, gathers, and enlightens you for the sake of Jesus Christ. That you would be a new community, one grounded not in law but in love, not for yourselves but for each other – making room for one another, listening to one another, loving one another as new creations. If you love me, you'll keep my commandments – and you will love Jesus, for the Spirit makes it so.

6. Two Sundays ago I had the opportunity to sit in with our seventh-grade Confirmation class, and on this day as we wind down our program year, it's worth noting how blessed we are to have gifted, faithful teachers for our children's, youth, and adult classes. The teacher that day, James Claud, devoted the session to talking about why our Christian faith matters, and gently put the other adults in the room on the spot. I found myself sharing Bible camp memories – no, not of "Honey, if you love me," – but of myself as an eight-year-old boy with a nasty speech impediment and not a lot of friends. The thought of going away for a week to be with people I didn't know was less than exciting. I suppose that I imagined I would be met with the same sort of teasing and taunting I endured at home. But at Waypost Camp on Mission Lake, I discovered something else: a community of peers and counselors who didn't see me as deficient or defective but as a child of God to be loved. It changed my life, and this is God's dream for Grace, that we would continually become one "y'all" with room enough everyone in God's capacious love.

7. It was this gospel that transformed Paul and drove him to the edges of the known world to preach Christ crucified and his forgiving love for all, even the Gentiles. Think about it: When we saw Paul in last week's reading from Acts, he was called Saul and served as the coat-check boy at the stoning of Stephen. But in Christ, he is transformed, proclaiming a love that knows no boundaries, not of Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. This new community centered in Christ is a community for all. In baptism, we have been saved for precisely this purpose, to love Jesus and, through Jesus and the Spirit, to love one another. Paul, in today's reading, is able to boldly stand in front of the Areopagus, surrounded by pagan idols, and preach the gospel of Christ, not be beating the Athenians over the head with their wrongheaded ways, but by meeting them where they are, finding common ground, and then unabashedly preaching Christ. This can be nothing but the Spirit's work in Paul, for the Spirit, the Advocate, has Paul's back the entire time. And if the Spirit can make use of Saul; if the Spirit can reclaim eight-year-old me, what can the Spirit not do?

8. This is the work of the Spirit, to save us from ourselves and gift us to one another through Christ. Lois Malcolm writes, "If the truth the Spirit discloses is Jesus' relationship to the Father – how they are distinct yet fully related to one another – then through our participation in that relationship, the Spirit also discloses to us how, even though we are distinct from one another, we can still be fully related to one another." Yes, fully related, sisters and brothers in Christ. So, if you love Jesus, won't you please, please love one another? Y'all will, for the Spirit of truth is alive in you. Christ is in you, and you in him, bound together in a love without end. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!