

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
May 29, 2011  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Living in Love and Obedience  
Acts 17: 22-34, I Peter 3: 13-22, John 14: 15-21

Have you ever noticed that we are more obedient or do what we are “supposed” to do when an authority figure is around? I know I am a more focused and an obedient driver when a policeman is around me. I brush and floss my teeth just a bit better a few weeks before I go to see the dentist. I am less likely to daydream when I am the authority figure in a meeting. We need authority figures to help us to be obedient, so that we will do what we are supposed to do because it is good for us. I do not like to hear the phrase, “because you are supposed to,” but I also know that discipline or obedience to the rules usually can be best for us, and I have found “supposed to” goes with it as do authority figures.

But what of our obedience, focus, and behavior when the “authority” figure is not physically around, or is not soon to be reckoned with, or we do not have to be in charge? Do we do what we are supposed to then? To a certain extent this is the situation with Jesus and his disciples in John. They were having communion, the Last Supper. Jesus was preparing them for his death, and the fact that he would not be physically with them in the very near future. He knew these guys very well. Despite all the good they heard him say, and saw him do in God’s name, he knew he had remind them twice to be obedient in the practice of their faith in him. In fact, he was quite emphatic in his reminder: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” This was Jesus’ way of reminding the disciples that this was what they were supposed to do when he was no longer with them.

As a refresher, here are the commandments Jesus was referring to; “that you love one another as I have loved you,” and “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself.” We know these so well we could mumble them in our sleep, but do we obey them? Are these commandments and the one who calls us to such obedience the foci of our lives? Do we live a disciplined faith that reflects this love to the world? Do we do what Jesus says we are supposed to do with his love?

Too often in our society this love is thought to be a bit wishy-washy or based mostly on feelings. But, Jesus was not talking about falling in love or “loving” the latest fashion, car, or new kid in class. He was not even talking about feeling love. He was talking about his grace, an unconditional love, an everlasting love that goes way beyond any feelings or things. It is a love Jesus described well in saying, “I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you. You will see me, because I live, you will live.” He was commanding the love he lived, as I Peter describes it, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you (and me) to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.” Jesus

was commanding his disciples then and now to practice a deeply committed love that required an obedient faith. This is what we are supposed to do as Christians.

Jesus set the example of the true meaning of a committed love and an obedient faith we are supposed to live. Not only did he do this on the cross, but according to Peter, he even went so far as to the depths of hell to proclaim his saving love to the spirits in prison who were disobedient during the time of Noah. This going to speak to the spirits in prison is one of the strangest ideas in the Bible, and there are several theories of what this meant. But the interpretation I like best, and have shared with you before is more speculation than scholarship. Tom W. Boyd, a Presbyterian professor of Philosophy and Religion wrote in a sermon entitled "Going To Hell For the Right Reasons." (Best Sermons by James W. Cox, pg. 252). "A friend of mine, John, wrote a short story about Jesus' descent into hell. Fascinated with the question on why Jesus went to hell, John first did some research. One dominant legend from the Middle Ages, he found, is that Jesus went to release Adam and Eve from torment. John found this interpretation inadequate, not radical enough.

In (my friend) John's story, Jesus shows up at the gate of hell. Satan meets him in rage, trying to forbid Jesus entering. Jesus cannot be restrained. He tears open the gate and begins his search. As he probes the darkest and most sinister recesses of torment, he releases everyone he finds, but it is clear that he is in the quest of some particular one. He hunts ever deeper, ever more strained, into the bowels of ultimate treachery. Finally, far back and away from all other prisons, Jesus finds a cage in horrifying isolation. He approaches it, and as he does so, Satan cries, 'No, not that one! That is my prize!' Oblivious to Satan's objections, Jesus wrenches open the door of the cage and sets the prisoner...sets Judas (the one who betrayed Jesus and hung himself)...free." "This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." "I will not leave you orphaned: I am coming to you. You will see me, because I live, you will live." This, my friends is the true meaning of a deeply committed love and an obedient faith that saves you and me. It is what we are supposed to do.

Obedying Jesus' commandment to love in such a deeply committed and faithful fashion took some serious discipline upon the part of the first century AD Christians. As we heard in the Epistle lesson, it meant they had to practice the love of Christ in a balanced way. You see, these brothers and sisters in the faith were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. They were being insulted, falsely accused and shunned by the society around them. It was very hard for them to do what they were supposed to do. Peter gave them some specific and balanced advice on how to obediently live Jesus' commandment of love especially in the face of all the troubles coming at them. Peter tells them they must be "gentle and reverent" toward people, but at the same time be willing and able to verbally stand up for their faith and what is Christ-like when evil is being perpetrated upon them or others. Peter also told them not to become the evil they were facing as they did what was loving and right in the eyes of Christ, who taught us all not to return evil for evil. Peter was telling them and us, "One cannot be wishy-washy about their faith to live Christ's love in this obedient manner. Doing what we are supposed to do takes great discipline.

Paul faced similar challenges when he was strongly quizzed about his proclaiming Christ in front of the Areopagus in Athens, Greece by the city authorities. He could have been arrested and punished for his teachings. But he simply told the truth, and treated those who challenged him with gentleness, reverence, and the love of Christ. Yet, he held firm on what he knew to be the truth of Jesus Christ. He let them know that the God he was proclaiming was not made of the gold or silver from which their gods were molded, but was a God in human flesh raised from the dead out his love for humanity. Yes, Paul was scoffed at, but he courageously took the risk to be obedient to Jesus' command to love. As a result, several people were converted to Christ.

So what are we supposed to do today with Jesus' command to love as he has loved us; to love our neighbor as ourselves when our neighbor is hard to love or persecutes or insults us in some way for our faith in Jesus Christ. How are we to be obedient to the one we call Lord and Savior when we see evil like physical or verbal abuse trying to have its way? What are we supposed to do?

Biblical Professor David L. Bartlett shares some insights based on what we just heard Jesus command, Peter teach and Paul do. "Among Christians who are or have been the victims of abuse and oppression, the call to non-retaliation has of late had a bad reputation. Cannot this (non-retaliation) represent the means by which oppressors play on the piety of the oppressed simply to prolong evildoing? As usual it is easy for those of us who are relatively powerful in our society to urge non-retaliation on those who are relatively powerless. Nonetheless, the larger context (of today's scriptures) nuances the claim that Christians are to suffer for doing right rather than to return evil for evil. Within the context of 1 Peter, Christians are to suffer if need be, but not to suffer silently. They join the struggle against oppression by speaking honestly and powerfully of what they hold dear, making their defense unapologetically. Christ himself becomes an example of this activity, of course, and when we read the Gospel accounts of his passion we note that he was by no means altogether passive. His silence and his speeches manifest power in weakness, and that power is as clear as the weakness. Thus for Christians the unwillingness to abuse and to slander does not mean the willingness to take abuse and slander without speaking the word that might convict or even convince those who do the abusing and slandering," to change their ways. This is what Jesus commanded, Peter taught and Paul did and we are supposed to do. [TNIBC, Vol. XII, pgs. 296- 297.](#)

I think Dr. Martin Luther King was a good modern example of how Christians can live in obedience to Christ's commandment to love, yet still speak out and live to change the ways of those who abuse, slander and perpetuate evil . If we can recall, "In the 1960s, many powerful people wanted to maintain segregation of the races. Dr. King was one of the many people who spoke out against this abusive status quo. He always had an answer ready, an answer based on God's Word, on God's care for all of God's people" and Christ's commandment to love. "He willingly led the folks who wanted to see the barriers tumble down. Because of his obedience and his outspokenness, he and his followers suffered. He -- and they -- were ridiculed, lambasted, arrested, beaten, and" he and some others were killed. "In the face of this opposition, King obediently continued his witness to Christ's love. And he suffered

because of that witness. But in his suffering, the news of Christ's own willingness to suffer for us out of his love was proclaimed, in word and deed, for all to hear and see." And, as we know the abuse and evil of segregation was overcome, thanks to Dr. King, other civil rights leaders, and the courage and wisdom of some Federal legislators and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. "Emphasis,"- Spencer

Jesus knew well how difficult and complicated it would be for the disciples in the first century AD or at any time to live in obedience to his command to love. Jesus Christ knew that we would still need an authority figure to keep us disciplined, and to constantly remind and guide us to love as Jesus commanded us once he physically left this earth. So he told the disciples and us, "I will not leave you orphaned. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."

This Advocate or the Holy Spirit of truth is the real and ever abiding presence of the resurrected Lord watching over us. The Holy Spirit is now the authority figure from God who gives us the courage to testify to and live the truth of Christ. It supports and vindicates us when we are persecuted. It helps us to sort things out when life gets complicated. It gives us the strength to stay obedient to Christ's love command. Of all the authority figures we need to obey and love, let it be the Holy Spirit, the real and ever abiding presence of the resurrected Lord watching over us and leading us in what we are supposed to do.