

May 10, 2015 John 15:12-17 1 John 5:1-15 “Commanded to Love”

Did you hear what John wrote to the early Christians in the section of his first letter we heard today? He said, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God....” And then he said, “for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” (Verses 1a and 4)

Several years ago I was sitting in a church meeting, and someone started talking about our church’s employment policies.... No time at all passed until someone said, “Well, in the REAL world, ...” I’ve heard this a lot over the years.

A break-in happened at a residence for college students. Nobody was hurt, but some things were stolen. One comment: “Welcome to the REAL world.”

Whether it’s Christianity or academia, there is a sense that the worlds in which church and college folk dwell are not REAL. In many ways, particularly in terms of the church, this is absolutely true. We who believe in Jesus as the Christ believe that we are to live in the “real” world with our eyes and hearts set on the kingdom of God. This does not mean that we don’t see the pain and brokenness and opportunities of the world around us. It means that the pain, brokenness, and opportunities of the secular world are our *assignment*. We are chosen to be God’s children, and to live as Christians. As children, as friends of Jesus, we are commanded to love others, and perhaps even to give up our lives for someone else’s sake. We are under command to live boldly and intentionally, remembering that our Lord has already conquered the death that scares the life out of this world so much.

This morning’s *New York Times* had an article about a crisis in some Christian congregations in Liberia (in Africa). Liberia has just been declared Ebola-free, after thousands of people there died from it. But some Christians have had their faith severely shaken. One congregation allowed an ebola-stricken person to come into church for healing prayers, at which time the members laid their hands on the person (as is prescribed in James 5). Many became ill and eight of the church members died as a result of doing this. Trying to be obedient, and now struggling with their understanding of their faith.

In the fifteenth chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus told his followers, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” We heard him say last week, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (Vss. 10-11)

In the “real” world, it’s “dog eat dog.” In the “real” world, if you leave a door unlocked, you’re likely to have your valuables stolen. In the “real” world, if people are nice to you, it may be because they want to get something out of you. In the “real” world, it’s almost a norm these days that nobody wants to be bothered. We have experienced this “real” world.

Not too long ago I had opportunity to talk with a young person who had served in the army for a few years. According to this person, sergeants in the army are supposed to tell a person that he or she is NOTHING, that the army is everything. The “real world” for someone serving in the armed forces hangs on obedience to the orders given.

In the kingdom of God, things are very different. Though we are definitely called to be obedient, the Commander is also the very one who tells us that we mean *everything* to him, that he loves us and cherishes us. The one who gives the commands tells us that he calls us friends, and that he lays down his very life for us. This Commander tells us that the reason he has given us these commands is so that we may share in his joy, that our own joy may be complete.

We are “under the command” of the one who has given his life for us. The command is: Love God, and love one another the same way I have loved you.

It can be hard to love others, and sometimes it can be hard to love God.

There's an old story of a man who was a professed Christian who was stricken with a serious and long-lasting illness. He became troubled over how little love he felt in his heart for God, and spoke of his experience to a friend. The friend listened to his concern, and then replied: 'When I go home from here, I expect to take my baby on my knee, look into her sweet eyes, listen to her charming prattle, and, tired as I am, her presence will rest me; for I love that child with unutterable tenderness. But she loves me little. If my heart were breaking it would not disturb her sleep. If my body were racked with pain, it would not interrupt her play. If I were dead, she would forget me in a few days. Besides this, she has never brought me a penny, but has been a constant expense to me. I am not rich, but there is not money enough in the world to buy my baby. How is it? Does she love me, or do I love her? Do I withhold my love until I know she loves me? Am I waiting for her to do something worthy of my love before extending it?'

This practical illustration of the love of God for His children caused the tears to roll down the sick man's face. 'Oh, I see,' he exclaimed, 'it is not my love for God, but God's love for me, that I should be thinking of. God loves us before we love God.'" (from the *Christian Herald*)

Perhaps because it's Mother's Day, I find myself thinking about my mother. I remember my efforts as a child to try to let my mother know how much I loved her. Nothing I could choose to give her seemed "right," even though she would usually not tell me so. I would ask her, and she would say, "Why, just being you is enough. I'm very proud of you." I've heard other mothers tell their children, "Just be good for a day; don't argue today, and I'll have a great gift."

Pastor Richard Thulin offered another perspective on this when he wrote: "I can't help but think about how my show of love was always made directly toward my mother. I don't ever recall my mother telling me to love her by cutting my neighbor's lawn. Similarly, it never occurred to me to love my mother by reading to the blind woman down the street. But this outward direction is exactly the direction that Jesus' words take. If we want to show our love for him, we must do so by loving one another. No card, no flowers, no gifts can be given directly to Jesus. We love him by keeping his commandment to love others." (*Clergy Journal*, May/June 1983).

John Wesley, who ended up becoming the founder of Methodism, preached many years as an Anglican priest before he finally came to believe that God loved him. Once he wrote in his journal, "I preach to convert, but O, who will convert me?" Following his heart-warming, life-changing experience of the assurance of God's love, Wesley preached about God seeking God's children and emphasized three steps to commitment: believe, love and obey God.

Wesley tried very seriously to live out his thanksgiving to God by loving others. Besides tireless preaching throughout even his 87th year, Wesley founded England's first free medical dispensary. To give employment to the poor, he set up spinning and knitting shops. A Benevolent Loan Fund was established to help finance new business enterprises. The Strangers' Friend Society gave relief to "the poor, sick, and friendless strangers." Wesley gave away \$200,000 - royalties from his books - and limited himself to \$150/year for his expenses. (Remember, this was in the 1700's!!) Even at his death, he insisted that his funeral have "no hearse, no coach, no pomp," and that six unemployed poor men be hired at a pound each to carry his body to its grave. Wesley was a child of God who heard and HEEDED Christ's commandment to love others.

We have been given the Bible stories to let us know that there is someone bigger, stronger, and wiser than we are who loves us and is with us every minute of our lives.... The promises of God form a precious message for God's children as we struggle through the challenges and darkneses of our lives in this "real" world.

Several years ago when we lived on Long Island, a dear woman in the Bayville church died. Her death was completely unexpected, even though she was 84 years old and for a day or so had been feeling a bit unwell. Her housemate had suggested that she see a doctor, but Beatrice had scoffed at the idea, saying that she'd never been to a doctor in her life and wasn't about to start now. As usual, she was cheerfully blunt about things. Her housemate started to go back upstairs to her own section of the house, but then heard a bump. She went back down to make sure there was nothing wrong. Beatrice had fallen, and as her friend leaned over her, said, "Don't worry, I went down easy." She then died.

"I went down easy." "Let not your heart be troubled; believe in God..."

"I go to prepare a place for you..." (John 14) A precious message. This is a promise for any who would let God's work through Jesus be the cornerstone of our lives. Put God first in your life - Jesus taught this and he lived this way! And he has chosen to call us to do the same. Everything else we need will follow.

This is God's gift to us, a precious message, a promise of Someone bigger, stronger, and wiser who knows us completely, who sees the good and bad in us, but who nevertheless has chosen us to be his precious children; forever, God loves us. May we live out our minutes and days in this world always remembering that we are "under command." May our Commander-Friend-Savior be praised by our living. May the love of God and the challenge of Jesus lead each of us to life right now and forevermore. Amen.