

May 2, 2010

David Drebert

“I give you a new commandment, 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.”

Great, just what we need, another commandment. Now there is something else for us to feel guilty about when we don't get it right. We have trouble enough with the Ten Commandments. I thought I was doing pretty well if I remembered the Golden Rule, to do to others what I would have them do to me. Now Jesus goes and ups the stakes even higher. We are supposed to love the way Jesus loves us. That's downright impossible. How could we ever match the sacrificial love that Jesus loved, even willing to be tortured for us, even laying down his life for us. I can't do it. I am doomed to fail.

And yet, this is the commandment given to us by Jesus at the Last Supper, his final discourse. These are his last words, and so we have to pay attention. But I don't think that Jesus is trying to lay another duty, or another guilt trip, on us. I think that there are a few ways of looking at it.

The first is that this is some kind of koan, designed to bring us into a deeper spiritual place. A koan is a kind of a riddle in which we are invited to meditate on an impossibility, for which there is not logical answer. A classic example is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” There is no answer, and if you think you have found one, your teacher will tell you to meditate harder. How can we consistently love one another as Jesus loves us? There is no answer, but it invites us into a deeper contemplation of how much Jesus does love us, and invites us to the ever deeper task of self-emptying love, in order to be filled with the love of God and his people. We are invited to approach the standard of his love, the asymptote which can never be reached.

The second way of looking at this new commandment is as a promise. “They will know we are Christians by our love,” we sing. The way Jesus loved us is the bedrock on which we have built the church. Our attempts to love in the same way may be comparatively feeble, but when we are visibly trying to love one another inside and outside the church, that is when we are recognizable as the body of Christ, the church in the world. When we stop trying, when our churches lapse into conflict and stop loving one another, we are no longer recognizable as Christ's church. When we stop living our mission of bringing Christ to the world outside our doors in love, people don't see any reason to sign up. That may be the main downfall of our mainstream churches – our love is not very visible. So the commandment to love one another is a promise that we will be recognized as Christ's disciples.

A third way of looking at this new commandment is that it is a sure-fire way of building up the community. There are all kinds of books and programs out there that will give great techniques for church growth. They are all good and worth reading. But the church cannot grow as Jesus' disciples unless it loves one another. It has been said that people know within the first five minutes of walking into a church whether this is the right place for them. That is before the choir sings, and certainly before the sermon. There is a feel about the place, a spirit of love. It can't be faked. They sense that spirit of acceptance and immediately feel they have found home.

Jesus knew he was about to leave the scene, and I think he was trying to lay the groundwork of his legacy, the church. I don't know if this is what he thought it would become. But he did know that it would be through his disciples' sacrificial love for him and for each other that his ministry would finally be fulfilled.

So how do we even begin to love the way Jesus loved? I think that it requires us to think differently, to have a different view of the world and the people in it. Love has come to mean for us the romantic, emotional feeling that comes from a special relationship with another person. That is Eros love. But what Jesus is talking about is agape love, a love that is not directed toward any particular person, but rather is inclusive to all God's people. I thought it interesting that when the word for agape was first used, it was a verb, not a noun. It was action oriented, it required people to do something.

It is the same today. Love still requires us to do something. If we see Jesus' commandment as a koan which invites us into deeper meditation and relationship with Jesus, then we will need to make time to pray. If we want to be recognized as Christians, then our love cannot be hoarded, it must be shared and made visible. If we want to build up the church community, then we must participate in our membership, not just consume what is on offer.

Which brings me to stewardship. You knew I had to get around to that today, the day of our ingathering for the special pledge to the Dean's fund. Of course there are a couple of different approaches to talking about stewardship. There is one approach that says, "Give money because the church needs it." And that is of course true for any church. I have never been in a church yet that was not concerned about its budget. It's just a fact of life. And it is true that the cathedral needs to find the resources to pay a new Dean.

Another approach says something more like, "Give money because it is good for you." And yes, it is good for us to give away part of our money. It helps us to feel part of the community to which we give. It decreases dependency on worldly pursuits. It places us in solidarity with the causes that we support. It helps to understand that there are other ways of defining wealth than just money. Remember only people wealthy in spirit are able to give away money.

But I think the real reason we need to give is found in Jesus' commandment to love as he loved us. We need to give because we love God. Stewardship is a sign and a measure of our love. Isn't it strange that he *commands* us to love? Can you command love? Love is not love if it is demanded; love can only be given from the heart. Yet, I do think that love is also a decision we make, a commitment to the one we love that does not depend on our feelings of the day. One way we express our love for God is through our love for our church community.

Love that does not express itself in practical ways is merely narcissism. When we love someone, we tell them that we love them. We tell God we love him in praising him in our worship together. When we love someone we care for their needs and build them up. We show our care for God by caring for his Church and helping to build it up. When we love someone, we share with them our treasure, our time, even our whole lives. We indicate our love for God in the same way. That is the essence of stewardship. Today's request for support for the Dean's fund is a unique opportunity to express your love and commitment to this particular community in Christ, as you seek a new leader to work with you to build up his Church in this place.

Giving is one way, an important way, of making visible our love for God. By our love everyone will know we are his disciples.