

## THE NEW COMMANDMENT

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The apostle John wrote, "By this we know that we are the children of God, when we love God and we keep God's commandments."<sup>1</sup> "If you keep my commandments," Jesus said, "you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."<sup>2</sup>

"A new commandment I give to you," Jesus said.<sup>3</sup> A new commandment. What are the commandments of Jesus and what is this new one?

Some would say to love God with all your heart and with all your soul and mind and strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself.<sup>4</sup> This is not original, though. It comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, the law of Moses.<sup>5</sup> It certainly isn't new.

Others would say to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.<sup>6</sup> This isn't exactly new either. It is the Golden Rule which goes back at least 500 years before Jesus. Rabbi Hillel who lived shortly before Jesus said almost the same thing but in a negative form, "What you would not want others to do to you, do not do to them."<sup>7</sup>

Others would say to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them.<sup>8</sup> This one, however, reads more like an epilogue, a commissioning and benediction practised by the early church and grafted on to the end of Matthew's Gospel.

The new commandment unique to Jesus is this, "love others as I have loved you."<sup>9</sup>

What's so new about this? What's new is this, love others "as I have loved you," "as I have loved you." That's what new.

Doesn't seem like much, does it? In fact it seems a little conceited and self-centred. It certainly doesn't seem earth moving. Why might this new perspective be important?

It isn't. It isn't in any general sense, unless you believe that Jesus has already loved in a unique and earth moving way. It isn't, unless you believe, as John says, that Jesus is the Christ, the begotten of God. It isn't, unless you believe that in this way the love of God was made manifest among us, God's only begotten One sent into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent Jesus as Christ to be the atonement for our sins.<sup>10</sup> If you know that, if you believe it, if you confess that Jesus is the Christ then the new phrase "as I have loved you," makes all the difference. It motivates your love. It tests your love. It empowers your love.

## I

It motivates your love because it informs you of the priority of God's love in Christ.

A number of years ago I was visiting with a family for whom I had just conducted the funeral of their grandmother. One of the granddaughters said to me that she had a one-word prayer. She learned it at school. It went, "We love because God first loved us." It's not a prayer and it's not one word but it is the Gospel, the Good News according to a child.

Karl Barth, one of the preeminent theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was slightly more wordy. His major work, *Church Dogmatics*, is 6 million words long. It occupies 13 volumes consisting of 8,000 pages. In addition, he has written hundreds of other books and articles. Nevertheless, when he was asked to summarize his theology more briefly, he replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." The Good News according to an adult.

When theologian Henri Nouwen visited the Richmond Hill Ministerial back when I was still at St. Matthew's, he told us something about his faith journey and the verse of Scripture that had made all the difference was this, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us first."<sup>11</sup> It was this verse that had become a kind of banner or theme for his life leading him onward. It was obvious that he had felt the love of God in a very

powerful and deep way when he himself was not lovable or deserving or himself loving. It motivated him.

That is what we ourselves need, a personal experience of God's love in Christ to motivate us.

In a *Peanuts* cartoon crabapple Lucy says that she wants to be a doctor to meet the needs of humankind. "But you don't love humanity," Linus says. "Yes, I do," she yells back. "It's people I can't stand."

Picture two lovers who come together. Imagine this dialogue.

"Dearest, I love you."

"Why? What can you possibly find in me to love?"

"I love you because I love everybody."

"Excuse me! You love me because you love everybody!"

I don't think that relationship would last very long. We need more than a vague affirmation of everyone, a love for humankind in general. We need love for us in particular, specifically directed our way.

Yes, God loves humanity just as God loves creation, but there is more to it than that. The object of God's love, or perhaps better the subject of God's love, is in the second person singular, you. In Jesus God's love is revealed as personal, specific, particular. So personal that Jesus says, "No longer do I call you servants or slaves; I call you friends."<sup>12</sup>

Now "servant of God" was no title of shame. It was a title of honour. Moses was a servant of God.<sup>13</sup> So was Joshua and David and Paul and James.<sup>14</sup> But Jesus offers us more. He calls us friends. He offers us an intimacy with God that even the great people of history did not have until he came. No longer do we gaze far off to a distant God. Now God is our friend and we experience close up the love God had in a very personal and individual way.

When I say that we experience it, it must then also be clear that God's love is more than just a feeling. It is not just a noun;

it is a verb, an action verb.

Jesus' life on earth was not a contemplative or meditative one. It was an active one. He cared for people. He spoke a word of hope to the despairing. He healed the sick. He welcomed those the world thought unimportant. He was a friend. Yes, he withdrew from time to time for meditation, to be close to God, to be renewed, but only to return to love and to love again.

In Christ God holds nothing back. "Greater love has no one than this," Jesus said, "That you lay down your life for your friends." Jesus laid down his life. His life and love were selfless and unlimited and active, motivated by no loveliness in ourselves, motivated only by the very nature of God who is love.

How Thou canst think so well of us,  
And be the God Thou art,  
Is darkness to my intellect  
But sunshine to my heart.<sup>15</sup>

Even though beyond our comprehension and understanding God's love in Christ is wonderful, undeserved, limitless, active, forceful, purposeful and personal, and it is this same love which we are commanded to have for others.

## II

And so, as we look to the divine love of Jesus, we find that our love is tested.

What motivates your love? What motivates you to do what you do? Do you love and care for others because it makes you feel good? Certainly, doing good feels good but what is your motivation? What if the feeling wanes? What if it stops feeling good? Will you stop doing it?

In the epistle of John what is not as obvious in the English as it is in the Greek is that John uses participles as a way of emphasizing the dynamic quality of the verbs: believing, knowing, loving, obeying, begetting and overcoming. John prefers the verb "believe" to the noun "faith", the former captures the active and dynamic force that the latter does not.<sup>16</sup>

When Gaylia and I were married part of the marriage address was taken from an address by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was the marriage address he had written for his own wedding. The one point which clearly stood out for me was this. Love does not sustain marriage. Marriage sustains love.

In our culture that is a rather startling concept. So often people seek to end marriages when love is cold, when feelings are gone, when emotions are empty. If we believe that love is what we feel and that marriage is based on what we feel then divorce seems like a very viable option when we cease to feel love. However if we look at love as something we do and marriage as a practice which sustains, nurtures and builds our feelings for each other then perhaps another option might make more sense.

When speaking about love Catholic theologian and scientist Teilhard de Chardin writes, "Love alone is capable of uniting living beings in such a way as to complete and fulfill them, for it alone takes them and joins them by what is deepest in themselves." Love does not grow out of feeling and unity. Unity and feeling grow out of love.<sup>17</sup>

Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler affirms that to love is to recognize a deep underlying solidarity with all God's creatures and to reach out to grasp the hand that need holds out. Love is not merely working at a distance. It works personally reaching out a helping hand.<sup>18</sup> To love is to be with and for others, to act for others, even at cost to ourselves.

How involved are you, how involved am I, in doing love?

The true Christian, writes Clement of Alexandria, "practises being God." I think it was Luther who said that a Christian is to be a little Christ to others. "Love as I have loved you." Jesus' love motivates us and tests our love by the scale and model of his own.<sup>19</sup>

### III

Fortunately, Jesus' love also empowers ours.

It is said that "a saint is a person in whom Christ lives

again.” The Easter message is not an empty tomb, but a full heart. The proof of the resurrection is the presence of Christ in your heart and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in your life.

In the lesson from the Book of Acts for today, a lesson which we did not read, Peter after a dream goes to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius was a centurion, a Gentile but a God-fearing man. Peter preached to him the good news of Jesus Christ, concerning his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection, and all who heard it received the Holy Spirit. God’s ministry of love through Christ broke out of the Jewish people into the Gentile world and beyond. People were energized with the Spirit.

“Love is energy,” de Chardin wrote. And we are like electric motors with God’s Spirit empowering us. Without it we can do nothing; with it we can do everything.

In *Aha!!!* magazine the story was told of a group of travelers meeting a most remarkable Roman Catholic priest in Mexico. He was a simple man. “I understand all of you have theological education,” he said. “I am not educated, so I don’t think I have anything to teach you.”

But then he went on to talk about his life which was lived with incredible wisdom and strength. “I believe that all we’re called to do is to live the gospel and love the people.”

His story is this. Some years ago, his bishop sent him to this new charge. But the people didn’t want him. They wanted the priest the bishop had removed, so they shot the new one and left him for dead. Someone came, dragged him off and nursed him back to health. Then that priest had the audacity to go back. He went back to that same village, and eventually they learned to love him because he loved them first. Such is the empowerment of Christ’s Spirit.

Luke’s Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are really book 1 and 2 of the same work by the same author. One day you might take your Bible and mark in those books all the references to the Holy Spirit. What you will find is that the Holy Spirit is intimately involved with the conception and birth, the baptism and

wilderness testing of Jesus. Then the Holy Spirit vanishes and does not appear during Jesus' ministry.

Then in Acts the Holy Spirit comes again after Jesus ascends to God and fills the apostles on the day of Pentecost. Thereafter the Holy Spirit appears time after time after time empowering people, leading them, guiding them, teaching them, enabling them to undertake the ministry which was the ministry of Jesus and is now theirs. Over and over again, ordinary people became extraordinary people bearing the Spirit of Christ traveling to the ends of the earth and moving people with the love of God, faith in action. The difference that these people have made in small but personal ways has been enough that it has changed the world.

When an ocean liner travels at great speed, as you might imagine, it is difficult to turn. Its great mass and the resultant momentum is so great that it requires an enormous force to move the rudder. So, on the trailing edge of the rudder are a number of smaller rudders called trimtabs. Because they are so small trimtabs take minimal effort to turn and they in turn move the rudder and it turns the ship.

Ordinary people are like trimtabs who by being faithful, by putting their faith into action, by loving in real and concrete, even if small, ways are even now turning the world around. So it can be and is for us.

Jesus loves me this I know and because of that we are motivated and empowered to change the direction of the world. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 5: 2.

<sup>2</sup> John 15: 10.

<sup>3</sup> John 13: 34.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22: 37-39; Mark 12: 29-31; in Luke 10 it comes from the lawyer, not from Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 6: 4-5; Leviticus 19: 18.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7: 12; Luke 6: 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Aha!!!* April-June 1997, Vol. 6, # 3, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28: 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> John 15: 12, 13: 34.

<sup>10</sup> 1 John 4: 9, 10.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 John 4: 10.

<sup>12</sup> John 15: 15.

<sup>13</sup> Deuteronomy 34: 5.

<sup>14</sup> Joshua 24: 29; Psalm 89: 20; Titus 1: 1; James 1: 1.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in William Barclay, *Letters of John and Jude*, Welch, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> Craddock et.al., *Preaching through the Christian Year (B)*, Trinity Press, 1993, p. 263.

<sup>17</sup> R. Chalmers, *The Happy Science*, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Sittler, "Moral Discourse in a Nuclear Age", *The Christian Century*, March 6, 1985, p. 242-245.

<sup>19</sup> William Barclay, *Letters of John and Jude*, Welch, p. 115.