

# Covenant Word

## ***A Sweet Arrangement***

I Peter 3:13-22; Acts 17:22-31; John 14:15-21

sorrow... continuing to love Jesus even after he is gone. How do we now take part in the life that we experienced with Jesus?"

Jesus tries to prepare the disciples for his death. Jesus gives them instruction for four chapters in John's gospel. It is sometimes referred to as "The Last Discourse." His theme is consistent: Love one another (13:34); you will be known as my followers by the ways you love one another (13:35); and then here in chapter 14, "IF you love me, you will keep my commandments."

I must confess that I had a hard time getting beyond that conditional word "IF." I struggled because God's love is never conditional. God's love is NOT I will love you IF you make up your bed, take out the trash and put the dirty dishes away. God's love is NOT I will love you IF you go to China to be a missionary or read the Bible all the way through. God's love is NOT I will love you IF you sing in the choir, serve on committees, or attend worship faithfully. No, God's love is sure and true, constant and

*A Message by  
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Pastor  
Sunday  
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Last summer, Lloyd and I made a trip to Chautauqua, New York. Chautauqua is a gated community that prides itself on all things intellectual. Each week of the summer is dedicated to a theme and artists of all kinds, authors and experts are invited to share with whoever has traveled to be in residence for the week. Without exaggeration, there were probably 50 different lectures a day from which to choose. So one rainy afternoon, I heard the wife of Paul Kalanithi talk about the book *When Breath Becomes Air*. It is the memoir of a Yale medical student who was possessed by the question: given that all organisms die, what makes for a virtuous and meaningful life? That medical student was Paul Kalanithi and just a few months into his career, he was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer, so that one day he is a neurosurgeon treating the dying, and quite literally the next day, he is a patient struggling to live.

After his death, his wife took his journals and organized them into the book. Her words are found only in the last chapter. This is what she says, in part:

I expected to feel only empty and heartbroken after Paul died. It never occurred to me that you could love someone the same way after he was gone, that I would continue to feel such love and gratitude alongside the terrible sorrow, the grief so heavy that at times I shiver and moan under the weight of it. Paul is gone, and I miss him acutely nearly every moment, but I somehow feel I'm still taking part in the life we created together. (p. 223-224)

If the disciples had possessed these words, I think they would have said, "Yes! That is how we feel: love and gratitude alongside terrible

***"Yes! That is how we feel: love and gratitude alongside terrible sorrow... continuing to love Jesus even after he is gone. How do we now take part in the life that we experienced with Jesus?"***

forthright without any strings attached. We are loved because God first loves us. God loves us so much that God gives his only son. God loves us even while we are sinners. So what is this IF? ...IF you love me...

Then it dawned on me that the condition is not placed on Jesus' love for us, it is placed on our love for Jesus! IF WE LOVE JESUS, we will keep his commandments. IF WE love Jesus, we will love one another. IF WE love Jesus, we will love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength. IF WE love Jesus, we will love our neighbors as ourselves.

No wonder the disciples begin to hem and haw. They know as well as we do that this is no easy task. They know how hard it is to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. They know how hard it is to turn the other cheek and walk the second mile. They know it is next to impossible to love someone that isn't selected from a mail order catalogue, because Jesus constantly put them, places us, in the

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday  
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible  
study at 10:30 a.m.

presence of lepers and sinners, prodigals and Pharisees, demon possessed and hungry, male, female and questioning, Samaritans and Syro-Phoenicians and says, "Love them. Love even the least of these."

Because Jesus never let up, he poses this conditional challenge. He knows the choice is left up to us. "IF you love me, keep my commandments." Then he gives them a gift to keep them able. Like good guardians with a preschooler who has separation anxiety, Jesus reassures them that not only will he return at some point, but that he will leave someone with us who will give the courage to love another even as Christ loves us.

Jesus calls this someone "Spirit," "advocate," "comforter," "helper," "counselor." It is the same Spirit that blew like a wind over the face of the deep in creation. It is the same Spirit that took on flesh and now sits with them around the table. It is the same Spirit that will come at Pentecost and blow through Jerusalem in such a mighty way that they are filled with enough courage to go out into the streets and preach a gospel that sets the world on fire. Jesus is very clear. Just as God breathes Spirit into lifeless clay to create a living person, so Jesus breathes the presence of Spirit into us to create living faith. It is the presence of Spirit that keeps us from being orphaned. We feel His presence in us at all times. (Lundblad)

Now, it is understandable if that all seems a bit too lofty to grasp. Maybe an experience from my week will be helpful. On Tuesday, when I met Dolores Lovechia at the funeral home, we went in together for one last look at William. He was laid out in his Sunday finest, and the funeral director had placed a red carnation in his coat lapel. Dolores reached out to pet his hands.

## ***Jesus is gone, but his love is still growing in their hearts and being nurtured in their souls.***

"He looks pretty, don't he?"  
"Oh, yes, Dolores, he is so handsome."  
"He's not here though."  
"That's right. He has gone to be with Jesus."  
"But I still love him. His love is still in my heart."

This is what the disciples come to realize too: Jesus is gone, but his love is still growing in their hearts and being nurtured in their souls. But to DO something about it, in other words, to love as Jesus commanded, requires a Spirit to give us the courage to keep going.

So Jesus says to the disciples: "You are not being left alone or orphaned. I am in you. I am abiding in you..."

***So Jesus says to the disciples: "You are not being left alone or orphaned. I am in you. I am abiding in you...dwelling in you, making my home in you." It is a kind of cherishing where heart, mind and will all merge to inspire deep commitment and stubborn loyalty.***

dwelling in you, making my home in you." It is a kind of cherishing where heart, mind and will all merge to inspire deep commitment and stubborn loyalty. (Mark Ralls, "Reflections on the Lectionary," The Christian Century, May 14, 2014) It is a presence that stays with us at all times for the purpose of helping us love one another.

On Mother's Day, 13 years ago, our family picked out a puppy at the pound. Cleopatra was not, for the

most part, an affectionate dog. She walked away when we called her name. She rarely snuggled up against us on the sofa, but when we came home, there was the enthusiasm of a puppy who was all wriggle and wag. In the end, it was that greeting that did her in. The excitement was too much for her, and she would drop on her side immobilized by seizures.

Our children are already lobbying for a new dog. Both of my Mother's Day cards had golden retrievers on them! Lloyd and I tortured ourselves by watching that movie *A Dog's Purpose*. The truth is that neither of us is home enough right now to be good owners, so we have vowed that we won't get another dog until Lloyd retires. (Right?) I have to admit, however, I miss that completely loving welcome even when I am late, even if it rained all day, even if I picked up the wrong dog food. All that energy says, "I missed you! I'm so glad to see you! I love you soooo much!"

After we put Cleo down, Allan and Valerie Burton gave us a collection of poems by Mary Oliver. Each poem is about her dogs. She writes in *Little Dog's Rhapsody In the Night*:

He puts his cheek against mine  
and makes small, expressive sounds.  
And when I'm awake, or awake enough

he turns upside down, his four paws  
in the air  
and his eyes dark and fervent.

"Tell me you love me," he says. (And I imagine Oliver rubbing his belly.)

"Tell me again."

Could there be a sweeter arrangement? Over and over  
he gets to ask.  
I get to tell.

"Tell me you love me by loving one another," says Jesus.  
"Tell me again."

Could there be a sweeter arrangement? Over and over he gets to ask. And over and over, we are privileged to tell.

In the first months of being your pastor, several members

took me under their wing and tried to prepare me for all that I had gotten into. I was told about business meetings and how you liked to cuss and discuss things like pews and chairs, organ or piano, robes or not. I was told that most would give sacrificially but that there would never be enough money to do anything of significance. I was told that the presence of our children in Sunday School would double the attendance numbers. And I was told that people will come to visit Covenant out of curiosity, but don't expect anyone to join. So I am wondering, if you became a part of Baptist Church of the Covenant since the year 2000, would you raise your hands high? (Jack Brymer, are you seeing this. Not only did they come, they have joined us!)

Now to your defense, the congregation was low in spirit at that time, but there was one thing you still had in you to do, and that was you found a way to love one another. It was not always pretty. It was measured and cautious, but because you would not give up on the commandment of Jesus, Jesus did not give up on us. I often think we underestimated how much Spirit would honor our attempts to reach across the aisle to touch another's life with the love of Jesus. If today is any indicator, it is a powerful testimony.

Katie Ponder Israel, home grown and demanded of her family of origin that regardless of whatever transitions that were occurring, that they would all worship together at Baptist Church of the Covenant.

Now, here she is, returning with her husband and son saying, "Be faithful to the commandment of Jesus and tell me you love me!" And it is our sweet arrangement to get to tell.

Valerie and Allan Burton came to us as DINKS...a double income couple with no kids. Not only did Valerie respond to your love by becoming our Minister of Christian Formation, but she and Allan, with the birth of Marshall, began a revival in the baby room. 14 babies born in one year and we have never looked back! We are seeing the results of our dedication to them in the baptismal pool today. It has been a sweet arrangement to tell them over and over again that Jesus loves you.

***Because you would not give up on the commandment of Jesus, Jesus did not give up on us.***

Allison Graden came to our church because she was interested in

one Jimmy Hawley. She was a Methodist and proud of it. Could she really become a Baptist? She soon realized that if she was going to be a Hawley, she better settle into this church family as well. Your love wooed her. Over and over we had the privilege of telling Allison, Jimmy, Logan and Grant that Jesus loves them.

Melissa Evans came into our church because a friend at Curves invited her. I believe it is safe to say that you gained your courage to adopt Gizatu from watching others in this congregation. Assured that it would be a safe place to bring a baby that would ask, "Tell me you love me," you brought Gizatu home to us, and it has been our delight to tell you and Gizatu over and over again that Jesus loves you.

It is such a sweet arrangement. Jesus gets to ask through the lives of others, and we get to tell. Jesus is so faithful to us to bring a unifying, loving, energizing Spirit when we follow the command to love one another.

So I am wondering who among us wishes to respond to the movement of Spirit this day. Who will allow us the privilege of loving and telling you about the love of Jesus? Come, as we stand and sing hymn # 366, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling."

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