

Abiding With Jesus

John 15:9-17

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

May 6, 2018 – Sixth Sunday of Easter



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. How good are you at generating guilt in other people? Can you unleash a burden of shame on them as if you were turning on a faucet? Do you suppose there's a parent alive who hasn't used this technique on at least more than one occasion to get their children to do homework or household chores? I think you all know exactly what I mean. A parent looks at his child and says: "Why are you treating me this way? Just look at all the things I've given to you – and *this* is how you repay me?" Of course this only works so long as the other person doesn't know what you're doing. Because as soon as they figure out that you're trying to lay a guilt trip on them, they might well figure out a way to turn it back on you!

The other side of the guilt trip coin is when you look for what might be called a "minimum level of satisfaction." In other words, if you can figure out the least amount of effort it takes to fulfill a requirement, then you'll be able to effectively short-circuit the inevitable shame of not doing what you were supposed to do. And you know how this works, as well. In fact, you even encourage this way of thinking when you say to your kid: "Come on, just three more peas, and then we all can have dessert!" Why is it then, do you suppose, that later you're surprised when they say to you: "Mom, there are too many problems on this page. Can I go outside and play if I just do half of them?" And so it goes from the home, to the school room to the work place, where this kind of thinking will most likely eventually foster a sense among all the employees that if everyone's productivity isn't likely to be rewarded as you think it ought to be, then the workers will soon start finding creative ways to pass the time without actually getting anything done.

Minimum satisfaction even works in the Church. When budget restraints are handcuffing us, it's likely we'll figure out the lowest common denominator that will enable us to keep the doors open. Thinking the other way doesn't come quite so easily – like: what potential do we have by God's grace to do great things in His kingdom even when the giving numbers are down? Or: What creative ways can we use our talents for someone else's good? But the temptation to always look for the minimum amount that will satisfy is strong in all of us. It gets in the way, and leaves us feeling like there's no solution in sight. Why is that?

Techniques to generate guilt, as well as the automatic response of doing the minimum amount you can do and still get by, are sadly both related to the same thing: the Law. The Law, you see, is all about requirements – what you are to do, and what you are not to do. You know

transgressing the Law will bring with it certain punishments and consequences. When you live under the Law you can't escape being measured against its demands. The guilt the Law imposes on you is no game or technique. It has real teeth. No minimums will be acceptable. It's all or nothing, and the full payment is due now – no exceptions!

Now recall the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. 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. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Is this the language of the Law? Did you notice any threats or punishments connected with these words? Where are the teeth to enforce its requirements? Such things are nowhere to be found, because here Jesus is *not* using the language of the Law. It's true, some have wrongly surmised that Jesus is laying a guilt trip on us and might be really upset if we don't do what He says. But that's because the Law, guilt trips and minimum requirements are the only things our sinful human nature knows.

When we hear these words of Jesus, we tend to think He's setting down some new Law or requirement. That's what leads so many, including many Christians, to believe falsely that the Christian faith is all about doing good things, following a certain code of conduct, or being "good people" with cheery attitudes so Jesus will smile on us and reward us with success and prosperity. Such a view clouds these blessed words of Jesus, and strips away their power. But our Lord isn't imposing any new Law upon you here. He isn't laying a guilt trip on you so that you'll then turn around and try to work out some sort of minimal work requirement to assuage your guilt and get Him off your back. You've probably had somebody ask if you've accepted Jesus into your heart, if He is *really* the Lord of your life, or if you've been doing enough to prove your Christian faith to others. All in all, this is just another guilt technique like all the rest – a trick that ultimately makes the one, true faith look no different from any other man-made religion. But that's *not* what Jesus is saying. That's not what He's about at all.

What our Savior is doing here with these words is giving you your freedom – right here, right now. Just by speaking His powerful Word, He's crucifying and killing your old, sinful, human nature, then raising you up as a new creation made in the image of Christ. He's removing the shadow of guilt that's been hanging over your head and unlocking the slave's handcuffs that are continually forcing you to meet only the minimum necessary require-

ments. All the Law's threats, punishments, and condemnations have been removed from you and pressed down, along with that thorny crown, onto the bleeding head of Jesus. Jesus has fulfilled not only the bare minimums, but He has completed every command of God perfectly – freely accepting the guilt that rightly belongs only to you, and paying the debt you owe, but can never satisfy.

The Law makes slaves, while the Gospel makes friends. And what does Jesus say about all this? He says: "No longer do I call you slaves, but friends. You did not choose Me. I chose you. I singled you out so that you might go forth in life bearing fruit that will abide. And whatever you ask, it will be given to you." There are no conditions about what might cause God to take these blessings back. There are no contracts you're obligated to fulfill. It's all from Him to you. I know, it all sounds so easy, but truly it is! There is no effort you have to expend to make it happen, because Jesus has already accomplished it all. He even sent His Holy Spirit so that God could place the faith of Jesus in your heart, so that your trust might be only in Him and thus receive all the blessings of heaven. You can spend your time looking for loopholes, but you won't find them here because this isn't about the Law, but the Gospel – about what God has done for you. Wouldn't it be silly to look for minimums when in fact there are no requirements at all!

When Jesus says you are to keep His commandments, He's not demanding something of you so that you have to go out and earn His love and blessing. In fact, in today's Epistle lesson it states clearly that God's commandments to Christians are not burdensome. His only command is that you believe only in Him – and the Holy Spirit has given you the ability to do it. You have no ability within yourself to believe in Jesus, but God has given you that belief as a gift in the water of Holy Baptism. The very same body and blood of Christ that took away your sin is what now strengthens you in keeping His commandment to believe.

And here is where the Christian holy life and love for one another comes in – not as a requirement you have to fulfill, but as the natural result of what God the Father created you to be. In last week's Gospel you heard Jesus say: "I am the Vine, you are the branches." And so today's Gospel very simply explains how this mystery is played out in practical, everyday life. You have been restored and reconciled to the Lord because the Law no longer stands in your way. Now restoration and reconciliation is what branches out in your everyday calling as you interact with others whom God places in your path. Your love for them

– expressed in prayer, words of encouragement, or helpful deeds – is what Jesus is talking about when He says your life will bear fruit. That fruit hasn't made you a branch, just the opposite. You are a branch because you're connected to Jesus the Vine, and He is the One who enables you to produce the fruit of your life, whatever that might be. The things you do as a Christian don't make you a Christian, nor do they improve your standing before God. Rather, God, through Jesus, has made you to be His very own. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit you are able to go forth and do far more than just the bare minimum, because there are no requirements for you to minimize. There is no threat of a guilt trip to prod you along. Instead, you have the freedom to love as He has loved you – to even give up your life, if that's what will help your neighbor.

But if it's so easy, then why aren't all Christians more like this? What makes your life as a new creation so difficult, if you have nothing to do to add to your faith? What makes it hard is not that your faith isn't perfect, because in fact everything our Lord gives you is perfect. The problem is the resistance of your stubborn, sinful nature. On this side of heaven that old, sinful nature will continue working against you, in spite of the fact that it's continually being crucified with Christ – which is precisely what happens when you confess your sins and receive forgiveness in the gifts God provides for you here in His Church. It is necessary that you dominate and control that part of you which is still opposed to God's love and mercy. But since you cannot do that yourself, the Father has given you the wealth of His grace in Christ Jesus to overcome and finally win the victory that the Savior has already achieved for you.

Martin Luther once pointed out that Adam had countless trees to choose from to satisfy his every hope and desire, but temptation so blinded his and Eve's eyes that all they could see was the one thing God had not given them. So even though you see obstacles all around you, dare to open your eyes and apprehend by faith all the riches of grace God has laid out for you! Do you suppose it might just work out if you heeded the liberating Gospel word of Jesus that now enables you to love one another? Remember His words last week, because He is the Vine and you are the branches, you are now free to abide in Him. And He can't wait to produce the fruit of love in you that He's been planning every since before the world began! Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.