

Cling to My Command
John 14:15-21
Trinity Lutheran - Kearney, Missouri
May 21, 2017 - Sixth Sunday of Easter



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. You can always tell which kids are attending preschool for the first time. They're likely the ones who are howling at the top of their lungs, looking like a poster child from an orphanage, with big crocodile tears running down their cheeks, the trademark quivering lower lip and a runny nose. They have a sad look of abandonment on their face that cries out: "I want my mommy." Mom or Dad tried to convince them that they were coming back to pick them up, but that didn't matter. All they know is that their parents are gone and they've been left alone with strangers. The two people in all the world they counted on most to be there for them seemed to have abandoned them!

But that feeling is not limited to preschoolers on their first day at school. Those who observe our culture note that there is a growing sense of isolation and loneliness among all of us. Behind our walls, security gates, guns and burglar alarms, we're becoming increasingly lonely and isolated. Loneliness is fast becoming a quiet epidemic. Even in crowded urban areas like ours, people feel lonely in a crowd – disconnected, isolated, and abandoned. Loneliness is a major factor in the rise of teen suicide. It's the driving force behind those who seek identity and meaning in street gangs. Loneliness leads husbands and wives to look for romance outside of their marriage. It leads singles into misguided relationships and misuse of their sexuality.

"It is not good for man to be alone," God declared at the beginning, and we affirm that truth with our own behavior. Teens can't keep their eyes and attention off of their cell phone to see who has texted them. We rush to get our mail, check to see who's e-mailed us or updated their Facebook page. We dash dripping wet out of the shower to pick up a ringing telephone. The words of our Gospel this morning are the words Jesus spoke to His disciples in the upper room on the night He was betrayed – as He preached at table and instituted the new Passover of His own body and blood. He told His disciples the hour was approaching when He would be taken from them and that they would no longer be able to see or touch Him. Understandably they were disheartened, frightened and sad. Their Master, on whom they had counted for three years, was going away. What would become of them? How would they or the Church survive?

"If you love me," said Jesus, "you will keep My commandments, I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, to be with you forever." Until that moment Jesus had been their Comfort. Yet He was about to die, rise from the dead, and withdraw His visible presence from them to sit at the right hand of the Father. Still, His promise was that they would never be alone. The Father would send another Comforter, One who would comfort them with the same comfort as Jesus Himself. He would cause them to remember all that Jesus had said and done. He would lead and guide them into all truth. He would take what belongs to Jesus and make it known to the disciples. He would be with them forever, and nothing, even death, would be able to deprive them of the Spirit's presence. He would be the Father's unique gift, a gift neither seen nor known by the unbelieving world.

Our Lord prefaced this promise with these important words: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Love in Holy Scripture is an action, not a feeling. It's an act of the will, not a state of being. Love is action toward another. You love by doing something. But the truth is that we have nothing but sin and death to offer Christ – and He willingly takes it. And in return He gives us His perfection and life. That's the blessed exchange Jesus was hurtling toward death to accomplish. He died, taking our wretched sinfulness and exchanging it for His perfect righteousness and victory over death. That's how Jesus creates love for Him in our hearts, when we realize His death is greater than our death and His perfect obedience is greater than our sin. Hence we are not fearful of hiding anything from Him. He invites us to come to Him with all our burdens to find peace and rest. We love Christ because He first loved us and gave Himself for us. His love for us is the cause of our love for Him.

To state it another way, Christ first works love in our hearts, then speaks of our keeping His commandments. And note this well: "keep" here does not mean "obey." Rather it means clinging to something or treasuring it. And Jesus' commands are not like the Ten Commandments of Moses. Indeed, we must make a careful distinction between Jesus and Moses, as John does at the beginning of His Gospel where he writes: "The Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Christ Jesus." Jesus is speaking of His commandments,

not the commandments of Moses. He doesn't say: "If you love me, you will keep the Ten Commandments. Instead He says: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." And Jesus' commandments are entirely different from those of Moses. They aren't burdensome and threatening the way the Ten Commandments are. They may be summarized in this way: He commands us to be forgiven in His name, be Baptized into His death and resurrection, hear the forgiveness of our sins, and that we faithfully eat and drink the Supper of His body and blood. Those are Jesus' commandments, if you can even properly call them "commandments." They are mandates for us to be saved. The commandments of Moses offered nothing of the sort.

The commandments of Moses show us our sin. When you meditate on the Ten Commandments, you will quickly realize that you are daily guilty of every single one of them in thought, word and deed. Moses' Law reveals us to be idolaters, blasphemers, despisers of God's Word, disobedient to parents, murderers, adulterers, thieves, gossips, covetous and greedy. These commandments testify to our unworthiness, so that God would be justified in sending us to hell if Moses' Law were all we had. But Jesus has come to our defense, placed Himself under the Father's Law, put on our human nature, kept the law of Moses perfectly, died a perfect death under that Law, and now gives us His perfect life and death as a gift.

On the eve of His death, Jesus said to His disciples: "If you love Me, you will cling to those things I have entrusted to you, so that you might be freed from your guilt and shame – so that you might cling to My work instead of your own, that you might draw courage and comfort from my Baptism, Absolution and Supper. If you love Me, you will eagerly receive these gifts. You will allow me to wash you, feed you, cleanse and heal you, for this is My will and mandate, that you walk in safety under the shelter of My death and resurrection."

The trouble is that our sinful nature resists such gifts and refuses to be forgiven. We want to save ourselves. We want to deal with God on Moses' terms rather than Christ's. Now there are many who will say it can't be as simple as that – that you have to obey the Ten Commandments and walk in them or you will not receive the Holy Spirit. Yet consider this: How can anyone even begin to be holy, even for a moment, without the Holy Spirit? Jesus foresaw our day when preaching, Baptism, and the Supper would be thought of only as decorative additions to the faith, and when His death and resurrection for the life of the world would be denied even by many who claimed His name. He could already see unbelief at work in Judas and in those who would oppose the work of Apostles following His

death. And He could see it in our own day in those who would despise preaching and His Word and make up their own worship and religion – choosing to live without the benefit of Christ's Word, body and blood.

Jesus knew that such a time as ours was on the horizon, when the gifts He died to give us would be neglected even by those who claimed His name. That was why He said to His disciples: "If you love Me, you will cling to My commandments." With that statement He bound both them and us to His Word and Sacraments, through which He would send the Holy Spirit – for He also knew that without the Holy Spirit there could be no true preaching, Baptism, forgiveness, Lord's Supper, Church, faith, or Christianity. And it is by clinging to His commandment that His disciples are able to see him now through the eyes of faith. They "see" Him in His Word and recognize Him in the Breaking of the Bread. That same Jesus is just as "present" for you today as we are gathered in His Name to hear His Word as He was for His disciples in the upper room on the night when He was betrayed. His dying, rising and ascending didn't take Him from us. Indeed, He is just as surely present among us as He ever was – only now it is through His Word, Baptism, and the Supper of His true body and blood.

Jesus comes to us gently and humbly in the water and Word of Holy Baptism, in the voice of your pastor, and in the bread and wine of the Supper. That's how He reaches down to you in your loneliness and isolation. He reaches down from the right hand of the Father and pours water on you in His name and says, "You belong to me." He puts a bit of bread on your tongue and says: "This is My body given for you." He gives you a sip of wine, and says: "This is My blood shed for you." He gently lays a hand on your head and says, "I forgive you." He lives in each of you by His Word; and you live in Him by faith. You are saved because you are in Jesus. And you love Him and cling to His commandments because He lives in you.

Now not even death can separate you from Christ. Death only serves to draw you closer to Him. Because Jesus lives, you too shall live. Your death been swallowed up in His death, and His life has been put into you to save you. This is why Luther preached that a Christian must therefore "learn to ignore death, despise it through Christ, and fix his thoughts on life alone." Death has been put to death in Jesus. That is sure. That is certain. And "because I live," says Jesus, "you will live also." You know this is true because Jesus has told us this is so. And if Jesus has told us this is so, you may believe it without any doubting – all for Jesus' names' sake. Amen.