

John 14:15-21

Easter 6A + May 21, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

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Love and Keep

The Word of the Lord from John 14:15: Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

And the risen Christ says to you, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." That's pretty straightforward, but a lot of people get it wrong. It's because they get the verbs wrong; so we'd better spend a few minutes talking about the words "love" and "keep."

To "love," then. This isn't any sort of love: it's *agapé* love in the Greek. That means it's a sacrificial, selfless, love-at-all-costs sort of love. It's not a feeling of affection or attraction, and it's not a fifty-fifty "I'll love you *as long as* you love me" kind of arrangement. *Agapé* love says, "I'll love you, I'll sacrifice for you, even if you don't care for me one little bit." First and foremost, this is the love that God has for us, as in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." When He gave His Son, He gave Him as a sacrifice for the sins of the world – for the sins of all, even those who will never repent of their sin or desire His forgiveness. That's the sort of love we're talking about: Jesus effectively declares to the world, "Out of love for you, I will die for all of you, even if you only hold Me in scorn and contempt for eternity."

Selfless love is a high bar in a sinful world, where our flesh is constantly urging us to be selfish. But here comes Jesus saying that we are to love Him with *agapé* love, selflessly and sacrificially; and that's bound to be a struggle as long as you've got sinful flesh. But since we're not called like Him to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world, what sort of things are we to do in selfless love? Jesus tells you what to do: keep His commandments. When He talks about loving your neighbor, He says something similar through St. Paul in Romans 10:13: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

To love Jesus and your neighbor is to keep God's law. This is where reflection on the Ten Commandments comes in handy. So, for instance, you don't respect authorities, refrain from anger, and honor the marriage bed just to stay out of trouble. By doing these things, you are acting in love to God and neighbor both.

Love is the fulfilling of the law. We must do more than just affirm this is true. We must be ready to suffer for it. In the world today – and too often inside the Church today, the word "love" is used as a cover for license. Too often we are told that to speak the truth of God in the form of rebuking sin is an unloving thing. If you warn against sins of false teaching, immorality, a low view of life's sanctity or a host of other sins, you'll be told pretty quickly that you lack love. You might even be told that you're guilty, not of love speech, but of hate speech. Where Scripture says, "Love is the fulfilling of the law," sinners too often reverse the Word and say, "Love is defying God's law accepting the sins of others without judgment."

But God maintains that love is the fulfillment of the law. The world's insistence that love is non-judgmental acceptance of sin is absurd on its own merits. Imagine a marriage where a husband continually breaks every last promise he's made in his marriage vows: does anybody want to defend him and assert that he treats his wife so poorly *because* he loves her? Will anyone argue that she objects to his horrible behavior because she *lacks* love? And yet the world is quite happy to say that we are free to love God by breaking His law and poking Him in the eye.

Don't be surprised if such love leads to suffering. Considering how the world treated Jesus, who truly loves everyone sacrificially, do you think that fulfilling His law is going to be popular or easy when we attempt it? Yet one of the gifts of salvation – one of the joys we have as Christians – is that we are set free to keep His commandments. That's love.

On to the word, "keep," then. When we hear Jesus say, "keep My commandments," I think we automatically hear, "obey My commandments." That's not wrong, but it fails to capture the greater meaning of the word. "Keep" can certainly mean "obey," but it can also mean "to hold onto," or "to treasure." When we speak the benediction and say, "The Lord bless you and keep you," we are not praying that the Lord would obey you – that's a disturbing thought! Rather, we are announcing the miraculous truth that, for Jesus' sake, God holds onto you. He will not forsake you because you're now His holy child, redeemed and cleansed by the blood of His Son. For Jesus' sake, He treasures you: He delights that you are numbered among His people. He's written your name in the book of life, and nothing can snatch you out of His hand. Not a bad way for the service to end, yes?

So when Jesus says, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments," He's not saying, "I'll measure your love for Me by how well you obey." He's telling you to hold onto His commandments, to treasure them.

We need to keep that in mind once again when we speak of the lawless who say that love isn't judgmental. See, when you're pressured to be more tolerant of sin, you're tempted to say, "Look, it's not that I especially like all these commandments of Jesus, but I've got to keep obeying them or else I'll get into trouble." That has all the love of the customer service rep on the phone saying, "Look, *I'd* love to give you a refund, but the big bad company has rules that say I can't." You do not worship a big bad God. Part of confessing God's law correctly is to say, "Not only are God's commandments holy and eternal, but they're good and just and right."

However, we also need to clarify what Jesus is saying against another group: along with the lawless on one side, we must also warn against the legalist on the other. You'll find plenty of people who will say that even though Jesus died for your sins, you're saved both by His grace *and* the works that you do. Many who never darken the door of a church even say, "I believe I'm going to heaven because I'm a good person," and being "a good person" gets defined more or less as, "I've done good enough at obeying God's commandments;" as if setting the bar low and ignoring God's demands for holiness is going to pass the test on Judgment Day. Within Christendom, you'll find churches who teach that it takes your good works, along with Jesus' death, to save you. Sometimes, it's very subtle, as in those who insist that you have to do the work and a prayer of decision before you're saved. Sometimes, we Lutherans get portrayed as teaching that we don't care what sort of life you lead, as long as you say you believe in Jesus.

If you need a treatment of this, read through the book of Galatians: at that time, there were teachers who said, "Because Jesus died for you, you're saved solely by grace alone – as long as you men also get circumcised," which I imagine was a bit of an alarming thing for Gentile men to hear. For now, we treat this with a brief illustration. Let's say that paramedics arrive at the scene where a man has just suffered electrocution from touching a downed power line. His heart is stopped, but they arrive in time to "zap" him back to life. He says to them, "I'm alive! What should I do now?" The paramedics say, "From now on, don't touch downed power lines."

Here's the question: is he alive because of his future work of not touching downed power lines? No. He's alive because he's been given life by the work of God through paramedics. Not touching downed power lines is a good work (!) he can do now that he is alive, but that work

doesn't make him alive. He already *is* alive. On the other hand, if he gets up the next day and electrocutes himself again, he forfeits the life that was given him the day before.

You're saved by grace alone. The good works you do don't make you alive, because you already are. The good works you do are what you can do because you live. On the other hand, if you return to sin, you forfeit the life that has been given. That's why you live a life of ongoing repentance. Sin still kills. Faith alone saves – but faith is never alone.

There's one more problem with legalists (along with the fact that they're no fun at parties): they claim way too much ability for themselves, that it's possible to love God perfectly by giving your heart to Jesus. You know better. You said it last week as part of the confession of sins in Divine Service I: you confessed to the Lord, "We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves." I've sat through a few sermons where the message was, "You know you're saved when you give your whole heart to Jesus." As I said, you know better than that: as long as you're in this world, your whole heart isn't with Jesus.

Or, when Jesus says, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments," your honest response is, "I do not keep Your commandments as I ought, which means I do not love you as I ought."

Not loving Jesus is a problem. But that's why we've taken so long to define "love" and "keep." Let's add one more thing: not all of Jesus' commandments are laws to be obeyed. That might sound like borderline blasphemy, so I'd best explained. At the creation of the world, the Lord commanded, "Let there be light." This was not a command for you to obey; rather, it was God causing light by His command. Whether or not you've given it much thought, I'm betting that you *treasure* that command of God because light is indispensable for life.

Likewise, when Jesus met the man with the withered hand, He commanded, "Stretch out your hand" (Luke 6:10). He was not saying, "If you love Me, you'll find a way to make your hand work." By His command, He was causing healing to take place: as He once said, "Let there be light," He said to this man, "Let there be a strong, functioning hand" – and there was! And when Jesus stood before a tomb and commanded, "Lazarus, come out!," He was not saying, "Lazarus, if you manage to revive your body and walk out of the tomb, then I'll finally know that you love Me." By His command, Jesus was giving life.

Sometimes, when Jesus gives commands, they are not laws for you to obey; by them, He is causing things to happen. And while you are to keep and treasure His laws that He gives you to obey (because they are good, true and holy – and because sin still kills), you are also to treasure these commands by which He creates, restores and forgives.

Like this command: "Repent." Repentance is the Holy Spirit's work in you – it is a gift of God, not something you must come up with to be saved. Treasure God's command to repent.

How about, "Be baptized"? When the Lord says, "I baptize you," He is saying, "Be born again," "Be my child." "Be alive." Treasure that.

Likewise the Absolution: as the pastor says what Jesus says, "I forgive you all of your sins," the Lord Himself says, "Let there be forgiveness." "Let there be life."

Here's another command: "Take and eat: this is My body. Take and drink, this is My blood, for the forgiveness of sins."

Are these not also commands to keep, to *treasure*?

You are right to treasure His law, to obey His commandments and quickly repent when you sin. But all the more, treasure that the Lord commands grace and forgiveness, salvation and life to *be*. Until you are delivered to heaven where – freed from sin – you can properly love God with your whole heart, Christ's sacrificial love for you covers your sins and sets you free.

If you love Jesus, keep His commandments. Especially this one: Repent, and be forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen