

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 10, 2009
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 66:1-11
I John 3:14-24
John 14:15-21

I want to begin this morning with a question. The question is: What is the distinguishing mark of a *bona fide* Christian? Put another way: How can we know that someone is an authentic follower of Jesus Christ?

- ❖ Is the answer to this question to be found on a person's resume?
- ❖ Is it to be found in the number of degrees a person has hanging on the wall?
- ❖ Is it found in the amount of prestige, acclaim, and public recognition one has?
- ❖ Is it found in one's ability to be a great apologist, to debate the finer points of Scripture and theology?
- ❖ Is it to be found in one's ability to lead and influence great numbers of people, and to build large churches?

I suppose we might answer this question in many different ways this morning. But if we've ever asked ourselves the question, "How do we know if a person truly loves Jesus?" then today we get our answer.

The passage from the Gospel of John contains a literary feature known as chiasm, which simply means that the passage begins and ends with the same theme or emphasis. Writers often use this technique precisely to emphasize something that is important to them. Jesus is no different.

Jesus begins the passage by saying: “if you love me, keep my commandments.” Jesus ends the passage by saying, “those who obey me are the ones who love me.”

So, how *do* we know if a person is a bona fide Christian? You can tell that a person is a genuine Christian when that person *does* what Jesus says his followers should do. A true follower of Jesus is a person who *obeys* Jesus’ command to love others as he has loved us. The authentic Christian life is a life of love *in action*.

And yes, the love Jesus speaks of here is the famous *agape* love, the love that is hard to define. But the important feature of this love here from Jesus is that it is characterized by action and obedience, not sentiment. After all, Jesus commands this love, and sentiment or feeling cannot be commanded. Action and obedience, however, can be.

Dr. Jim Hollingsworth is fond of reminding me on many occasions that “love is what love *does*.” That would seem to be an excellent commentary on Jesus’ words here.

John’s words from our epistle lesson are also excellent commentary and reflection on Jesus’ words. John very precisely links love with obedience, and separates it from sentiment and feeling. He does this in at least two ways.

First, in verse 16 he says, “we know what real love is because Christ gave up his life for us. And so we also ought to give up our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters.”

Obviously, Christ’s example of giving up his life for us is a wonderful window into the nature of love. But at times I wonder if it can also impede our love for others, because we think in terms of actually dying for someone else. But the giving up our lives here from John’s perspective doesn’t involve dying for others as much as it does *living* for others. Dying for others remains primarily a theoretical thing because it’s far less likely to happen. But living for others is far more practical.

John illustrates this in verse 17, where he frames giving up our lives for others in these words: “if anyone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help -- how can God’s love be in that person?”

A second way John links love with action and obedience is in verse 19, where he says: “it is by our actions that we know we are living in the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord, even if our hearts condemn us.”

There may be times when our hearts trouble us, when we struggle with a guilty conscience or when our feelings trick us about our relationship with Christ. But John says that God knows our hearts, and that it is our obedience and our actions that confirm we are living in the truth.

Many years ago I remember watching the movie *Schindler's List*, the story of how Oscar Schindler saved hundreds and hundreds of lives during the Holocaust. Near the end of the movie is a touching scene where Schindler's heart "condemns him," as it were, where he breaks down and tearfully cries, "I didn't do enough; I should have saved more."

But his actions -- not his feelings -- confirmed that he was living in the truth. Love *is* what love *does*.

The challenge for us this morning is that Jesus' words here can sometimes seem a little daunting. "If you love me, obey my commands." "Those who obey my commands are those who love me." It can be tough because it seems to put much of the burden on us, on our shoulders. It can even make us wonder whether our salvation depends largely on what *we* do as opposed to what God does.

But neither Jesus nor John are saying here that we are saved by what we *do*. Jesus and John are talking here about a love relationship, and in any relationship love is not authentic until it travels from the realm of abstraction and expresses itself concretely through *action*. And it is the action that proves the relationship is authentic. The love and obedience do not establish the relationship; they *confirm* it and *legitimize* it.

And lest we still think that obedience to Jesus is a daunting task, notice what Jesus is doing in our Gospel lesson. Jesus asks the Father to send another Comforter, the Counselor, the Advocate, the Helper, the Paraclete.

The term “Paraclete,” is used only 5 times in the New Testament, with various meanings. The literal meaning of the term is “one who is called in,” or “one who is called alongside.” But it is the reason *why* the person is called in which gives the word its distinctive meaning. *In all cases, the Paraclete is called in to help one who is in trouble or distress, doubt or bewilderment.* This is why the term Paraclete has been translated with such terms as Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, and Intercessor.

Jesus knows that we are incapable of loving him and obeying him in our own strength and power. So he asks the Father for some help. He promises not to leave us helpless (i.e., as orphans). The Spirit will come to walk along side us, to live in us, to guide us, to make Jesus present even though he is absent. Everything we will need, we shall have -- including the power to dress up our love in work clothes, and give up our lives for others, not by dying for them but by *living* for them.

As we come to the Lords’ table this morning, the grace that he offers us is the power to love one another as he has loved us. Power that comes to us from the Comforter, the Counselor, the Helper, the One who walks along side us to make

Jesus present to us even though Jesus is physically absent from us. So come with open hearts and open hands, and receive the fullness of his love this day.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.