

Love

— *the word and the reality* —

6th Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020

Some of the worst conversations in the world have started with the phrase, "*If you loved me...*" when they are *not really about love at all*. For example:

"If you loved me... then you'd let me stay out with my friends all night."

"If you loved me... then I wouldn't have to say '*I'm sorry.*'"

"If you loved me... then you'd be a 'good' girl (or boy, or wife, or husband)"

"If you loved me... then you wouldn't feel that way."

"If you loved me... then you'd do what I say when I say it."

And worst of all:

"If you loved me... then you wouldn't make me have to hit you."

The word "love" can be quite influential (since we all know at some level that giving & receiving love is what human life is all about.) But the *word* "love" is not love itself.

Still, the word alone can be quite powerful. It's a word that can "*disarm*" us, even when it's only being used as a "*tool*" to persuade us, against our wills, to do what is wanted. It's a word that can increase our receptivity, even when it's only a "*cover*" for assigning blame, instilling fear, or denying responsibility for harmful behaviour. It's a word that can easily "*distract*" us from what is actually happening in an encounter, which may be quite *un-loving*.

And so, as we grow and become more emotionally intelligent, we develop a certain "*healthy suspicion*" when the word "love" is used — we consciously widen our attention to take in the whole context in which the word is being said (including any informative "*twinges*" that may be happening in our "*gut.*") And, because we *have* grown and *are* growing in these ways, we naturally bring that "*healthy suspicion*" with us when we read the Bible — as well we should — for its cast of characters, writers & editors (*although divinely inspired*) were *not* God, *not* perfect, *nor* problem-free.

So when, in today's gospel reading, we hear Jesus quoted as saying — "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" — it should give us pause. Is it one of those "*if/ then*" statements (like the ones I just mentioned), which we've wisely grown to be wary of? For example, does it mean "*If you really love me, you'd better keep my commandments, or neither I nor my Father will love you, but will damn you to eternal torment*"? In other words, is it a manipulative attempt to assure compliance by instilling false guilt, or making a veiled threat?

The short answer is "no" — it is not — even though there were definitely forces in the early church (*no less than there are in the church today*) that sought to put such hostile meanings into the mouth of Jesus. Forces that saw divine love as little more than a "*carrot*" to ensure compliance, but (behind their backs) were always holding the "*stick*" of divine vengeance, ready for a hostile thrashing, in case the "*carrot*" didn't work.

So, how can I **know** that "*the love of God in Christ*" is truly good, and not something malicious & coercive? The short answer is "*only through experience.*" How **else** could we know that someone's love for us is genuine & trustworthy?

In spite of what the old children's song tells me, I can't actually know that Christ loves me in a way that is real & beneficial & non-coercive ... just because "*the Bible tells me so*" ... or just because the Church, or my parents, have told me so. With all due respect to the Bible, the Church, and my parents — this is something that I have to know **for myself**, within my own personal life experiences, and in shared experiences with those I care for and who care for me.

To know for sure, I need to actually be "**visited**" (*and visited frequently*) by the Loving Christ within my own heart & mind. That may indeed happen for me in the context of reading the scriptures, or of the Church, or of my family, but not necessarily. It happens wherever & whenever we find ourselves being personally "*visited*" by Christ. That "*visitation*" is the place of prayer — whether it's with or without words, kneeling, closing our eyes, or being in the midst of like-minded people. That "*visitation*" is the place of true "*fellowship*," of mutual love, respect, & exchange. These "*visitations*" are the School of Christ, a school without walls, that operates within us & between us.

When I've had enough "*visits*," enough "*schooling*" with the Loving Christ — then I know "*enough*," I'm sure "*enough*" — that his love for me is genuine, beneficial, desirable, and not some kind of "trick." It is **this** "inner knowing" that inspires in me the deep trust we call "faith," which empowers & **moves** me to love Christ back as he has loved me. This is the context in which Jesus says, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" It's the "**place**" of loving him "*in return*" — which only comes through the experience of being loved by him first.

For it's here, within this inner knowing of Christ, that we discover that genuine love is the root of all the things we call "moral values & virtues." Love is *just*, and *discerning*, and *temperate*, and *courageous*. Love is patient, kind, compassionate, and forgiving. (**We** may not be, but **love** is.) Love *isn't* envious, or arrogant, or resentful, or bent on getting its way. (**We** may be, but **love** is not.) We learn in the School of Christ that it makes no sense to tell ourselves "*Oh my God, I'm so impatient; I have to be more patient!*" (or "*I have to be more 'just', more 'compassionate', more 'courageous'*" and so on.) We learn that when we lack these qualities in our lives, what we **first** need is **to be more in love**. We learn **to not** put the cart before the horse and end up frustrated when it goes nowhere.

Jesus fulfilled all the moral commandments & the values beneath them —*not on his own*— but through the delicate interplay of love between him and the One he called 'Father.' As a wise rabbi, he taught that all the commandments were derived from just two: **1.** to love God completely (body, soul, heart, mind & strength) — and **2.** (its earthly counterpart) to love others as we ourselves want to be loved. But for those who were already experiencing his love for them 'first-hand', he condensed the "2" into just "1" — his "*new commandment*" — "***As I, God-in-the-flesh, am loving you, and as you are loving me back – in this same way, love one another.***" In **this** — his Living Law of Love — all the moral commandments & the values beneath them – are realized. And so, it is within this sense, that Jesus says to us who are coming to know him personally within our own lived experience – "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" It's a lesson at a very different level than the one we learned in Sunday School, "*Try your best to be good.*" Still, that old lesson is a good message for us to remember – in those moments (which we all have) – when we just don't have "ears to hear" anything more than that. Thanks be to God, who provides for **all** of our needs. Amen.

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