



April 27, 2008 - Sixth Sunday of Easter

**2008 MNO Synod Convention
National Bishop's Sermon**

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-18
1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

- 15 Jesus said,
"If you love me, you will keep my commandments.
- 16 And I will ask the Father,
and he will give you another Advocate,
to be with you forever.
- 17 This is the Spirit of truth,
whom the world cannot receive,
because it neither sees him nor knows him.
You know him, because he abides with you,
and he will be in you.
- 18 I will not leave you orphaned;
I am coming to you.
- 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me,
but you will see me;
because I live, you also will live.
- 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father,
and you in me, and I in you.
- 21 They who have my commandments and keep them
are those who love me;
and those who love me will be loved by my Father,
and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

It is a pleasure to be here with you today. And I bring you greetings from your sisters and brothers in Christ from coast to coast to coast that make up this family of God that we call the ELCIC.

I wanted to begin today, seeing as how it is only a couple of weeks before mother's day, by asking you a question about mothers. And the question is, What did your mother do to make you do what she wanted you to do? What did your mother do to make you do what she wanted you to do? I've asked a few people this question this past week and have found a wide variety of answers.

And so I have discovered that some mothers use bribery to make their children do what they want them to do. So if they clean up their room, they can go to McDonald's or get a new video game or whatever.

Some mothers use the opposite of bribery, namely instead of promised treats there are promised negative consequences. Some call this threats. It's the "do what I want or else" variety of behaviour modification.

Some mothers go so far as to use punishment to get what they want. Usually it is too late for this particular episode, the wrong thing has already been done, but the theory is that next time the offending child will think twice. And so I talked to a few people who had received an encounter or many encounters with the wrong end of a hairbrush, or a wooden spoon.

Some mothers appeal to a higher power. Sometimes it is God, like God will eventually punish you even if I can't right now, but more often it is a real heavy, namely dad. Just wait til your father gets home.

My own mother did not have to resort to any such delayed action. She had what we children referred to as an evil eye that could wither you and stop you in your tracks if you were even just thinking of not doing what she wanted.

And of course, finally, there is the ever popular behaviour modification by guilt. If you loved me, you'd be a good girl. If you only knew how much I went through bringing you into this world, you wouldn't cause me so much heartache. I only wish you could be a good girl like your cousin Beth. It takes a lot of different forms, but it makes you cringe inside the same way.

The reason I talk about this is not because I want to get a few laughs at the expense of mothers, but rather because I think that many people think that God operates in one or many of these ways. Namely that God uses bribery, threats, punishment or guilt to get us to do what God wants us to do. So God bribes us with the promise of eternal life, God threatens us with eternal damnation, God punishes us when we are bad by sending all manner of hardship into our lives, and God guilts us by saying, if you loved me, you'd do what I want you to do.

And so we hear today's gospel lesson, **"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"**, and we think.... there goes God with the guilt again. But I think if we look at the text this way we end up totally misunderstanding what Jesus is trying to say.

First of all, we end up misunderstanding what a commandment is all about. Namely, that we tend to think of commandments as being rules and laws that prescribe good behaviour that will keep us on God's good side, and that doing the opposite will get us in big trouble with God. Instead, the commandments God gave, both the ten in the old testament and the new commandment to love God and neighbour that Jesus gave, were given as guidelines by which people could make good decisions. The commandments

were given as a way to help people relate to a God of steadfast love, and to provide boundaries to help us stay in loving relationships with God and with one another.

But even worse, if we think of this verse as showing us a God who somehow manipulates us into good behaviour then we also misunderstand the very nature of God. Our God is a God of love, and the commandments are one way that God has given us to show God's love for us. The commandments are not about guilt or bribery or threats or punishment - they are about love. Or in the words that we heard yesterday, God comes down to love us and set us free so that we can love and serve our neighbour.

Now that doesn't mean that they are easy to do. Living out God's commands to love both God and neighbour are actually very difficult. They go against our human nature which wants to put ourselves first, and they certainly go against what the world around us holds up and celebrates and encourages. Bringing the same selfless, caring, non-judgemental love to others that we receive from God is indeed a very difficult task. What we are being invited to do is hard.

But there is help. The gospel lesson reminds us of that promised help in the words of Jesus. **"I will not leave you orphaned"**. The same God who showers us with love, the same God who challenges us to live out and share that love with the world around us, that God does not abandon us, but stays with us as we try to show our love by living out the commandments.

Partly because I was a little hard on mothers earlier, I want to read you a paraphrase of the 23rd psalm that uses the image of a mother to show us this ongoing and ever-present care of God in our lives. Some of you may have heard this before.

*"My Mommy holds my hand; I'm not afraid. She takes me to school in the mornings; she sets me free in the playgrounds and parks; she helps me feel good. She shows me how to cross the streets, because she loves me. Even when we walk downtown, among the crowds and the cars, I will not be afraid; if I can reach out for her hand or her coat, I know she's with me, and I'm all right. And sometimes when I've fallen down and I'm all covered with mud and I come home crying, she picks me up in her arms, she wipes my hands and dries my tears, and I just hafta cry again, cause she loves me so much. How can anything go wrong, when I have that kind of Mommy? I want to live all the rest of my life with Mommy in my Mommy's house for ever'n'ever."***

We have been given a wonderful model of love-in-action in the life and death of Jesus. Jesus did not just talk about loving people, he loved them. He cared about them. He acted out his love concretely, feeding, and healing, and forgiving, and even challenging the authorities for the sake of those he loved. And he acted out his love for us by giving even his life for us; by suffering the pain and humiliation of the cross, ultimately defeating sin and death and giving us the gift of eternal life.

But God's daily presence in our lives and Jesus' model for us are not the only way that God strengthens us for our task. God calls us into community. We are called to come together and to take strength and support from each other. To encourage each other. To accept each other. To comfort each other. To love one another. We are called into community where we can find out together and then remind each other when we forget, that God loves us. And secure in that love we can begin together to reach out and share that love with God, with each other, and with the community.

Finally, each time we celebrate holy communion we remember and we again experience that Jesus loves us and continues to act out that love concretely when he

comes to us in the bread and wine and says “this is my body, given for you”. And our Lord Jesus calls us to come to his table, to be fed with his life giving food so that we may again be strengthened and enabled to leave this safe refuge and venture out again into the world as bearers of God's love.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." These are not words of law. They are not words of bribery, threats, punishment or guilt. Rather they are a gracious invitation for us to participate in living out and working to bring in God's world, God's reign of love. What an amazing privilege!! Let us help and encourage each other to accept that invitation, to live out God's love in our world, as a people and a church *In Mission for Others*. Amen.

***NOTE: We have been trying to track down the copyright information for this quote but have been unsuccessful at confirming where the original text first appeared. This information will be updated once it is available.*