

“Jesus and Me” A Sermon by Tom Boomershine

“The Holy Spirit is the spiritual power that enables us to keep, hold, and treasure Jesus’ commandments.”

I am thankful for this time to talk with you about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of peace. I have been speaking with you about a central, controversial and often neglected element in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke: “Love your enemies and do good for those who hate you.” Jesus both taught and did that. The problem is that it is often discouraging, this social action business, because peace is still a hope, not a fully present reality (though the rates of violence have steadily declined over the last 2000 years).

I think the Gospel of John was a response to that problem. In John, there is nothing about loving your enemies or doing good for them. There are no Gentiles, no demons, and exorcisms. It is about the love of God in Jesus Christ. So today I want to talk with you about Jesus’ love for us as individuals: “Jesus and me.”

How many of you have sung “Jesus Loves Me” as a child or as an adult? “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Where does the Bible say, “Jesus loves me”? Those exact words? Nowhere. The closest is here in Jesus’ farewell discourse with the disciples in John 13-17, specifically 14:21. As John Bennett so powerfully told it just now from the NRSV, “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.”

But wait a minute; a little exegesis: The NRSV says, “*those*,” “I will love *them*.” Plural. That’s a problem. The Greek pronouns here are singular. Jesus is describing the intensely personal relationship between himself and his friend, the one who keeps his commandments. The RSV reads: “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love him and reveal myself to him.” Personal, Jesus and “him” that is, Jesus and me.

But that’s a problem: Did all of you of the female gender notice all those “him’s”? The problem of gender specific language was the central problem addressed in the new translation of the RSV. The NRSV translators changed the pronoun to the plural in order to make it gender inclusive. But in making it plural, they made it impersonal, not “Jesus and me” but “Jesus and us.”

Another option was to keep personal pronouns and alternate masculine and feminine. It would be: “He who has my commandments and keeps them, she it is who loves me, and he who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love her and reveal myself to him.” You can see why they rejected this option.

The other option was to make all the pronouns feminine singular. Notice how different it sounds: “She who has my commandments and keeps them, she it is who loves me, and she who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love her and reveal myself to her.” It’s better. But then, of course, all the men are left out and the saying becomes this thing between Jesus and women.

There is no perfect option. Among the options, the plural is best. But, in effect, we have to retranslate, as we hear it, into the singular, so that it refers to, yes, “me.” Personal, intimate, describing the relationship between Jesus and me. Ah there it is, personal and inclusive but really awkward. What matters is the wonder of the relationship: Jesus loves me.

Now we encounter another puzzle. What does it mean when Jesus says, “she/he who has my commandments and keeps them.” One meaning is “to obey” or “to do.” The one who has my commandments and obeys, **does** them. But “keeps” also means “to hold, treasure.” It then would refer to holding his commandments in your heart, as in, for example, Grace by Heart!

Jesus clearly intends to include this meaning of “to keep,” because of his description of the Holy Spirit: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” To paraphrase, the Holy Spirit will teach us and enable us to remember all that Jesus taught us. When you see and hear the Grace by Heart community telling the Scriptures, it is the Holy Spirit that is reminding them of the words that God has spoken to us in the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit is the spiritual power that enables us to keep, hold, and treasure Jesus’ commandments.

So let’s do a little Holy Spirit exercise. Let’s learn this little piece of Jesus’ words so that we can remember, obey, and keep them in our heart. And let’s do a little fiddling with the translation. I’ll say “she/he” as in “She/he who has my commandments...” All of the women will say back and remember, “She who has my commandments...” and the men will say and remember “He who has my commandments...” “She/he who has my commandments and keeps them, she/he it is who loves me, and she/he who loves me will be loved by my father and I will love her/him and reveal myself to her/him.”

That is, Jesus loves me.

A little more about this keeping business. Keeping Jesus’ words in your heart is a way of loving Jesus. The “love” relationship with Jesus is a precious gift. If you ask Jesus to come into your heart and dwell there, he will do it. This personal relationship with Jesus is essentially your decision. You can enter that relationship or not. As he says later in this discourse, “She/he who does not love me does not keep my words.” That is, the person who doesn’t love Jesus doesn’t keep Jesus’ words.

The relationship is voluntary. It’s your call. Love is an option, a spirit. But a sign of one who does not love Jesus is that she/he does not keep Jesus’ words. That one, that she or he or you, doesn’t walk Jesus’ walk and does not hold onto and remember Jesus’ words. A way of loving Jesus is then to love Jesus’ words.

And what are Jesus’ commandments? His new commandment is, “Love one another.” As he says later in this last talk with his disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this that one would lay

down one's life for one's friends." So you are Jesus' friend and Jesus laid down his life for you, his friend.

And this is the source, the inspiration for us to love one another: that we love one another as Jesus has loved us. It is Jesus' commandment.

We just came back on Tuesday from the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Boston, my fortieth year of annual attendance at SBL. Great time! Lots of friends. And a great paper by a young scholar, Arthur Wright, on John 14. He compared John's description of "my Father's house" with the household imagery of the Roman empire.

In Roman ideology the emperor was father of the Roman family. Julius Caesar, for example, was given the name by the Roman Senate, *pater patriae*, "father of the fatherland." The emperor was the father of the empire and the father was the head of a Roman family. It was a hierarchical family, the father at the head, the mother second in rank, the children ranked by birth order, and the slaves. The responsibility of the lower levels of the household was loyalty and obedience to the *pater*, the father.

We are rapidly becoming a hierarchical community in the United States with more and more distance between the very wealthy and the rest of us. And the tax plan being considered in Congress will only further extend that distance.

By contrast, in Jesus' household everybody is equal, equally blessed, and equally loved. "The Father" is God. Jesus is the Son, and the Holy Spirit the Advocate and friend. In Jesus' household, believers abide in an egalitarian relationship of love with and for one another.

The sign of this equality was Jesus washing the disciples' feet, taking the role of the slave. And the household of the father is a mutual indwelling of love and peace. Our home is not up in heaven. Jesus and the Father will move down and move into our home here and now. Jesus and the Father want to come and live in your home, in a household of peace.

Jesus' peace that he leaves with those who love him is not a peace that the world gives. It is not dependent on political power or the vagaries of relations between the nations (a peace that is often established by warfare and conquest). This is the spiritual problem of peacemaking. It is always incomplete. There is always violence and warfare. But Jesus' peace is not a peace that is dependent on what happens in the world. It is an indwelling peace that Jesus gives to each person who abides in his love.

Where then do we go to participate in Jesus' love? We don't have to go anywhere. It is available here and now. All we have to do is to open our hearts to receive Jesus' love that is offered to us free. So where is heaven? Right here. Where is Jesus' family, his little children? Right here. And his commandment is that we love one another. That is our witness; that is how people will know that we are Jesus' disciples—if they see that we have love for one another.

How then do you enter into this intimate love relationship with Jesus? You ask him to come into your heart. You learn and keep his words. You live with him, invite him into your house. You love him and the Father and the Holy Spirit who will teach you and remind you of Jesus' words. That spirit is present when you remember and keep Jesus' words. That is the Holy Spirit enabling you to remember.

And what is his commandment? That you love one another. So where is Jesus' family? It is right here. How do we know about heaven? It is right here. This is what heaven will be like. And it is now. The theological term for this is *realized eschatology*. Realized eschatology means the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God that will be established in the last days is realized and experienced now, not just in the future.

John Wesley experienced this peace at the Aldersgate when he realized that he was justified by grace through faith. He felt his heart strangely warmed. We are named Grace because of that experience.

I too have experienced that love and grace in a very specific way. I was participating in an eight-day silent retreat at the Jesuit Renewal Center in Milford, Ohio. On Tuesday night I was praying in the chapel sitting on the floor to the left of the altar. I was in deep distress and anxiety. And I heard God say to me, "Tom, let me love you." So I stretched out on the floor. And I felt God's love washing over me like warm waves. And a feeling of peace began at my feet and gradually cell by cell moved up through my whole body. This went on for almost half an hour.

This love between Jesus and me has never left me. I do get discouraged and depressed with the slow progress of the Kingdom of God in the world. But this knowledge of God's love in Jesus is always with me.

That is what Jesus was talking about in his last words with the disciples before his crucifixion. We are all invited to be part of Jesus' household and to welcome him into our hearts and into our homes. He calls us "little children." It is as we live into his peace that we become children in the household of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Before we sing our closing hymn, I invite you to open your heart to receive Jesus' love and peace. If you would like to come forward and pray here at the altar, you are welcome. Or you can stand or sit where you are. Wherever you are, notice the love that is present in this household of faith. Let us abide in Jesus' love and keep his commandment to love one another.

Preached at Grace United Methodist Church on November 28, 2017