

Pentecost 12, Year B
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If we have any doubts as to what the Bible says on a topic, or which verse in the Bible carries more weight when we find conflicting statements, or what God might want us to do in a situation that is not addressed by the Bible, we have some clear, straightforward guidelines articulated by Jesus to help us resolve our dilemma. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus responded by saying: **“...‘you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”** In addition to this reply, known as the Summary of the Law, Jesus added a new commandment during the Last Supper with his disciples. He said, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”** Even if we come from no church background, or one that does not emphasize memorization of Bible verses, this is pretty simple and easy to remember. Easy to remember, of course, does not necessarily translate into easy to do, but we have been given clear instructions. The foundation of our attitudes and actions should be the same as what God has shown us: love.

What we should do as followers of Jesus and what we actually do are often at odds. This dissonance is noticed by others and is sometimes highlighted in our culture. Whether Christians are arguing over same sex marriage, racism, abortion, or why the poor are poor, as a group we are often seen as judgmental, hypocritical, and lacking in compassion. As Gandhi once observed, **“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”**

In our everyday lives you and I are called to behave in ways that are based in love, whether we are in the midst of ordinary stresses or great personal challenges. Such a calling takes a degree of patience, attentiveness, and loving kindness that is a challenge for mere mortals.

When we read Paul’s letter to the Ephesians it becomes evident that the gap between Jesus’ commandment and our behavior has been around as long as Christians. We are human; we fall short. We have plenty of room for improvement. While you and I have no direct responsibility for what other Christians choose to do, we are accountable for ourselves. The only way I can begin to live into Jesus’ command to love is to start with myself. I can choose to love because I am loved—loved by God. When I find myself challenged to love, or to do the loving thing, I can ask God to help me. There is a reason our baptismal vows repeatedly have us say, **“I will, with God’s help.”** Doing as God would have us do requires a very humbling amount of assistance from God. We

are human and experience human emotions. That is normal and natural. What we do with those feelings, however, involves choice. That is why Paul says, **“Be angry, but do not sin.”** It is not a sin to feel angry. Sometimes anger is a normal, healthy, appropriate response. Jesus got angry. He flipped over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple and chased them out with a whip. He chastised the Pharisees for their hardness of heart. We can be angry for good reason. What we choose to do with our anger is a matter of faith, for we are called to live what we say we believe.

Paul exhorts us to **“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”** There is a difference between telling the truth in love and being nice. Nice is what we are when we are socially polite and pleasant. Being nice while anger or hurt festers is not constructive to building Christ centered relationships. Loving is what we seek when we speak the truth in a way that people can hear. We are called to show loving kindness, saying what needs to be said so that others can receive it. Rumi, a Persian poet and mystic, is one of several people who have given voice to how we might consider our words before we speak:

**Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates:
At the first gate, ask yourself “Is it true?”
At the second gate ask, “Is it necessary?”
At the third gate ask, “Is it kind?”**

Whether we start with addressing our own behavior, such as Paul's admonition that we speak the truth in a way that shares God's grace, or we respond with kindness and compassion to those in need, there are plenty of opportunities to live in love. In Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers*, the author highlights just how much practice it takes to get really, really good at something. Whether it is creating operating platforms for computers; or becoming a first rate musician, an elite athlete, or a grandmaster in chess; an enormous amount of time and commitment is involved. **"The emerging picture...is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything."** Gladwell translates that into taking about ten years of intense practice, even for someone who appears to have a fair degree of innate talent.

While God's redeeming love to us is a gift, living out a loving response on our part requires the same basic element: practice. Perhaps that is why intentional engagement in our faith is called spiritual practice. Like a doctor, dentist, or lawyer—who are the subject of jokes because they have a 'practice'—we are called to bring our gifts, skills, training and full attention to doing what we are called to do to the best of our ability. Like becoming a student by starting the first day of school, or becoming a parent by virtue of having a child, we become a Christian by baptism. Then we need to live into what it means to be a student, a

parent, or a Christian. That means we need a lot of help along the way, and that we have ongoing opportunities to grow and learn. If we are to be faithful Christians, we need to live into the commandment that Jesus gave us to love, or as St.

Augustine so aptly quipped, “...**make sure that your life sings the same tune as your mouth.**” If I am going to sing anywhere near in tune with God’s call to love, I need to be part of a community that is seeking to do the same thing. Here, with you, is where I come to learn, to practice love in community, and to be renewed by God’s tangible presence in the Eucharist and in God’s people. Here is where we come, like athletes to a training center, so that we can go out and engage that practice again in the world. We cannot do this by ourselves. The good news is that we do not need to do this by ourselves. With the grace of God and the company of one another, we will have an abundance of opportunities to, as Paul says, “**be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love....**” This might not mean that we will find ourselves miraculously transformed into people who find it easy to love our neighbors as ourselves, but it could mean that with prayer and faithful practice we, as Christians, will be much more like our Christ.

Amen