**May 6, 2018**

**John 15:9-17; 1 John 5:1-8**

In this Eastertide, you know who you are and whose you are (a beloved child of the Triune God’s), and you know what you have been told from the beginning (you were created good, named and claimed, and called to discipleship). You will conquer the world with your faith, as John wrote here. There’s no need to panic or argue. Just do what you are supposed to do. Live your faith. Follow Christ. As Jesus said, the greatest commandments are this: to love God and love one another. It seems so simple.

But then someone dares to ask, “how?” How should we love God? And one person responds, “We should love God by building beautiful houses of worship -- great cathedrals with pipe organs, choirs, robes of gold, and candles and incense.” But another responds, “No! We should love God outdoors, in forests and on the beach, wearing our dirty, sweaty clothes and hearing only the roar of the wind and water.” Someone else responds, “You’re missing the point! We love God by serving Communion with wine in one common cup, looking one another in the eye, and touching one another’s hands, just as Jesus did.” Then another one disagrees, saying that “we should serve Communion to people wherever they are, so that they remember how Jesus comes to each of us, wherever *we* are.”

And then the question comes to how shall we love *one another*? Shall we hold all life sacred, never fighting or killing or ending a life (however young or old) by our own means – in war or peace, in prison or hospital? Or shall we stand up for our values, willing to end someone’s life in order to save another? Shall we feed one another with the food they want, rather than the food they need? Shall we clothe one another with the best we can afford, or our hand-me-downs that will do just fine, investing the money saved to care for others in need in other ways?

The devil is in the details. Despite John’s insistence that following God’s commandments is not a burden, many would argue that following God and obeying God’s will is quite difficult, for it is never done in a vacuum. No one person decides by themselves how God or others are best loved. It’s a communal conversation. We decide together, as we read the Bible, and as we talk and come to know one another. And we know that God is present anytime two or more of us are gathered; we lean into that belief, trusting that answers will come to our questions when we are gathered together. But we also know that anytime two or more of us are gathered, there will be two or more opinions about what that answer is. We each bring a nuanced idea of who God is, and what God is calling us to do and be. This difference of opinion can be a burden for any person or community, for it would be nice if we could just cut through the chatter and get right down to an answer. The time and energy spent discerning what and how to follow God wears us down.

And yet, *not* following God can be even more burdensome. To go your own way, even if it isn’t a path of murder and destruction, is to spend all of your time pushing against God’s tide of love. You will work hard to get yourself somewhere that you don’t need to be. You will bring sin and trouble into your life and the world’s. You might think that you don’t need God’s input or help, but you are asking for serious trouble if you do not follow wherever God leads. Just doing your best won’t take you where you need to be. You must have God, and you must have love. Saint Augustine was thinking of this very dilemma when he wrote, “With love, the faith of a Christian, without love, the faith of a devil.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The practice of following God’s will and keeping God’s commandments is as important for us individually as it is for congregations. Without intentionally remembering God’s will and practicing discipleship, church communities easily find themselves lost in a forest of self-indulgent tangents. One of the signs that we may have moved away from God’s will is if we feel “stuck” or as though we are depleting ourselves without being renewed and re-energized.

Our Mission Study writing task force read Joan Grey’s Sailboat Church last year. In it, Grey differentiates between rowboat churches and sailboat churches.

“Rowboat churches do what they can with the resources they have. [like money, wisdom, energy, people, and facilities] In a time when church was a respected fixture of our culture and a major center of community life, this approach often took the church a long way. Today, however, many rowboat churches are finding that rowing is not getting them where they want to go. And this is painful… Sailboats, however, operate under the power of God’s Spirit, as Sailboats run under the power of wind… The boat has sails spread wide, allowing the wind of the Spirit to move the church where God wants it to go. It is God-powered.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

As Grey suggested, in this current post-Christendom age, many of us -- older adults especially – remember the days when our hard work would earn the church “success” in terms of large Sunday School classes and committee participation numbers and such. But over the last 20-30 years, we have watched the church slowly drift away from the mainstream of culture. People no longer prioritize church attendance in their weekly schedules. Businesses, athletic, civic, and social organizations compete for our members’ time. Slowly and surely, being a member of a church has become **burdensome** according to society’s standards. We aren’t here doing only fun and people-pleasing things. We ask people to commit to financial and time and volunteer support, tithing as a sign of your spiritual life. Being a church member comes with responsibilities.

Church members experience the burden of responsibility when we must get up and get dressed and come to worship on Sunday mornings – a time when the rest of our neighbors seem to be going to the beach or visiting their favorite coffee shop or staying in their pajamas to do the *Times* crossword puzzle. We experience the burden of church membership when we travel from work to a weekday church committee or Session meeting, cutting into our precious down time at home. We experience the burden when we don’t do exactly what our first choice would be, but we pause and consider “what would God have us do?”

When other people say that they don’t have time for church, or they don’t need church, or that they are “spiritual, but not religious” – because they don’t want anyone to tell them who God is or how to follow God – we are reminded why church could seem burdensome. Perhaps it would be easier to go alone. Maybe we even wonder why we hold onto this “burden.”

There is a need for resilience among Christ’s disciples. For the road to discipleship is long and winding path to eternal life. Journeys of this magnitude bring blisters and creaky knees, tired backs and swollen joints. We need all the help we can get, and must be on a constant watch for the distractions and tangents that will take us away from God. We need to be mindful of our resources on hand, and how we are spending them.

The early church never used a rowboat (big or small) as a symbol of the church; they always used a sailboat. Congregations who follow this model, then, don’t focus on their own abilities or lack thereof (thinking only of their fatigue or failure or limitations); they focus on discerning God’s will and adjusting the sail to properly catch God’s power and direction.

As John wrote in this epistle, love is the force that we feel when our boat moves. Love is the sign of God at work. When we love, we are using the love given to us. When love guides our actions, we are sharing the power of Christ with others.

Love is really nice. We all want a little more of it in our lives. (It’s what the world wants, right?) But that doesn’t mean it’s easy to love. Loving can be at the heart of the Christian burden.

Fighting racism is a loving act. It takes self-awareness and courage to point out harmful behaviors in yourself and others. Ask any BlackLivesMatter activist – fighting racism can be burdensome; it would be easier to go along with whatever system is in place and keep to your people – whatever color they are.

Living a chaste life is a loving act. It takes commitment and a belief that your body is precious and deserving of a dedicated, loving partner. Chastity can be burdensome… and even boring. It would be easier to follow your whims wherever they take you.

Reusing shopping bags is a loving act. It takes some organization and community involvement to love the earth and be good stewards, as God intended us to be. Recycling and reusing can be burdensome. It would be easier if we never had to change our old, trashy habits.

It can be such a hassle to love God and love one another. It can feel burdensome to follow God’s commandments. As Jesus himself must have thought about his own sacrifice and its worth when he followed God’s commands to death on the cross. He set the bar pretty high: “No one has greater love than this: to lay down one’s life for their friends.”

Today we will gather around the Table which Jesus hosts for us because we need him. The burden we placed on him is far higher than any burden ever given to us. In these moments before the feast, let us each consider the personal burdens we carry, remembering the sacrifice Christ made for us, and the responsibility of attending such a feast. May we find here the greatest love, so that our own lives may be transformed, and we might indeed be able to love others, unburdened.

1. Augustine, Homilies on the First Epistle of John,” 10.2 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gray, Joan. Sailboat Church. WJK Press, 2014. Intro pages xi-xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)