

What's Love Got To Do With It? A Love That Commands!

John 15:9-17

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

1 John 5:1-6

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.

A few years ago I phoned a friend of mine. When he answered he said "Word up?" "New slang-speak" I thought to myself. This is the same friend who casually introduced me to such immortal phrases as "My bad" and "That's totally radical!" Now, I no longer pride myself in being "with it," but I do know that "radical" is a word used by people over 30 in an attempt to sound cool, but usually results in just the opposite. But I love language and "Word up" was a new one on me. So when I got off the phone, I googled the phrase and it referred me to "The Urban Dictionary." It's one of those open sites where people can add their own definitions. The word of the day was "meanderthal." That's what you call those people who wander around aimlessly and always seem to get in your way in stores or on the highway, chatting on their cell phones and paying no attention to their surroundings. "Meanderthal." "Sweet!" I thought, so I looked around. This is not a website for children, I discovered. The urban language of the streets is pretty rough. I found out what I already knew: I'm not "with it" at all. I'm a geezer and totally unfresh. I learned a smokeapotamus is a person who smokes too much. That "When someone unexpectedly tells you they love you, out of the blue when you least expect it and are not prepared to respond, "they've dropped the L-bomb."

A “two-bulb” is a police car.

For the fun of it, I looked up Methodist and was relieved by what I found. Methodist, in the Urban Dictionary, is “A Christian denomination started by John Wesley. He believed in bringing the church to the people, and accepting all people. That’s why there’s an ‘open table’ policy when it comes to communion. Anyone is allowed to take communion in the Methodist church no matter what church they belong to. It’s just a really great organization.” Then I looked up “Baptist.” That’s a whole different story. “Word up,” it turns out, can be either a question, meaning “What’s up?” or an exclamation, meaning “Absolutely true!” The phrase has since morphed into a simple “Word!”

Language is always changing. It’s a living thing. Always tricky, too, because communication gets garbled so easily. You remember the remark attributed to State Department spokesman Robert McCloskey during the Vietnam War? “I know that you believe that you understood what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.” Sometimes, getting our thoughts down from our heads, up from our hearts, out through our mouths, in through their ears and up to their heads without total obfuscation is nearly impossible to do.

But as I perused the Urban Dictionary I found one word that hasn’t had its meaning changed or been combined with another word in order to mean something totally different. That word is “commandment.” People still know what that means. It’s a mandate. An order. It means “I’m not messing around. I mean business. Do it! Do it now!” If we were one of Christ’s disciples and we tried to play dumb, asking Jesus “Hey. What does love have to do with it anyway?” Jesus makes it very clear: “This is my commandment, that you love one another.”

When Jesus spoke these words, people knew he wasn’t messing around. Which means Jesus wasn’t “skitssin” or “acting the fool” to get attention. He was serious: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Oh, if only we could love in isolation. Wouldn’t that be sweet? But in order to love, we’ve got to be in relationship. That’s a toughie. In order to love, we’ve got to be in community – not be alone. And that’s what a church is intended to be: a loving community. A loving community that prepares us to share God’s love in the world. The reality is that when Jesus commands us to love, we’re being commanded to be in meaningful, committed relationship with others. God knows that we cannot love and stand apart from others. Jesus commands us to live for

others, and this is where I think we've lost the meaning of the word "love." I'm not so sure we take our mandate to be church, a loving community, that seriously these days.

A headline in the satirical publication, *The Onion*, got my attention a few years ago: "More Kids Being Home-Churched." It said: "A new trend in the religious upbringing of children has recently emerged in the heart of the Bible Belt. 'Home-churching,' the individual, family-based worship of Jesus Christ, is steadily gaining in popularity, as more parents seek an alternative to what they consider the overly humanist content of organized worship."

I know it's simply humor poking fun at the home-school movement, but I think there's a grain of truth here. In our hyper-individualistic age we have reduced faith to a personal spiritual quest without relationship, without community, without accountability, without a sense of interdependence, full of righteousness but devoid of love. People will tell you they are "spiritual, but not religious." People will tell you they don't belong to any "organized religion," which means, of course they belong to a "disorganized religion." People think they can please God without connecting with God's people, a belief I'm sure God doesn't believe in.

The Bible will have none of this isolationism. God created us for relationship and we are incomplete without each other. We cannot even see ourselves apart from our relationships – they are a mirror to our true selves. And what God intended and Jesus commanded is that we are here on this earth to learn how to love and you don't learn how to love in isolation. That's why Christ calls us to be church. The church is not a place where individuals make their private spiritual quests; the church is where we help one another follow Christ together. And what is this prime commandment we are supposed live by and to teach the whole world? "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is how Christ designed it: that together we should be the children of God in one family, that our covenant with Christ would lead us to form relationships of mutuality and accountability, so we might grow to be more loving. This love is not the romantic warm fuzzy feeling you get inside. Neither is it a casual wish that all will be well, a benign absence of malice, but the active love of caring involvement. It is the tough love of real relationship which comforts but also confronts, which respects personal freedom but also engages in mutual encouragement. It is the bonded relationship the Bible calls "covenant." Anybody with a spouse or partner, anybody with a family knows love isn't easy. It means conflict sometimes. It means forgiveness and reconciliation often. And it

won't work if you just walk away when it doesn't feel good and hope everything will work out okay.

Love. Covenant. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Words I hope we still understand. There are two great lessons about love. The first is that God will not rest until we have been re-made in the image of God's love. Love is relentless because its source is God. And God will undo everything we think is right until love is all that's left.

Thomas Shafer is a United Methodist pastor in Texas. He tells the story of a woman in a colleague's congregation. This woman was wealthy, talented, successful and intelligent. She was also a deeply committed Christian. She was a tither. She wanted people to know Jesus Christ. There was one problem, however. She was also a hard-core racist. The love of God had not cracked her deep prejudice. She told her pastor that she had never touched a black or Asian person, even to shake hands, and she had no intention of doing so in the future.

Then, in response to a call from her pastor, she went on a mission trip to Jamaica. One of the stops was at an orphanage in a poor, remote corner of the island. The director of the orphanage told the incredible story of a little girl named Fine. As a toddler Fine had been abandoned by her parents in the bush. She was left there to die, but somehow she survived. She was found by some people who brought her to the orphanage. Now she was fourteen years old, but because of the lack of proper nutrition she was barely four feet tall. Because of the lack of contact with human beings, she was just beginning to talk. She was only able to communicate by using harsh, guttural sounds.

The woman took in all of this with her mind, but she was feeling a great conflict inside herself. She was almost physically ill when she compared her wealth to the poverty of the children around her. She knew that she would return to her plush hotel, but the children would likely remain there the rest of their lives. This woman walked onto the porch of the orphanage to sort out her emotions when, suddenly, she realized she was not alone. She turned and saw Fine. Their eyes met, and Fine simply lifted up her arms in the air to be held.

And something in the woman began to melt. All of her faith, all that she believed about the love of God in Christ Jesus came into direct conflict with her bigotry. Hardly realizing what she was doing, she reached down to the child, lifted her up, wrapped her arms around her and rocked her. The child probably wondered why this well-dressed American woman was sobbing.

From that time on, that woman began to walk a different road. Her attitudes and her actions began to reflect the love of Christ more than the hatred of humanity. A few weeks later, when she returned from her trip, she realized that

Jesus had torn down the walls, expanded her vision of life, and enlarged her compassion to include neighbors she never knew she had. Love had found a way.

But there is a second lesson to be learned from this Scripture. If we learn to love others, it will help us to know and love God. John Frederick Oberlin, a Protestant pastor of a French village church, one morning rescued a Jewish peddler from a threatening mob. Taking him home, the minister placed him at the table with the rest of the family. That evening, the Catholic priest came in for a chat, and three of them – the Protestant minister, the Catholic priest and the Jewish peddler – sat before the fire.

The mood of the evening was mellow, and the priest turned to the minister and said, “How I wish, my friend, that you and I were of the same religion.” John Oberlin was silent for a moment, and then putting one arm around the Catholic and the other around the Jew, he said something quite uncharacteristic of that day and age, “Those who love are of the same religion.” For love is our greatest commandment.

Love is deep. Love is wide. Love is long. Love is strong. Love transforms and love reforms. And because it is from God, it never ends. Those who love discover that the source of love is God. Those who love are able to see beyond our differences to discover that in loving, we become closer to God, more like God, and more obedient to Christ’s commandment. This commandment takes us beyond ourselves, beyond the walls we erect, beyond what society tells us we should do or be or think or believe. We are commanded to love because love alone shakes us free of our worst selves and brings us into the presence of God. Love has everything to do with you and me.

Word Up, people! There’s nothing ambiguous about this commandment. What is it that we don’t understand? We are to love one another. But love never ends there: we are to love those we’ve been taught are unlovable. We are to not to stand off to one side, apart from others, as if we’re somehow better than “them.” We’re to open ourselves to the challenge and pain of relationship – not only with family or like-minded friends, not only with those we may fear, dislike and avoid, but ultimately with God.

And so I ask you, will you love? Jesus said: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus made love “non-optional.” We understand the language, right? By what will you, as individuals, be known in this community? Will you be known for your love and your compassion and your kindness? Will you known for your ability to see beyond differences? And will we love? By what will we as a church be known in Grand Rapids? Will we be known for our love not just for each other here, but for all people in this area, city and county? Do we reach out beyond these walls, through outreach and mission,

to transform this community? Love must be our distinguishing mark, and we must strive to be known through our love. For they'll know we are Christians by our love – and only by our love – or we'll not be worth knowing at all.