

Commanded to Love

John 15:9-17

May 5, 2024

First Presbyterian, Luling

Here's something I'm not good at: giving presents. I'm not great at receiving them either, but I really stink at giving gifts. I can be thoughtful in the ways I offer to help you, at least I hope so. This week I've helped one friend pack moving boxes, and helped another wash off her patio furniture and planters so she can move. That seems nice, even though I'm sad that both of them are leaving. But ask me to get a present for either one of these people, and I'm absolutely stuck. No ideas. I'm no better at Christmas or birthday gifts for our kids or Andy.

When we were dating and first married, Andy and I used to watch the cartoon "The Simpsons." It was then in its early years, too. In one episode, Homer, the husband, forgets that it's Marge's birthday and doesn't have a gift for her at all. He has ordered himself a bowling ball, though, complete with his name inscribed in it. It will have to do. He wraps it up and gives it to Marge, telling her that she can learn to bowl. It's an obviously self serving gift, because even if it weren't inscribed with his name, Marge doesn't like to bowl, and it will make its way back to Homer. Andy and I have both been guilty of "Homer's bowling ball" sorts of gifts over the years—gifts that we ourselves really like, but our spouse doesn't, gifts that eventually end up benefitting ourselves. Nothing so blatant as an engraved bowling ball, but we do get a good giggle from the phenomenon.

The alternative to hoping in vain that your loved one or friend uses their intuition to find the perfect gift for you is just to ask for it. There's also the buy-it-yourself option, but for now let's think about just asking for whatever it is you'd like to have but won't buy for yourself. Kids make wish lists for Santa at Christmas time. This is just the grownup version.

I don't know about you, but this just isn't satisfying, either as a gift giver or a gift receiver. Being told what to buy, then buying it and giving it somehow feels like cheating. As a gift giver, it feels good that I'm giving the person something they really want, but I still feel inadequate because I didn't think of this thing myself. And as a receiver, it feels like I could have just bought it for myself. Being essentially told to purchase something and give it as a gift doesn't feel anywhere near the same as doing it on my own, but then again, I stink at doing it on my own, so I'm stuck in a trap of bad gift giving.

Jesus *commanding* us to love feels sort of the same. Is it real love if I have to be commanded to do it? Is that somehow cheating? Wouldn't it be better if I conjured up love all on my own, without being told to do it? Wouldn't that love be more genuine?

Today's reading is the second time that Jesus has commanded the disciples to "love one another" as he has loved them. The first time was a couple of chapters before, right after he washed their feet (13:34-35). This is the only "commandment" that Jesus gives them in John—there are plenty of times he tells them to do something, like the "abide in my love" in verse 10 of today's reading, but this is the only thing that he identifies as a "commandment."<sup>1</sup>

If we think of love as only an emotion, floating around as a feeling, then being commanded to love is sort of contradictory. How can we be commanded to feel something? Think of how much you like it when someone commands you feel calmer by saying, "Calm down, would you?" I don't like that at all. In fact, it usually backfires, and I become less calm. Commanding emotions is not how humans work.

A couple of things about this. First thing is that love is not only a feeling. Yes, it is a feeling, but that's not all it is. Love is also an ethic, a way to approach the world, that is expressed in concrete actions. It may be expressed in gifts, however imperfectly, like Homer's bowling ball gift to Marge. Jesus suggests, or really just tells the disciples, what love's actions look like. "Love one another" looks like kneeling and washing someone else's feet, an act of service. Here, he says that "love one another" is even more self-sacrificing. Love is "laying down one's life for one's friends." Love's actions are focused on the one who is loved, not the one doing the loving. Love's actions are not unconnected from emotions, but love's actions have to go well beyond what our feelings would have us do. Love's actions are a conscious choice to give up something, even our lives, on account of another. That's pretty intense. And it has to be commanded, because otherwise it's not something humans will willingly do very often, serve and sacrifice at the risk of our own lives. At the cross, Jesus shows us the ultimate action of love.

In the year 125, a Greek philosopher names Aristides was describing Christians to the Roman Emperor. He said a few things pertinent to the "love one another" topic: "They love one another. They never fail to help widows. They save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something, they give

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-john-159-17-3>

freely to the one who has nothing...And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food.”<sup>2</sup> That’s what “love one another” in action.

But love’s actions are not separate from love’s emotions. We learn to love by performing loving actions, as a discipline, without being necessarily prompted by our feelings, but by our obedience to Jesus’s command. We sacrifice and lay down our lives for our friends, and that transforms our hearts to be more loving. We love and become more loving, which in turn leads us to more loving actions. That’s why we need a command, to work within us and open our hearts to transformation, so that we can be the Christians that Aristides describes, and more importantly, so that we can be the disciples that Jesus calls us to be, disciples who love one another.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apology\\_of\\_Aristides](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apology_of_Aristides)