
Live and Love

John 14:15–24

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 14, 2020 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

You can do this!
You have all that you need.
In fact, because you have what you need, you will get even more.
You are not like other people; there is something special about you.
Really, you can do this.

What is all this? Advertising cliches? Instagram encouragement? Mindless fluff or maybe gospel truth?

The reading from the gospel of John today is part of the Farewell Discourse, in which Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure. Jesus knows what the disciples do not yet know, that he would soon be dying, leaving them to carry on without his physical presence. Presumably, he knows that the disciples will be distressed and anxious facing an unknown future. Perhaps he knows that some will weep, others doubt, and more will walk away. He knew they would need help to keep faith and to move forward. So, in the Farewell Discourse, Jesus is not only informing his disciples of what will come, he works to encourage and inspire them.

I will not leave you orphaned.
Because I live, you also will live.
Those who love me will be loved.

This is gospel truth according to the book of John.

The passage for today begins with a reference to love. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) and later “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father.” (John 14:21) These are conditional statements in here, which point to the need to keep commandments. Conditional statements are not particularly encouraging as they often sound more contractual than affirming. Further, the notion of “commandments” is not one we readily associate with inspiration. And we wonder what commandments are referenced here.

The gospel of John is not one with a lot of specifics. Unlike the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, there is no call to go the second mile, turn the other cheek, or render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. Instead, in John we hear Jesus say, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13: 34) and later he said, “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.” (John 15:12-13)¹ The way to show our love for Jesus is to love one another.

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, WorkingPreacher.org, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=69

It is tempting to think that this commandment is, if not easy, at least familiar. After all, we know something about love because we love our family and we love our friends. We know that loving those near and dear to us can be demanding and frustrating at times, and yet we also know such love can be rewarding and beautiful. This is one dimension of love, but sometimes we are pointed to a more challenging type of love.

Mahatma Gandhi, in working for the independence of India, pointed to the value of a love which went well beyond family and friends. As he instructed others to work for independence, he said:

“With truth for sword, he needs neither steel nor gunpowder. He conquers the enemy by the force of the soul, which is Love. Its test is not to be found among friends. There is neither newness, or merit nor yet effort in a friend loving a friend. It is tested when it is bestowed on the so-called enemy; it then becomes a virtue, there is effort in it, it is an act of ... real bravery. We can adopt this method toward the Government and doing so, we should be in a position to appreciate their beneficial activities and with greater ease correct their errors because we should draw attention to them not in anger but in Love. Love does not act through fear. There can, therefore, be no weakness in its expression. A coward is incapable of exhibiting Love, it is the prerogative of the brave.”²

Gandhi points us beyond our immediate circle, and challenges us to a courageous love. Jesus does something different. Instead of using human interactions as the starting point he uses Divine love as the model. Our lessons about love come not from our immediate circumstances; our lessons come from the example of Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth wrote “We do not know what love is and we do not know what freedom is; but God is love and God is freedom. What freedom is and what love is, we have to learn from [God].”³ God’s love is freely, generously, and completely given for the good of the other. That is what we see in Jesus Christ, and that is the love that is our example. This is a love that goes beyond what is comfortable and easy. And it is a love that is so needed in our world today.

When the pandemic started, we heard stories of singing from balconies and enjoyed poetry and music shared online. While uplifting stories are still being told, we now hear more stories of protests turning ugly and conflict among leaders. As our community strain continues on and on, and more needs are evident, our call, as followers of Jesus Christ, is to respond with love. Our command is to love and to do so generously, freely, bravely. To do so with words and deeds, in private and in public life.

I can’t help but think of an old song: “What the world needs now is love sweet love.” I would be tempted to sing it, but that would clear out the sanctuary. Oh, wait. The sanctuary is already empty. Does that mean I should sing? No, definitely not!

² Andrews, ed. *Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi*, p. 392, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/speeches&writingsofmg.pdf>

³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 39

While we know we are commanded to love, if we are honest with ourselves, we know we are not always good at it. We can be short-tempered with those who are closest to us and we are limited in our vision as to how to reach out beyond our small circles. The good news is that we are not on our own. John tells us that Jesus will send us another Advocate, the Spirit of Truth, who will dwell with us and in us. Further, Jesus assures us that just as he is in the Father and the Father is in him, so Jesus will be in us and we in him. There is a unity and interconnection that is promised to the disciples. One scholar is bold to even claim that while the Trinity points to the interconnection of God the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, this passage seems to say that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are drawn into the midst of the Trinity. “In John, Jesus insists that the intimate relationship that exists between him, God, and the Spirit also includes believers.”⁴ You can’t get any closer to God than that.

If we are so drawn into the circle of God’s Trinitarian love, then we are able to love, not on our own strength, but by the working of God within us. St. Augustine claims that love separates the saints from the world. He writes, “The saints are distinguished from the world by that love which makes the one-minded to dwell [together] in a house. In this house Father and Son make their abode, and impart that very love to those whom They shall also honor at last with this promised self manifestation.”⁵ In other words, those who have heard the commandments are drawn into relationship with God, dwelling together with God, and are given God’s own love and presence. We can do this because it is God’s work within us.

All of this is made possible, because Jesus lives. Our Lord’s earthly life was full of wonders and grace, and his earthly life, like all human life, was always going to be finite. The resurrection appearances of Jesus were miraculous, causing many to rejoice and believe. These resurrection appearances did not continue indefinitely. Instead, we see a gift in the post-resurrectional period in which “union with Jesus ... was not permanently dependent on bodily presence.”⁶ According to one author, “the appearances are not an end in themselves; they initiate and point to a deeper type of presence.”⁷ Jesus said, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” (John 14:20) Dwelling with the Holy brings forth life. Jesus said, “because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:19) While we often think of this promise as pointing to life after death, it also speaks to us now. We live now, truly live now, because Jesus lives.

Our Lord’s promise is true. He said “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.” (John 14:18) Irrespective of how we may feel in any given moment, the truth is that Jesus has not left us orphaned. We are not alone. More than that. More than not being alone, we are so bound together within the wonder of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that we abide in God and God abides in us. A wondrous union with the Holy One. This promise is not only for some far off time, but it is also a promise for today. It is not as if God is holding something back now to give us later. No, God has already given us everything: God’s own self. God’s divine presence. Freely given love.

So you see, we have what we need.
We can do this.

⁴ Jaime Clark-Soles, WorkingPreacher.org, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=69

⁵ Augustine, Tractate 76:2, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701076.htm>

⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, p. 646

⁷ *Ibid*, p.646

No matter what we face, we can live and love today, in ways that are courageous and generous. We can do this, because of what God has already done for us.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.