

## “Connected in Love”

John 15:9-17

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May 17, 2009

In the gospel of John, Jesus constantly redefines and pushes the envelope of our concept of God. Here Jesus refers to God as “Father” which is a family term. Although others in the time of Jesus used that term “Abba” it was very different from the more “holy” and “high religious” language often used to describe God.

Furthermore, in the text Jesus expands concepts by using the term “friend”. *“You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends.”*

Again this was not unique. Other Jewish group leaders employed a similar concept but such a concept was

pushing the envelope. In that society there were clear boundaries between husband and wife, parents and children, King and subjects, and teacher and students. It was very much NOT like our time when many boundaries have been softened or eliminated. In other words, in those times and in much of human history a student would not formally evaluate a teacher and even if there was some kind of evaluation it did not count for much. So this was a different concept in the time of Jesus and John.

-1-

The problem with this today is that we so comfortable with referring to God as “Father” or “Mother” and Jesus as “friend” that we may need a counter-balance. Is God really our “pal” or is God “Lord”---there is a difference. Perhaps we have moved very much to the concept that God is OUR

Friend and our Servant whose total desire is to provide us what we want and desire. Jesus becomes our “pal”.

The task is to restore a healthy balance between the concepts of friend, Father, and so forth and the idea of Jesus as Lord. We have over the centuries gained some valuable insights into relationships that need to be integrated into the text. Yet, ultimately our language needs to recognize that we follow God not God follows us.

-1-

One apparent problem could emerge when Jesus says, *“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.”*

This sounds a lot like “conditional” love. Jesus will love us IF WE KEEP HIS COMMANDMENTS just as God

loved Jesus IF Jesus kept God's commandments. We are very familiar with "conditional" love and in fact preach and practice conditional love all the time.

This is the kind of "love" that is at times at the heart of many relationships. Many relationships are conditional and this becomes even more so when there is an unbalance in power structures.

For instance in the relationship between employer and employee we may use the terms of "friend" but the reality is that the relationship continues or ends on the basis of whether the employee does what the employer wants. All around we have relationships that are conditional. I will love you as long as my needs are met and when they are not met---well I will search for another.

Conditional love is often the center of the church's message. We may say that "God Loves You" but then we

proceed to define the conditions of that love. Taking this verse we define the “commandments” that we must follow in order for God to love us.

That list can get pretty awesome. During a recent Presbytery meeting there was discussion of a language change in the Book of Order relating to ordaining persons into ministry. The older policy stated that a minister had to repent or not be engaged in any of the “sins” listed in the Book of Order. Of course the focus was on the gay issue. Yet, the presenter pointed out that there were a lot of sins that if the same standards that many were suggesting were to be applied it would mean that most ministers and elders in the Presbyterian Church would have to resign and leave. Sins like “charging interest or earning interest from accounts---usury” are among those listed in the historical Book of Order dating to John Calvin in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. I leaned over to Jim Collie, Executive Presbyter and asked

him just how many sins are we talking about? He replied without missing a beat, “296 sins at last count”. Conditional love gets us into a quick sand pit of contradictions, power issues, and in the end none of it comes out clean.

Is God’s love conditional or unconditional? Let us read on.

-2-

Jesus defines the commandment he is talking about. **“That you love one another as I have loved you.”** Love is the commandment that Jesus is referring to.

In the Letter of 1<sup>st</sup> John this idea is expanded. Listen to these words,

**“My dear friends, I am not writing to give you a new commandment. It is the same one that you were first given and it is the message you heard. But it really is a new commandment, and you know its true**

***meaning, just as Christ does. You can see the darkness falling away and the true light already shining.***

***If we claim to be in the light and hate someone, we are still in the dark. But if we love others, we are in the light.”<sup>1</sup>***

It is one thing to be connected it is another to be connected in “love”. Love is the defining term for our lives as Christians and our life and ministry as Church. Without love we truly are, as Paul says, “clanging gongs”.

-3-

So how are we doing? Are we loving one another as Christ Jesus loved us? The answer is “yes” and “no”.

The “no” is pretty obvious. There is so much hate, pre-judgment, violence, greed, and indifference within the

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<sup>1</sup> 1John 1:7-10b.

church. Congregations and members within congregations can at times be very judgmental and non-accepting in their attitudes toward others. When asked about torture a large majority of Christians responded that they were in favor of using torture. Many Christians support capital punishment even though our leader and founder, Jesus, was wrongfully executed.

The “no” challenges us to grow. The “yes” inspires us. Teresa Bell Kindred writes about “Random Acts of Love”. She writes, *“What if tomorrow morning when you got up instead of doing whatever it is that you usually do, you changed the world instead?.....As Christians we have an unlimited power supply in God, but often act as if we are afraid to pay our spiritual electric bill.”*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Random Acts of Love” by Teresa Bell Kindred. Found at [www.heartlight.org](http://www.heartlight.org).

Teresa continues, *“If we really and truly love others as ourselves, should we sit around and wait for them to ask us to do something for them? Or, if we see something that needs doing, should we plug into our spiritual source of power and just do it?”*

Where random acts of violence can discourage and frighten us---random acts of love can encourage and strengthen us. I can recall many random acts of love and kindness that were directed toward me. In each case the act was a surprise in one sense and in each case made my day better.

Think of how we feel when driving when someone cuts us off---pushes in ahead of us. Think also how we feel when the car pushes in front of us almost running us off the road and we see on their bumper a sticker saying “Jesus Loves You”.

Think of the difference we feel when we are driving and someone lets us into traffic or slows down so we can move over a lane to exit or does something else kind?

There was a movie awhile back titled “Pay It Forward” in which a small child began to do random acts of kindness for people. In each case the person was only asked that when the need was seen they were to do likewise. It is a touching movie about how acts of love can begin to change the world.

Teresa writes, *“Stop and think back over your day: Was there something you saw that needed doing but you passed it by because you were in a hurry? Was there an elderly neighbor who would have loved a ten-minute visit? Was there a child in the school yard, or at the park, who looked dejected and needed the comfort of a hug? Was there a young mother struggling at the grocery store with a cart full*

*of bags, a baby on one hip, and a crying toddler in the seat of the buggy?”*

Each day we are presented with opportunities to be connected with each other and with God through acts of love, kindness, gentleness, and grace. The little acts add up.

Many years ago I took a class where we called on a nursing home located in one of the poorest areas of Fort Worth, Texas. We were taking the class to practice what we had learned in pastoral care and to gain some experience. Every Monday afternoon we fanned out to three different nursing homes and visited people. Then we went back to our lives at the seminary.

Some of us were bothered by the disparity between the few minutes we spent with these persons and bleakness of the rest of their week. Dr. Kemp, a professor at the

seminary and teacher of the class told us something profound. He said that we do what we can and leave the rest in God's hands. Dr. Kemp said that perhaps that five to ten minutes on Monday was the highlight of that person's week. They could remember it all week and look forward with anticipation to the next Monday when someone would visit them. We love one act at time. When we love we are connected with each other and when we love we are connected with God---and we are friends with Jesus. Amen.