

# If You Love

By Debie Thomas. Posted 12 May 2019.

## For Sunday May 19, 2019

Lectionary Readings ([Revised Common Lectionary](#), Year C)

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

If you knew you were about to die, what would you tell the people you love? What cherished hope or dream would you share? What last, urgent piece of advice would you offer?

In our Gospel reading this week, we hear Jesus's answer to this difficult question. Judas has left the Last Supper in order to carry out his betrayal, the crucifixion clock is ticking fast and hard, and Jesus knows that his disciples are about to face the greatest devastation of their lives. So he gets right to the point. No parables, no stories, no pithy sayings. Just one commandment. One simple, straightforward commandment, summarizing Jesus's deepest desire for his followers: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

And then, right on the heels of the commandment, a promise. Or maybe an incentive. Or maybe a warning: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

May I take a moment here to point out what Jesus *doesn't* say? When death comes knocking, and the Son of God has mere hours left to communicate the heart of his message to his disciples, he doesn't say, "Believe the right things." He doesn't say, "Maintain personal and doctrinal purity." He doesn't say, "Worship like this or attend a church like that." He doesn't even say, "Read your Bible," or "Pray every day," or "Preach the Gospel to every living creature." He says, "Love one another." That's it. The last dream of a dead man walking. All of Christianity distilled down to its essence so that maybe we'll pause long enough to hear it. *Love one another.*

What's staggering about this commandment is how badly we've managed to botch it over the last two thousand years. New Testament scholar D.A. Carson names the irony this way: "This new command is simple enough for a toddler to memorize and appreciate, and yet it is profound enough that the most mature believers are repeatedly embarrassed at how poorly they comprehend it and put it into practice."

When I look at my own life, it's not too hard to name why I perpetually fail to obey Jesus's dying wish. Love is vulnerable-making, and I'd rather not be vulnerable. Love requires trust, and I'm naturally suspicious. Love spills over margins and boundaries, and I feel safer and holier policing my borders. Love

takes time, effort, discipline, and transformation, and I am just so darned busy.



And yet Jesus didn't say, "This is my suggestion." He said, "This is my *commandment*." Meaning, it's not a choice. It's not a matter of personal preference; it's a matter of obedience to the one we call Lord.

But what does it mean that Jesus *commands* us to love? Does love obey decrees? My guess is, most of us would say no. Shaped as we are by Hollywood, or Jane Austen novels, or romantic poetry, we usually think of love as spontaneous and free-flowing. We *fall* in love. Love is blind, it happens at first sight, it breaks our hearts, and its course never runs smooth.

Even if we put our culture's hokey clichés aside, we know that authentic love can't be manipulated, simulated, or rushed without suffering distortion. Those of us who have kids understand full well that commanding them to love each other never works. The most we can do is insist that they *behave as if* they love each other: "Share your toys." "Say sorry." "Don't hit." "Use kind words." But these actions — often performed with gritted teeth and rolling eyes — aren't the same as what Jesus is talking about.

Jesus doesn't say, "*Act as if* you love." He doesn't give his disciples (or us) the easy "out" of doing nice things with clenched hearts. (Nor would I want him to; nothing feels as hollow as a "loving" act performed mechanically. Moreover, I doubt that the people who flocked to Jesus would have done so if they sensed that his compassion was thin or forced.) He says, "*Love as I have loved you.*" As in, *for real*. As in, the whole bona fide package. Authentic feeling, deep engagement, generous action. Doesn't it sound like he's asking for the impossible?



Maybe he is. G.K Chesterton once wrote that "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried." Imagine what would happen to us, to the Church, to the world, if we took this commandment of Jesus's seriously? What could Christendom look like if we obeyed orders and cultivated "impossible" love?

I ask these questions fearfully, because I don't know how to answer them, even for myself. I mean, I know fairly well how to *do* things. I know how to make care packages for the homeless. Or bring dessert to the church potluck. Or send checks to my favorite charities. But do I know how to love as Jesus loved? To feel a depth of compassion that's gut-punching? To experience a hunger for justice so fierce and so urgent that I rearrange my life in order to pursue it? To empathize until my heart breaks? Do I *want* to?

Most of the time — I'll be honest — I don't. I want to be safe. I want to keep my circle small and manageable. And I want to choose the people I love based on my own affinities and preferences — not on Jesus's all-inclusive commandment. Charitable actions are easy. But cultivating my heart? Preparing and pruning it to love? Becoming vulnerable in authentic ways to the world's pain? Those things are hard. Hard and costly.

And yet this was Jesus's dying wish. Which means that we have a God who first and foremost wants every one of his children to feel loved. Not shamed. Not punished. Not chastised. Not judged. Not isolated. But *loved*.

But that's not all. Jesus follows his commandment with an exhilarating and terrifying promise: "*By this everyone will know.*" Meaning, love is the litmus test of Christian witness. Our love for each other is how the world will know who we are and whose we are. Our love for each other is how the world will see, taste, touch, hear, and find Jesus. It's through our love that we will embody Jesus, make Jesus relatable, possible, plausible, to a dying world.

I can't speak for you, but this makes *me* tremble. What Jesus seems to be saying is that if we fail to love one another, the world *won't* know what it needs to know about God, and in the terrible absence of that knowing, it will believe falsehoods that break God's heart. I.e: that the whole Jesus thing is a

sham. That there really is no transformative power in the resurrection. That God is a mean, angry, vindictive parent, determined only to shame and punish his children. That the universe is a cold, meaningless place, ungoverned by love. That the Church is only a flawed and hypocritical institution — not Christ's living, breathing, healing body on earth.



Such is the power we wield in our decisions to love or not love. Such are the stakes involved in how we choose to respond to Jesus's dying wish, hope, prayer, and commandment. Such is the responsibility we shoulder, whether we want to or not.

But here's our saving grace: Jesus doesn't leave us alone and bereft. We are not direction-less in the wilderness. He gives us a road map, a clear and beautiful way forward: "*As I have loved you.*" Follow my example, he says. Do what I do. Love as I love. Live as you have seen me live.

Weep with those who weep. Laugh with those who laugh. Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Welcome the child. Release the captive. Forgive the sinner. Confront the oppressor. Comfort the oppressed. Wash each other's feet. Hold each other close. Tell each other the truth. Guide each other home.

In other words, Jesus's commandment to us is not that we should wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that we're invited to abide in the holy place where all love originates. We can make our home in Jesus's love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence. Our love is not our own; it is God's, and God our source is without limit, without end. There are no parched places God will not drench if we ask.

"Love one another as I have loved you." For our own sakes. And for the world's.