

Living God's Word

John 14:15-22, 26-29

May 13, 2012

I.

Once again it's Sunday, and we gather as always to praise God and give thanks for the blessings we have received. And it's also Mother's Day, a special time when we honor those wonderful women through whom God's gift of our lives became manifest in the world. And we can look at Mother's Day from the perspective of both children and mothers.

A child's viewpoint might be reflected in the story of a teenage boy who came into the house totally famished, a familiar condition with teenage boys, and found his mother in bed not feeling well. He said, "Don't worry about dinner, Mom, I'll carry you down to the stove."

And from a mother's perspective, there probably were times when some moms felt like the woman who was asked if she still would have children if she had it to do all over again. "Of course," she replied, "just not the same ones."

But seriously, we do appreciate our mothers. We remember the sacrifices they made, especially when they were weary and tired. And we know they never would replace us with anyone else.

The celebration of Mother's Day leads into today's Gospel reading. Just as our mothers gave us worldly life, we will see that Jesus does the same for our spiritual lives.

II.

But before we get into Jesus words to his disciples, it could be helpful to review the setting in which he spoke. And it is a very familiar setting.

Today's reading occurred at the end of the Last Supper, after Jesus shared the Eucharist, after he washed the disciples' feet, and after Judas left the room for the ultimate betrayal. It's a small section of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" to his disciples that takes up four chapters of John's Gospel. If you have a red letter Bible, that's about the only color you see for many pages.

But today's reading is not out of sequence. It does not look back to Jesus' death and resurrection, or our services of Good Friday and Easter. Instead it looks forward to his ascension into heaven, which is observed next Thursday, and then to our celebration of Pentecost in two weeks.

At this point Jesus was reassuring his disciples about their future. He was preparing them for life after he was gone, and he offered a vision of the future shaped by God's promises. He called them to live lives based not on his absence, but rather on God's presence.

Today's Gospel could be treated as part of Jesus' last will and testament to those who had followed him from the hills and shores of Galilee on a remarkable journey that was about to end at a stark and dismal place outside of Jerusalem.

And that last will and testament contained three wonderful heavenly gifts given to the disciples, and through them to all humanity. The first was Jesus' instruction to keep his commandments, and the promise that he and the Father will dwell within those who do so.

The second was his revelation of the means to carry out his commandments through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who soon would be with them.

And the third was his assurance, by leaving his peace behind, that those who do God's will would never be separated from God's love in Jesus Christ. Let's look at how they apply to us.

III.

Jesus began by telling us that if we follow his commandments he will live in us and we in him. It's fairly simple. We might say that after all the preaching we have ever heard, this is the big-picture answer. Jesus said to love him and keep his word, and he will be part of our lives.

And in a world of theological complexities, in a time of division and controversy within the church, don't we want some clear answers, some central principles that are at the heart of it all?

Today's Gospel gives the formula. "Love me and keep my commandments" equals "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" If the people do "X," God will do "Y." X equals Y. That seems pretty straightforward, doesn't it?

Maybe not. As often is the case with Jesus' teachings, simple answers are not so simple as we put them into practice. When we look at the world, and at society, and even at the church, we see that this Gospel concept is not always a guiding principle in contemporary life.

And the problem seems to be with our part of the formula. The difficulty is with "X," loving Jesus and keeping his commandments. The part about "Y," Jesus being part of our lives, is trustworthy and reliable.

But how does that work? How do we love Jesus and keep his commandments? Do we scrunch up our eyes, clench our fists, grit our teeth, and just force all of that love to come out of us? Is following his teachings and commandments simply a matter of will power?

It mostly doesn't happen that way. We know the Christian life is not always easy or natural. On occasion we find that it takes an effort to overcome our worldly tendencies as we try to follow the path that Christ has laid out for us.

And being on that path means more than just having some abstract feeling of good will toward Jesus. He wants us to carry out those feelings in our lives. It means actually doing the things he taught us to do in the commandments he spoke of in today's reading.

So, what are Jesus' commandments? They are found throughout the Gospels, and are a little different from the Old Testament Ten Commandments, for example, which are very specific. We probably know, in our own minds, how we measure up to the Ten Commandments. Jesus' commandments, however, deal with attitudes of the heart rather than requirements of the law.

And you have heard many of them before. Let your light shine before others. Seek first the kingdom of God. Do not store up treasures on earth. Forgive others as God forgives you. Do not judge others. Remember him as we celebrate the Eucharist. Search and you will find.

IV.

And because of the spiritual nature of these commandments we know we cannot always follow them on our own. It is beyond our capabilities. We cannot be obedient in our own strength. This leads to the second gift Jesus mentioned in today's reading, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said the Father would send the Holy Spirit in his name to teach the disciples and remind them of all that he said. And since everything that Jesus ever said reflected the will of the Father, we therefore can look to the Spirit to guide us in discerning God's will for us now.

This is because God's revelation continues. The Holy Spirit came to continue to reveal God as first manifested by our Lord. The love of God made known two thousand years ago in Jesus Christ also is made known to us today through the Holy Spirit.

And so the Spirit not only preserved and gives life to Jesus' teachings until his coming again, but also is the source of new revelations in the name of the risen Lord as they might apply to us today. The Spirit reinforces Scripture, and strengthens us now in ways that are in continuity with Jesus' life and message.

V.

And Jesus' life and message is the foundation of the third gift in today's reading. He told the disciples that he would leave them, and therefore also leave us, with his peace. And he emphasized that his peace was not the world's peace. What does this mean?

The world's peace is comfort in material things. The world's peace is gratification and fulfillment resulting from our accomplishments, our possessions, and our struggles to get ahead. There is not necessarily anything wrong with that kind of peace as long as it is understood in perspective, but it was not what Jesus meant.

Jesus' peace is different. It is not about comfort in our homes or the avoidance of difficulties in life, but rather about confidence in God and the acceptance of God's love.

The peace Jesus left is reconciliation with God, something the world cannot give. His peace is not merely a good wish, or a cordial expression to have a nice day. He left an inward tangible peace that can be experienced, not merely observed. It comes from Jesus' union with the Father, and we are invited to share that union so God's love always will be present in our lives.

VI.

Mother's Day by definition includes grandmothers. And while I have many fond memories of my mother, I'm also moved today to say something about my grandmother.

When I was growing up my grandmother was full of snappy one-line statements. I was amazed at how she could come up with all this stuff. Here are some examples. "Spare the rod and spoil the child." I heard that a lot. Or, "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere." Also one of her favorites. Also, "Pride goes before the fall." Most of us probably are familiar with that.

Then, as I got older I began to read the Bible and came to the Book of Proverbs. And, ah ha! There it was; all of my grandmother's wisdom, revealed! Busted! So that's how she knew those things. And it helped me to realize that the Bible was sort of interesting, and had real-life applications. The rest for me is history; delayed reaction, but history nonetheless.

And we soon can be in for similar realizations and insights about the Bible here at St. Thomas. Next Sunday our sign-up sheets for our new spiritual growth course, 40 Days in the Word, will be available. It starts in June, and I urge everyone to consider signing up for a small group.

And while I did use my grandmother to lead into this 40 Days program, it is not your grandmother's Bible-study course. It is a contemporary nationwide movement that embraces traditional values, and has been or is being presented in over six thousand churches across the country just this year.

I believe this course, just as Jesus' words in today's Gospel, will give us guidance and hope. As we learn the Word, love the Word, and live the Word, God will dwell within us and further transform us into the people we are meant to be. We will know his love and his peace. *Amen.*