

“You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

Now what kind of an invitation is that?

This reminds me of a schoolyard in which the biggest, bossiest member of the gang tells the kids who would like to be members that in order to join they have to obey him (or her). All I could think of was the scene in *Christmas Story* when Ralphie’s friend is triple-dog dared into sticking his tongue on a flagpole in the middle of winter.

You can easily imagine what happens next. And that is mild compared to some of the insanity we read about when it comes to hazing for fraternities.

Do we really want our relationships to be based on such coercion? As adults if we pretend that we didn’t know that this was Jesus saying this to his disciples we might hear it as manipulative at best and threatening at worst, an invitation to a game that we are not sure that we want to play.

Why in fact would Jesus’ disciples find such an invitation attractive? If we are honest with ourselves we will admit that the Jesus of the gospel of John is anything but a warm fuzzy. This kind of absolutist language is pretty typical for Jesus. John’s Jesus is always in control, somewhat aloof, always knowing a bit more than the people with whom he is engaging, encouraging them to make fools of themselves. Remember how Nicodemus comes to him by night because he is intrigued by what he had heard about Jesus and then Jesus makes him a bit nuts with his words about being born again or born from above and poor Nicodemus is left wondering how he is going to fit through the birth canal a second time? Then there is the raising of Lazarus. Admittedly Jesus is concerned for his friend but he is also willing to let his friend die, to let his friend’s sisters grieve the loss of the brother before raising Lazarus from the grave in order to give glory to God. This use of circumstance of Lazarus’ fatal illness could be seen as a bit cold-blooded. Or what about how Jesus spars verbally with Pilate? Here Jesus is on trial for his life and he argues with Pilate about the nature of truth and will not give Pilate the satisfaction of showing any fear about his fate. I think the only time Jesus does a bit of backtracking is when his Mother asks him to do something about the wine shortage at the wedding of Cana. At first Jesus rebuffs his mother saying that it is no concern of theirs that the host is about to run out of wine because it’s not his time yet, but Mary forces his hand when she sends the wine steward to him and Jesus ends up turning the water into wine anyway.

At the same time Jesus is telling his friends about obedience he is telling his friends about love. Jesus tells them about the Father’s love for him, his love for the Father, and Jesus’ love for his friends. As I mentioned last week God’s love is not a feeling. Jesus’ love is not a sentimental attachment, it is not fondness or affection, it is not romantic love, it is not liking or friendship, it is the very essence of what it means to exist, it is like pure creative energy, endlessly creating, redeeming, and sustaining and what we learn this week is that all of that energy is channeled into this command to Jesus’ disciples to abide in his love. The verb abide has multiple meanings. Without getting too technical, to abide can mean to adhere to, to live with, and to endure. The need for obedience is explicit, keeping in mind that obedience means to listen to and then to do what you have heard, and acting in this case is about keeping God’s commandments. I know some of you have learned that love is also a decision and that is true,

because to love Jesus is to decide to believe in Jesus, to believe in this love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father and the Son's love for us but more importantly it is not just about deciding to believe. To love Jesus involves deciding to act and this is what makes it relevant for us today. Jesus' affirmation of his love for his disciples is strong and powerful and deliberate. His capacity to love comes out of the Father's love for him. When Jesus asks his friends to do what he commands them he is asking no more of them than what the Father has asked of him. He trusts in the Father's love so completely that he is willing to obey all the Father's commandments and to lay down his life again with perfect confidence ...and that is what he expects of those who want to be his friends as well. This is the love that abides in Jesus's love resulting in obedience that will bear fruit.

The image is tidy but the reality is much harder. How often do we run from what God is calling us to do? How often do we rely on "like" instead of "love" to care for those in need? How often do we forget to trust God even when we are hurting? All this in spite of the words from the first letter of John in which we are promised a victory that conquers the world. This is both inspiring and scary.

It is also important to keep in mind that the power of abiding is its apparent vulnerability. It reminds me of the Toyota Production System. No, I haven't lost my mind at least I don't think so. The Toyota production system, the way Toyota manufactures its products, is the reason for its success as the leading manufacturer of cars in the world.

One component of this system is its just-in-time method for calculating the exact amount of inventory required to keep the production line moving without stopping. An example might be if you produced a hundred cars a day you would have 100 engines ready to be installed. It sounds logical doesn't it? Unlike the US car makers who liked to play it safe because they couldn't rely on all those engines to work as designed and so would throw in a few extra, just in case. This overproduction requires batches of inventory for all kinds of parts, consuming resources to produce goods that may or may not be used. And so on. But, and there's a big but here, is that if amounts were calculated incorrectly or if the Toyota production line wasn't calibrated to fix an engine that didn't work when it was being installed then the production line would grind to a screeching halt ...resulting in delays, increasing costs and disappointing the consumer.

When some US consultants decided to bring this approach to the US they realized that the assumptions on which it was based were very powerful but also vulnerable. The consultants thought that the system was fragile but in order to introduce it to this country they couldn't call it "Fragile" so they called it "Lean" and Lean is now practiced in many industries throughout the US.

Jesus knew he was loved by the Father in Heaven. Jesus trusted in that love and obeyed the Father's commandments. The Father's love gave Jesus power, power of healing, power over the minds of men, and power over the forces of nature, power over life and death. Jesus did not admit to any limitations and his trust enabled him to go to the cross to lay down his life for his friends in the sure and certain knowledge that he would be able to take it up again.

But if Jesus had failed to trust Jesus would have wavered in his obedience, Jesus would have not had the sure and certain knowledge of the love of the Father to share with his disciples. If Jesus had refused to share the love of the Father with his disciples what do you think would have happened?

We wouldn't be here today. We just have to look at what happened to Peter to admit how vulnerable we are to lack of trust, to disobedience, and to withholding love.

The good news though is that Jesus did not fail to trust; Jesus was willing to abide in God's love, and Jesus was glorified and so passed the love of the Father to his disciples and they passed it onto us.

May we accept his invitation to become his friends, to keep his commandments and abide in his love, so that we may love one another, and bear fruit.

Amen