

Back to Basics

David Garnett

John 14:15-24

August 1, 2021 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

I am self-conscious of the fact that I am the last of your three interim pastors. In Olympic terms, it is as though we three interims are running a relay race, passing the baton between us, and it has fallen to me to run the last short anchor leg of the race.

So I have been wondering how best to use my limited time with you, how best to prepare you for the next chapter of your congregational life with your new installed senior pastor, Chris Currie. And what I have decided is to use my time to bring us back to the basics of our Christian faith. In fact, I am calling my sermon series for the next four weeks “Back to Basics.”

I have found the interim time in a church to be a particularly opportune time to review some of the basics of our Christian faith, the beliefs we share together, the things that bond us together as believers, and the things that make us as the church distinct from other human groups. Today, and for the next three weeks, I want to talk about the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ for the church and obedience to Christ as the main calling of the church.

Let me begin by saying I walk every day. I walk 3-4 miles a day. It takes me an hour. I walk daily because walking works for me on so many levels—physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, creatively. During my walks, I pray, I think, I feel, I make connections between things that were not connected for me before. There’s a lot of important inner work going on during my morning walk.

Nothing much happens in my outer world on my walks, at least nothing worth telling a story about, but every now and then something unusual. Let me tell you the story of one of those unusual times.

In another place and time, I was out walking in a lake park and needed to sit down. I’m not sure why I was out walking that day. I just didn’t feel well and my legs hurt. So, I found a park bench to sit on next to the lake and sat, and resolved to stay there until the awful feeling passed. I found myself sitting unexpectedly near a young couple I did not know, who were sitting and facing each other across a picnic table. I was sitting close enough, and they were talking loud enough, that I could overhear every word.

As they talked, I could tell they were having pretty serious marital problems, and they had decided, for whatever reason, to have it all out then and there in public. They were

both mad and in the moment and oblivious to everything except the other. They didn't seem to care who might be there or who might be listening. They took turns dredging up things from their past, reminding each other of all the things the other had said and done that they had despised. On every turn they both seemed to ratchet up the accusation and the emotion.

I marveled at what a rare and real and honest human exchange this was. Nothing staged or put on. Real human beings acting with real emotion, saying what was really in their heart and mind, however dark that might be. It was all such a train wreck that I couldn't seem to look away from, and all of it was so profoundly sad to me. As Presbyterians, one of our confessions, the Westminster Confession of Faith, has a section on marriage and divorce and remarriage that acknowledges the hard reality that sometimes a marriage, even one entered into with all the best intentions, can die at the heart, and at that moment I thought I was hearing the death rattle in this young couple's marriage.

After a long time of bitter, poisonous exchanges, the two finally seemed to slump in their seats and went silent. They had, apparently, gotten it all out and now they were spent.

After sitting in silence for a while, the husband finally broke the silence. When he spoke I noticed his tone had changed markedly. He was less strident and much softer, more gentle and kind, as if he suddenly found the need to repair something he had just heavily damaged. He said to his young wife, "In spite of all that, you know how much I still love you, don't you?"

The wife didn't answer right away. She seemed to take in his question and process it for a while, and then, when she began to speak, I could tell she wasn't having any of that. She said to her young husband, "If you love me so much, why don't you ever do anything I ask you to do?"

To this there was no answer, no snappy comeback, no disputing, just silence, and the conversation ended there, and when they both determined that there was nothing more to say, I saw them both get up and walk off in two different directions.

The next morning that encounter was still in the brainpan, and it has been there ever since. I found myself mulling over that anonymous woman's words ever after, "If you love me so much, why don't you ever do anything I ever ask you to do?"

It got me to thinking about love. That woman, whoever she was, was right. Love is more than just a thought in one's head, more than just a feeling in the heart, more than just a few affectionate words on the tongue. Love, ultimately, is something you do. Love is something you do for another. Love is doing for another person in the ways the other

asks you to do. Love is caring for another person in the way that the other understands as love.

“If you love me so much, why don’t you ever do anything I ever ask you to do?” Jesus, I noticed, said much the same, only he put it more positively when he said to his disciples on the night before his death. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Jesus, on the night before his death, spoke in primary language, the language of relationship, of love and intimacy—the language we speak when we are children, and then again when we fall in love and get married, when we have children, and when a good friend or family member is dying, but language that can be lost to us for long stretches of time as we give ourselves to the secondary language of school and work and the world, the language of knowledge, information, data and technology. Jesus speaks primary language when he says to his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

When we read those words of Jesus in John 14, we realize that both Jesus and that anonymous woman in the park had a similar view of love--as something you do. For both Jesus and that woman, love was properly understood more as a verb than a noun. And it is clear from our scripture this morning that Jesus, just like any other human being, wanted to be loved back. We know from our human experience that love is a circle that begins with the mystery of one person loving another. The circle is completed when the person, inspired by the love they receive, decides to return that love. Most of us know the joy of requited love and the pain of unrequited love.

On the night before his death, which would be his ultimate expression of love for his disciples, he said to his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” In our relationship with God in Christ, in our relationship with one another, love for Christ boils down to doing, doing what Christ has asked us to do.

It’s a theme repeated throughout the Bible, that God always takes the initiative with human beings, always makes the first move in human life, and it’s a movement of love. God loved us first in Jesus Christ, and then waits to see how we will respond to that love, and hopes that we will choose to return love for love, and even tells us how to love when we are ready to love. The way to return the love of God in Jesus is to do what Jesus teaches us to do, to take seriously the words of Jesus and try to live them out in the world, to keep his commandments.

Our keeping of Jesus’ commandments is meant to come out of a love affair we have developed with Jesus Christ.

My sense is that the purpose of this church, the purpose of every Christian church, is to get us all into a love affair with Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the central figure in our Christian faith and in the life of the church. Jesus is God’s person, God’s Messiah, the

light in the darkness, whom God sent to give us life, to show us, to teach us, how to love. Jesus as a human being reveals God to us in the human ways that we are able to understand, and he reveals the God who is head over heels in love with every person God ever created, including every one of us.

The great American writer, the late John Updike, once wrote “We are most alive when we’re in love.” And I believe that we as individual Christians and we as a church are most alive when we’re in love with Jesus Christ, and when we are in love with Christ, we want to keep Christ’s commandments because we know they lead to life and love for us and for everyone else. We’ll do surprising things for love that we wouldn’t do under any other circumstances.

Of course, it’s a little daunting to think of loving Christ by keeping all of Christ’s commandments. After all, in the four gospels we discover that Jesus left behind many commandments and not just a few. When we read the story of Jesus, we realize that there’s a whole lot of things Jesus wants us to do.

Over the years, three of Jesus’ commandments have come to me over and over again as those that give shape to the work of the church in every generation and have given shape to my own life as a Christian and church pastor. Putting these three of Jesus’ commandments together is not original with me.

I first heard them put together at Montreat my very first year as a pastor. Molly and I went to a conference called “The Ministry of the Laity”, which was about the priesthood of all believers. It was led by the Rev. Bruce Larson, by then a beloved 70-year-old Presbyterian pastor and popular author and nationally known Christian speaker, whom I had never met in person until then, but who had been speaking to me through his books and sermons since I was a teenager, and has influenced as much as anyone who I have become as a person and as a pastor. It was such a poignant week for me, Bruce, my mentor from afar in so many ways, was winding down his public ministry, while I was just beginning mine.

That week in Montreat 30 years ago Bruce boiled down his long ministry, his personal Christian faith, and the faith of the Christian church in terms of three commandments of Jesus—follow me, love one another and go—and spent the entire week fleshing out what he thought those three commandments meant for us in the church in our time. Though I don’t remember the specifics of what Bruce said that week, I know I was never the same for having heard him put those three commandments together. It was like I had been hit with a bolt of divine lightning. I felt like Bruce was handing on to me the family jewels, not for safe keeping but for giving away to others. And ever since I have been doing for churches what Bruce Larson did for me that week. I have been sharing those

commandments with every church I have pastored since. During this interim time, those three commandments together answer in the broadest possible terms the question of what Christ wants for us as individuals, for the church, for this church, for every church, in every age.

Follow me, Love one another, and Go. Over the next three weeks I am going to try to flesh out anew for you and for myself what those three commandments of Jesus might mean for this time and place.

During the next few weeks I want us all to have an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, and with his words and commandments, and my hope is that we together will fall in love with him all over again, or maybe even for the very first time, and out of our new-found love for him want to return his love by keeping his commandments.

That encounter begins today with Jesus inviting us first into a conversation, a conversation that Jesus begins in primary language: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."