

Sermon for Sunday, May 1, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

As last words go,
the ones spoken by Jesus to his friends the night before he died,
four generous chapters in the gospel of John,
are unusually long
and unusually labored.

Reading them
is kind of like reading the will
of your great-great-grandfather,
or one of the letters
written in the trenches
during the First World War.

They were words once spoken
to his closest friends,
giving them advice
on how to survive the difficult days ahead,
preparing them
for life without him.

We read them
after his death
and it is too late to argue,
too late to ask questions,
we have
just these words, the only tangible legacy
of a crucified Savior.

At the time, though, the disciples were there.
Together in a quiet room,
he washed their feet, spoke quietly with them,
and sent Judas the betrayer
out to do his treacherous work.

They were full of questions: where are you going? why can't we come with you? why
are you leaving us alone?

And Jesus' answers, no more satisfactory to them then
than to us today,
were about love
and denial,

and glory
and betrayal,
and death.

And a promise
that he would continue to love them
and reveal himself to them.

Which is what prompted Judas - not Iscariot, the betrayer,
but another Judas, son of James -

it prompted him to ask,
“How will you reveal yourself to us?”

And Jesus answered, as we heard in our gospel reading,

“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.

Whoever does not love me
does not keep my words...”

It wasn't
a very satisfactory
answer.

Because what it sounds like Jesus is saying
is that we have to earn
his love, it sounds like
God's love
is conditional,
it sounds like
God's love
is only for those
who keep the rules.

Which, of course, is what some people
would like us
to believe. It's so much easier
that way. Do this,
and this, and this,
and God will love you;
do that, and that, and that

and God will not.

So, is that right?

Is it true?

Does

God only love

the people who “get it right”

whatever “right” might be?

Many of us

spent our childhoods

trying to win the approval

and, to be honest, the love,

of our parents.

It’s a hard habit to break - many of us

continue to do it as adults, even when our parents

have died.

Is our relationship with God

just the same thing

writ large?

Are we doomed to be forever

rebellious

teenagers?

Is Christian faith ultimately

just a matter

of obedience

and reward,

like much

of the rest

of our lives?

“If you love me

you will keep my words.”

Obedience

and legalism

are out of fashion

these days,

in fact

they’ve been out of fashion

on and off
for the last two thousand years,
ever since Jesus
began railing at the scribes and Pharisees
for keeping the details of all 633 commandments in the Book of the Law
and ignoring the spirit of them.
In the world of generational research, obedience and duty
are the province of the GI generation, born from 1901 to 1924, give or take a couple of
years.
In a book by Strauss and Howe
called "Generations: The History of America's Future",
the GI generation are known for
their strongly collectivist attitude to life.
They prized anything
standardized or prepackaged,
they valued conformity,
they trusted in authority.
And the church
which many of us were born into
was characterized
by those same values, a church of obedience
and conformity.

Some of the GI generation
are still around;
some of you
are here in church today,
but it is the nature of generations
that they move on.
And the GI's
were succeeded by the hidden generation
and then the Boomers
and the Xers,
and the millenials
are among us too.
And with them each successive generation,
values have changed.
Activism,
idealism,
individualism

have risen in emphasis, and obedience
is not our thing.

We, as a culture,
seem to ask a lot more questions;
we, as a culture,
want to make our own way.

And yet,
and yet, we still tend to see obedience
as a way to get approval,
whether it's obedience
to our parents' expectations,
obedience
to our employers,
or obedience
to the lifestyle expectations
of the world around us.

Talking
about obedience
might be out of fashion
but we still carry an ambivalent allegiance to it.

“If you love me,
you will keep my words.”

So back to the question,
is God's love only
for those who keep the rules?

No,
but it's a paradoxical no.

Because God
love us.
If scripture
says nothing else,
it's that God
loves us,
unconditionally
and without limits.

The stories of the Old Testament
resound with God's love.
From the very beginning
creation is presented
as the loving act of God,
one where God not only creates human beings,
but everything we need to survive.
In every new circumstance,
the love of God is at work,
whether its putting a mark of protection on Cain
so that he will not be killed
for his crimes,
or providing food in the desert,
or safety from attacking armies,
God's love
is at work.
And its no different
when we get to the New Testament.

“For God so loved the world
that he gave his only son”
writes John,
a son
we know as Jesus,
who healed the sick and raised the dead
and in the end
died for our sake.

Nothing
can separate us
from that love
of God.

God loves us.

And its only because God loves us
that we
can love God.
It is only because God loves us
that we can even

know
God.

So no,
God's love
is not only
for those who keep the rules,
God's love is not
dependent on us.

And yet
neither does God
force God's love
on us.
There is no divine rape
of humanity.
God's love
comes to us
as an invitation, a gift,
something
which we are free to accept
or refuse,
something which we can respond to
or ignore.

God loves us,
and invites us
into a relationship
of mutual love.

And when we
open ourselves to that love,
if we allow ourselves
to respond to that love,
God sweeps us up,
embraces us,
with love.

We are caught up
into the life of God,

the boundaries of heaven and earth
become blurred,
and God's love
spills over
and through us.

It's grace
all the way.

And if we open ourselves to God's love,
if we love God,
then we will keep the words of Jesus, not as a matter of duty
but as a matter of inevitability.

Because
when Jesus is talking with the disciples
that last night
before he died,
the only two commands he gives
are to wash
one another's
feet,
and to love one another.

Keeping Jesus' words
isn't about rules,
it's not about placating
or impressing
God,
it's about love.
It's about being people
about being a community
characterized
by the very love of God
flowing through us,
a community characterized by love
and by humble service.

And its grace
all the way.

It's grace
all the way.
And that's the paradox.
God's love
is not bounded
by our keeping the rules,
but when we allow God's love
to flow through us
we can't help but keep the rules
– of love.

So why do we so easily
turn to a rule bound faith?
I suspect, at least in part, that it's because
we don't always find it easy
to receive.
Our lives are built
on self sufficiency and independence.
It's hard to let go
of control.
We find it uncomfortable
to accept a position of humility
which would allow us to love one another, not at a distance,
but up close, close enough
to wash
one another's feet,
close enough
to experience love
and denial
and glory
and betrayal
and even death,
and to experience
the resurrected life of Christ
welling up within us
the love of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
overflowing
and transforming
our lives.

Here, today
in the Eucharist,
in this bread and this wine,
God offers us
a tangible sign
of that all-embracing love.
As we receive it and welcome it,
the love of God
will spill over
and through us,
and from us
into our community
and our world.

It's grace
all the way.