

“The Hard Commandment”

John 15:9-17

Generally speaking, being a Christian, following the ways of Christ, is not really that hard. No, I haven't forgotten what Jesus said about the road to hell -- not that it's paved with good intentions -- that was someone else. What Jesus said was that “the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. (Whereas)...the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Mt. 7:13-14) I haven't forgotten about that.

But Jesus also said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” If it seems difficult it is because people have made it difficult – it was not designed that way. Jesus said of the Pharisees: “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others....” In other words, they take something simple and make it complicated.

I don't know that there is a better example of this than the fourth commandment, resting on the Sabbath. A commandment to rest, of all things! Thou shalt rest. Once every week thou shalt take a load off. Thou shalt sit in thy lawn chair and read a book, have a cold one (after going to church, of course). Thou shalt take it easy, spend a little time with thy family, read the Sunday paper. What a commandment! Life is not intended to be all work. There should be time for relaxation, reflection, renewal, rejuvenation. And it is an easy commandment. What could be easier?

But then it got into the hands of those who thought that nothing should be that easy, just as a matter of principle, especially nothing that had to do with religion. So they took the fourth commandment, which should have been a blessing, a boon to humans, and they turned it into a burden. What started as the Fourth Commandment E-Z became the Fourth Commandment 1040 Long Form with a maze of complicated rules, schedules, exceptions, interpretations, and ultimately, of course, loopholes. The end result was that instead of people enjoying a day of rest, they found themselves trying to figure out a way to get around the rules so that they could do what they wanted to do. The fourth commandment became an obstacle rather than what it was intended to be, an aid, something to help make their lives richer and fuller. Jesus said: The Sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around.

And what was done to the Fourth Commandment has been done to religion in general and to Christianity in particular. Religion ought to be a boost, a lift. One suggested derivation of *religion* is a Latin word meaning “to reconnect,” to bring together again, to reunite that which has been fragmented and separated. To make one whole. That, it seems to me, is what we ought to be about here in the church. When people's lives are pulled apart by all of the various pressures and entanglements, our faith ought to be a force for bringing all of those disparate, disjointed parts back together again. I should not be burdensome, but helpful. “My yoke is easy, my burden is light.”

But it occurs to me that there may be one exception to this premise, one part of being Christian that is difficult. And I think it may be that one commandment that he gave his disciples, that troublesome commandment that is emphasized over and over in the Fourth Gospel: that we love one another!

I was in a doctor's office just a couple of days ago, when in came a young mother with her young charge, a boy, maybe 1 ½ or 2. I think she came in with visions of her son playing with his toys quietly while they waited for their appointment. But it didn't go that way. In fact, it didn't go well at all. Something upset him – a toy that came apart, I think it was. His mother managed to put it back together, but that didn't make any difference. He was crying and nothing was going to stop him. So his mother tried all kinds of tactics, but he just got more and more upset.

At one point she said, “well, there is not going to be any ice cream for you.” Maybe there had been a promise of ice cream made earlier if he were a good boy. But now he had something new to be upset about. And then it became, “I want ice cream! I want ice cream!” Over and over again, pleading, yelling, screaming, crying to the point of nearly throwing up! All of this with a room full of people watching and listening to every sound and every word of the mother, every attempt to get him to settle down. And then a nurse came in and asked if there was anything she could do to help, which I took to be a subtle signal that the office staff was taking note of the disturbance.

But I was so impressed with this young mother. She kept her poise, didn't lose her temper, was loving and yet firm, telling her son, for example, that there was no way he was going to get ice cream, that he had made some poor choices along the way and so on. Eventually, he calmed down and she was able to talk with him. Before we left I told her what a good job I thought she had done.

We had come from witnessing our daughter and son-in-law dealing with their own two-year-old and his two older sisters. Anyone who is a parent knows what I am talking about. Sometimes it is pure chaos, and children can at times be very unlovable. We were impressed at how our daughter and her husband handled themselves in those situations. Loving people, children as well as adults, is not always easy, not even your own child at times.

That same day that I was in the doctor's office, I heard a story on the radio about foster children who age out of the system and sometimes have nowhere to go. As part of the story they interviewed one girl who had been in the system. At one point they had no one to place her with, so they went to a list of people who were not approved foster parents but who had signed up to take children temporarily until a home was found. This girl went to stay with a woman who took her in on a temporary basis and then, just because she wanted to keep this girl, went through the application process and became certified and became her foster parent. The comment the girl made was that this woman loved her when she was very unlovable and it had changed her life.

On Thursday someone stopped in to visit the Human Rights Office housed in our church, and after her appointment she came in to see me. She has a good friend, she said, a woman who is a mother, who needs to find a new church. She described this woman as on welfare and a person with a lot of problems, including being abusive to her children. The woman who stopped in told me that her friend needs the support of a good congregation. She admitted to me that it could be difficult, that this woman presented herself in such a way that made it difficult. She asked me if I thought that she would get the support she needed here.

I told her that I would like to think that she would find our congregation to be loving and supportive, but that I couldn't be sure that she would not get some subtle looks or comments that might be offensive to her. And for all my fine talk of being open and supportive, I acknowledged the difficulty I have at times reaching out to some people. How would we do? I don't know.

When we think about Jesus' command to love one another, we should not think of those in our circle of friends and family with whom we have a warm and close relationship of mutual respect and love. Rather, we should think of those who need our love the most. We should measure ourselves based upon how we do with those folks.

There was a story in *Newsweek* recently on the anniversary of the school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. The story was about two ministers. One of them had conducted the funeral service for one of the girls who was killed. The other, a Lutheran pastor, had been called by the father of one of the boys who had done the shooting, asking desperately if this minister would conduct the funeral service for his son. The minister agreed to do it.

During the private service, this minister said to the parents of this boy, “God, who knows about suffering and pain and loss, wants to reach out to you.” In an interview with the Denver Post he described the parents as “the loneliest people on the planet.” That is when he began to get into trouble with his congregation. Eventually he lost his job. He acknowledges having made some mistakes in how he handled the situation. Still, one has to wonder about how Jesus’ commandment to love one another got played out in this situation.

I remember hearing about an interview a reporter had with some of the survivors of the shooting. They said that they were praying for the parents of the students who had been killed and also for the parents of the shooters. The reporter asked incredulously, “You are praying for the parents of the shooters?” And one of the young people said in reply: “You can pray for anybody.” Yes, you can. And you can love anybody, but sometimes it can be hard. The Lutheran pastor who lost his job says: “You absorb everyone else’s pain, and after a while that catches up to you, big time.”¹

So one difficulty in following Jesus’ command lies in the fact that sometimes it is very difficult to love some people. But there is another difficulty with the command, and that is that when we allow ourselves to love another person we open ourselves up to pain, we become vulnerable.

In the college that Diane and I attended in northwest Arkansas, I served as student pastor of a tiny church just across the Oklahoma border in a town called Little Kansas. (Diane and I were married in that church, tripling the population of the town that night). There was a woman in the church who invited the students over for dinner and got to know all of us pretty well. But when the time came for graduation she told us that she wasn’t going to do that any more with other students. It was just too hard for her to say goodbye. I thought at the time that that was a sad thing.

The movie “Shadowlands” tells the story of C.S. Lewis and of his finding love and marrying late in his life, and then of his wife dying. In one of his books, entitled *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis says this about love: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.”²

So there it is – Jesus’ commandment, his new commandment, his central commandment, the one commandment that he emphasized, according to this Gospel, over and over again, the one that would be the touchstone, the final mark of his people, that we would love one another. It is one very hard commandment! It is our challenge and opportunity to learn to obey it and to live it.

¹ Faith, Fear and the Wages of Columbine, Newsweek, April 20, 2009

² p. 169; quoted in *Word and Witness*, Vol. 94:3 Year B