

Eyes to See Sermon Series Week 4
“If You Love Me”
Acts 17:22-34, John 14:15-21
May 14, 2023
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A group of children were asked “what does love mean?” and these were some of their responses. 8-year-old Rebecca said, “When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So, my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love.” 6-year-old Chrissy said, “Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs.” 5-year-old Karl said, “Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving cologne and they go out and smell each other.”¹ Children get it. They understand that love isn't expressed just with words but with actions, and that's what Jesus says in our Gospel passage this morning. In verse 15 he says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,” and he repeats himself in verse 21 saying, “[T]hey who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.” We didn't read past verse 21, but he says it *again* in verses 23 and 24. It's a clear message. The way to show Jesus that our love for him is real is with obedient action.

I have an app in my phone that I can use for creating to do lists, and I have 2 kinds of to-do lists. The first kind is my actual to-do list that includes things that I will do because they're things that I want to do or because I know someone else is depending on me to get them done. The second is a *should* do list. That list includes things that I know are important, but for a variety of reasons, I have a harder time following through on the things on the should do list. That list ends up sitting in my phone with the items unchecked and undone for days, or weeks, or even months sometimes. When we think about Jesus's words and the instructions that he wants us to obey, I don't think any of us go through his words and put them on lists like the ones I have in my phone, but unconsciously maybe we do. If you think about it, you might realize that there are some of Jesus's words that you're more motivated to get to and get done, but there are others that you hear and you say to yourself, “I should do that,” but you don't seem to ever get around to it.

The Gospel of Matthew closes with Jesus giving a final commandment to the disciples before his ascension. It's a command that extends to all of Jesus's disciples, not just the ones who were standing there on the mountain with him that day, and I think it's one that seems to have a way of getting onto our mental should do lists. This is the commandment I'm talking about it. In Matthew 28:19-21 Jesus said to his disciples, “**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** ²⁰ **and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.**” Jesus is telling us there that he wants us to tell other people about who he is and what he has done. He is telling us that he wants us to invite them to become his disciples and to join God's family through baptism. He is telling us to teach others the things that he has taught us, and that all sounds good, but do we do it? When we are going about our lives outside the walls of this building, do we talk to other people about who Jesus is and what he has done? Do we invite them to become his disciples? Do we even invite them to church? I'll answer for myself. Not nearly as often as I could. We know that Jesus has told us to do it, but we don't know what to say, and we don't want to seem like religious nuts, and we don't want to offend people. We find ourselves in a difficult position then. We love Jesus and we want to show Jesus that we love him by obeying his command to go, and tell, and make disciples, but we also *don't* want to do it for the reasons I mentioned and maybe others. Keeping his command in mind as something we

¹ <https://universal-spirituality.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/What-Children-Say-Is-Love.pdf>

should do feels like a good middle ground. It becomes a way to say “I’m *going* to show you that I love you with obedient action at some point” without actually doing anything.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, we see that God’s grace is so amazing and so lavish, and God’s mercy is so deep and wide, that we can be fully confident that we are covered in those times when we are less than perfectly obedient and when we don’t live up to our full potential. That is comforting when we know that there are things that we should be doing that we aren’t really doing, but what we also hear in the Gospel text is Jesus’s promise to give us an Advocate, who is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit lives inside us to empower us to do the hard things that Jesus tells us to do and to help us get better and better at those things. This means that if we want to obey Jesus’s word and get better at being his witnesses and making disciples, we can.

Our Gospel passage this morning is paired with a text from Acts, and in that passage from Acts, we see Paul obeying Jesus’s word and bearing witness to Jesus. In the church, we often point to this story as a great example of how to obey Jesus’s command to teach, and invite, and make disciples because in the story, Paul identifies an altar in the city that is designated to an unknown God and then masterfully takes this thing that is familiar to the people to teach them about the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ who is unfamiliar to them. The result isn’t like the result of Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost when 3000 people became believers and followers of Jesus, but there were some who heard and believed including a man named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris who are both named in verse 34.

It’s easy to look at this story and to admire how brilliant Paul was in making that connection between the altar that was familiar and Jesus, the incarnate God who was unfamiliar to them, but it’s also easy to look at this story and compare ourselves to Paul and say I could never do *that*. After all, we know Paul as the great missionary, and evangelist, and teacher who took the message of Christ to people all around the Ancient Mediterranean world and successfully made disciples and established churches. He is also credited with writing 13 letters that make up a good portion of the New Testament. He was also well educated and had an intellect that could keep up with the sophisticated thinkers and philosophers in Athens. He had unique gifts, and skills, and experience and you think, I sell insurance, or I work in healthcare, or I’m a student. I don’t have the same gifts and experience that Paul had so how can I do what he did?

It is true that none of us are the Apostle Paul, but there is one important thing that Paul did in this story that didn’t require any special gifts or skills. It’s a simple thing that any of us can do if we want to connect with people and share the good news of the gospel with them in obedience to Jesus. The thing that Paul did before he ever used his mouth to say a word about Jesus in the Synagogue, or in the marketplace, or on Mars Hill is that he used his eyes to look around. He observed the people, and their culture, and he noticed the things that seemed important to them. When he did, it’s true that he saw things that were upsetting. He saw that the city was filled with idols and that bothered him, and when you and I look around at people and the things that are going on in our culture, we’re likely to feel bothered or upset by some things, too. We’re bothered by people’s moral choices or bothered by the things that people say that they believe or don’t believe, and when we’re bothered, there is usually a temptation to judge and condemn that comes with those bothered feelings. We might not tell people that we’re judging them, but quietly in our minds, we’re judging them. Or we want to. Paul saw the idolatry in Athens, and it was upsetting to him, but we can learn from him because he didn’t get hung up on judging or condemning the people. Instead, he kept looking and trying to understand what was behind the idolatry and upsetting things that he was seeing, and what he saw was a deep spiritual need and hunger. He saw that the people were grasping for gods, and experiences, and ideas in the hopes that those things could satisfy the hunger that they were feeling in their souls. He really saw them and instead of fueling judgment it fueled compassion that compelled him to share the good news.

We can do what Paul did every single day and every single time that we interact with friends, and neighbors, and family members. We can even do it in the encounters that we may have with strangers.

When someone begins to talk to you in a waiting room or when a store clerk or your coffee barista randomly overshares what's going on in their lives. Once I was getting my drink in the drive thru at Starbucks and for some reason when the woman gave me my coffee, she also unexpectedly spilled out this story to me about how her boyfriend had cheated on her. Sometimes things like that happen, but whether it's people that we know and talk to regularly or a stranger, when people talk about things that are happening in their lives, or they talk or post on social media about things that they are angry, or sad, excited about, we can listen and really hear them and look and really see them.

When Paul looked and listened, he saw the spiritual need and hunger and it compelled him to speak up, and because he had listened and loved first, he found the words that were the right words for those particular people at that particular time. Being afraid of saying the wrong words or that the words won't come out in any kind of intelligible or winsome way is a common fear, but if we focus first on listening first, we might be surprised to find that words do come more easily than we thought they would. Listening to the people around us can help us to become better witnesses and evangelists, but let's not forget Jesus's promise to give us his Spirit. He has given us the Spirit and listening to the Spirit will help us become better witnesses and evangelists, too.

When Jesus told his disciples to go and make disciples, he also promised to be with them always. The Spirit was with Paul in Athens helping him to perceive the real spiritual needs of the people; inspiring his thoughts and helping him to make that connection between the altar to the unknown God and living God in Christ; giving him the words to say; and helping those who were listening to understand and make sense of them. The Spirit helped Paul, and the Spirit is with us to help us in the same ways as we try to move from knowing that we should tell others about Jesus to really doing it more and more. The Spirit is with us to help us be good listeners and to help us hear what people are really saying. The Spirit helps us see how the gospel speaks to the needs that we are perceiving, and the Spirit helps us find whatever words might be needed at the right time.

As we leave today with this message in our hearts, it is my prayer that we will feel compelled to demonstrate our love for Jesus by moving the command to go and tell and make disciples off of the mental should do list and that we will ask and rely on the Spirit to help us in doing it. That doesn't mean we have to go set ourselves up on a street corner with a megaphone. We can start very quietly, using our ears and eyes first. Look at the people in your life. Listen to what they are saying, and listen for the Spirit who will be with you to supply everything that you need to love Jesus and keep his commandment. Amen.