

Serve, Love, Believe
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A
April 27, 2008

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

Well, there’s a real popular line.

We Americans aren’t real fond of obedience. Sure, we’re good at following the law—most of the time. We just like to pick and choose: Murder, mayhem, and many felonies—the majority of citizens are pretty good about respecting the law on these. But speed limits, staying in crosswalks, and getting all those necessary building permits—maybe not so much. Maybe because it’s in our blood: many of those who originally crossed the Atlantic to make this continent their home were rebels of a sort—those who wanted to worship God as they wished rather than adhere the theology and polity of the Church of England. That spirit seemed to continue, for eventually we declared our own independence from England, thus rejecting the reign and rule of King George and Parliament. Our own Constitution gives us the right to assemble, and therefore to protest, to question. No, obedience is not America’s strong suit. Frankly, it’s not mine either—priestly vows to obey my bishop notwithstanding.

But our relationship with our Lord is not only one of love, it is one that shows forth that love through obedience to Jesus’ commandments. And just what are those commandments? We are given three in John’s Gospel: to serve one another as Jesus has served, to love one another as Jesus has loved us, and as we believe in God, believe in Jesus. Serve, love, believe. Seems simple enough. However, this is John’s Gospel—and nothing in John’s gospel is ever simple. We are called to serve one another as Jesus served; Jesus served his disciples by washing their feet, an act of very humble service. And while footwashing may not be a powerful 21st century example, it all boils down to this: we are all equal in the sight of God. The homeless person

Serve, Love, Believe
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A
April 27, 2008

sleeping on the street, the single mother in Camden, the person suffering from mental health issues, even the person sitting in prison—all are equal with those of us who have roofs over our heads, food on the table, jobs to go to, responsible positions to fulfill. We are asked to serve one another, care for one another, to build one another up instead of tearing each other down or drawing lines of separation. This is hard work, and goes against the grain of our comfortable lives. But serving is a large part of loving, which brings us to Jesus' second commandment.

“Love one another as I have loved you” Jesus says to his disciples. But how can anyone, even Jesus, command emotion? The truth is, you can't. But Jesus isn't overly concerned with emotional love, the love of romance or warm, fuzzy feelings. Jesus' focus is that of *'agape'* love, a Greek word meaning love that is focused on meeting the needs of the other, a love lived out in action. It is a love defined by loving acts—in spite of how we feel about the other. You may think your classmate or co-worker or boss is an absolute jerk—but as a Christian, we are bound to 'seek and serve Christ' in others, to love others as Christ loves us—sacrificially, without excuses or looking for the loophole. Again, not so easy, not so comfortable.

Ah, but now we come to believing—easier, right? That depends. Ask a faithful believer and they will assuredly answer yes—but ask someone who has struggled with their faith, or is not sure of what to believe at all—and they'll answer differently. And even the staunchest believer wrestles with God and Jesus in times of crisis—for our trust can easily wobble in the face of suffering or fear. But in the face of all that seems to go wrong, we are asked to believe—believe in a God who loves us so much that God's son was willing to go the cross for us; believe that

Serve, Love, Believe
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A
April 27, 2008

death does not have the final word; and believe that no matter what have done or will do, we are loved beyond all measure. To believe with our hearts, and not just our minds, and to live that belief out in our lives of love and service, no matter what the world may say or promote.

But why is obedience to these commandments tied to loving Jesus? Because we too are asked to love Jesus in the *agape* way—by showing that in loving action. And as we are called to be the Body of Christ for the world today, that would mean modeling Christ in our lives, individually and communally—in service, in love, in belief, as Jesus did and calls us to do. Discipleship, like it or not, is a way of obedience, a setting aside of one's self-will—following the One we call our Lord.

But we are not asked to do this on our own—for truth be told, we cannot. The Holy Spirit, present in our lives, in our hearts, encourages us, guides us, comforts us, gives us strength when we feel there is none to be found. The Spirit also teaches us—drawing us ever further into God's truth, continuing to reveal God's word to us, making us ever aware of God's love and how to share that with a hurting world.

And the world does hurt. The same God who created us to love and care for one another also calls us to love and care for all of creation. We are intrinsically connected to all that exists on the earth—the land, the sea, animals, plants, the air. Like it or not, we need to acknowledge that we have inflicted damage on that which sustains us—and with the Spirit's help, there is

Serve, Love, Believe
The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Sixth Sunday of Easter, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A
April 27, 2008

redemption: we can choose to change, we can love and serve the Earth and all that is in it.

Today, Green Grace Sunday, is a day when we can choose to do just that, and I pray that we will.

The God in whom ‘we live and move and have our being’ calls us to follow in God’s footsteps, obediently walking in the ways of love, service, and belief—even when that path seems difficult, unclear, or uncomfortable. The One who loves us most asks us to love him as well—in discipleship, in obedience. It may not be the American way, but it is the Christian way—and truly the way to live an authentic life.

Amen.