



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, April 14, 2013
The Third Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
John 13:34-35
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Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News
SERMON 14: AS I HAVE LOVED YOU

This sermon series, which we conclude today, has been called “Commandments as Good News.” Odd as it might seem, it is indeed good news that God has given us commandments. The cosmos is vast, and we live on an insignificant planet on the outskirts of a so-so galaxy, and there are six or seven billion of us. One human seems so small, and the cosmos indifferent. So it is good news to know that God does notice, that he not only *knows about* us but *cares*, cares enough to give us commandments. But get this: if God is going to give us commandments then God is going to have to speak to us. The condition of the possibility of God commanding humans is that God communicate with humans.

This too is good to know. God speaks to us, and has spoken to our forebears going back literally millennia. And there is more: if *God* speaks to us with commandments, it will be possible to live up to his expectations and keep them. For God is quite unlike an absolute dictator. The tyrannous Pharaoh of Egypt can say: I want you to produce more bricks per day than you are now producing, and furthermore I want you to gather the straw for the bricks themselves. A dictator can demand what’s impossible. But when God commands us, then it is precisely our creator who is speaking to us; and the God who gives us existence and breath and everything will also give us what we need to keep his commandments. It is the same Word who creates us who also speaks to us, commanding us. The commanding word is the creative word, and that is the good news of hope.

The particular commands that God has given us—the Ten Commandments—these also are good news. They point the way for us to flourish as human beings. To start with, flourishing humans acknowledge and worship their creator. They don’t confuse him with idols of their own making. For us to flourish humanly is to allow God’s imprint upon the weekly pattern of our lives; it is to recognize that we are not self-created but rather arise within communities, the fundamental one being the family, and thus to honor our parents; it is to treat each another with the fundamental respect of not murdering them, not taking their spouses, not stealing their things, not testifying falsely about them, and not coveting that which they have and are.

All that is good, but it’s not the end. As we strive to keep God’s commands, we stumble upon the remarkable fact that in the commandments God does not lay out what we should do.

I will give two examples. God tells us not to have any idols, any representations, any images; not to worship them. But immediately he instructs Moses to make two cherubim (angels, covered with gold) and to place them on either side of the mercy seat over the ark in which are the stone tablets with the commandments. Aren't those cherubim images? Here in the church we also have icons and other images: is that wrong? On the one hand, God makes it clear that to create an image of something and then to worship it is wrong, because that turns the image into an idol, a false god; but on the other hand one might have images and representations that are not idols. You see what happens. The commandment against idols turns into an existential question. Is *this* image, whatever it might be, that I am using in worship—is *this* image an idol? Am I worshipping the image or am I using it to draw me towards the true worship of God?

The commandment becomes a question. A second example: It is a rather cut-and-dry matter whether a person is committing adultery. But the commandment against adultery raises the question of how I relate to any married person. Am I, in my dealings with this married person, undermining their marriage, or strengthening it? In such wise this commandment also becomes an existential question. God does not tell us precisely what to do, but rather probes our soul with difficult questions.

When Jesus summarizes the commandments as calling forth two forms of love—of God, and of neighbor—he makes this very point. The person commanded to love must ask if he or she is in fact loving. There is no simple answer. I have to judge myself, and whatever the answer, there is always more loving to do, more creativity to be applied.

In summary: It is good news that God is speaking to us, because it means that God knows us and cares that we flourish. It is good news that our maker commands us, because that means implicitly that we will be able to keep his commandments. And it is good news that God commands us, because he thereby sets us free to question ourselves and to seek ever-fresh ways to love God and neighbor.

In all of this, Jesus is implicit, and Jesus fulfills it all; yet none of this, strictly speaking, is new in Jesus. Jesus simply is God speaking to us, and he shows us the deep meaning of the commandments.

Nonetheless, at the end Jesus gives one commandment that is unprecedented. This new commandment was not and could not have been given by anyone except Jesus. He gave it the night before he died. Jesus told his disciples: *Love one another, as I have loved you.*

Note first: the new commandment is not for everyone. All the other commandments point to what's good for all human beings. They all pertain to human flourishing, to doing a good job at being human.

But the new commandment is just for those in the church, just for the disciples of Jesus. And it is not a commandment that they love outsiders. They already have that commandment: they are to prove themselves neighbor to whatever outsider comes into their lives. But here, in the new commandment, the field of view is circumscribed. It is: one another. Love one another. Love one another for no reason except that your fellow Christian is also a disciple.

And the depth of this love is infinite: *as I have loved you.* Love one another even unto death. There is no greater love. And this is Jesus' love: there is no greater.

What is new in Jesus is that, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. At supper, he took bread. He took wine. He took them into the garden. He let them, if they would, follow him to the hill of the skull. He breathed his last. He emerged from the tomb. He breathed on them his Spirit. He ascended into heaven and sent gifts to them. By means of those gifts,

the gifts of the Spirit who makes Jesus present: by means of all this and only in this way his disciples were able to love each other to the end.

Jesus loving his disciples to the end and his making it possible for us to keep his commandment that we do the same: this is the best news of all. The commandments are good news because Jesus, who loves us to the end, has commanded us and given us gifts to do the same.