

**“The One Commandment”**

**John 15.9–11**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 21 May 2006**

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

How many of us have heard that passage from Paul first letter to the Corinthians read at a wedding. It's really a wonderful piece of poetry, but few of us stop long enough to listen to what Paul is saying. He isn't referring to ephemeral infatuation, but love that is deep and that lasts. He isn't referring to the kind of love that asks, “What's in it for me?” but rather “What can I do for you?” It isn't an easy affection; it's tough love.

The variety of love that Paul writes about – *agape* – involves a lot more than patience and kindness. It often requires self-sacrifice.

In John's gospel, Jesus is quoted as saying, “No one has greater love than this, to lay one's life down for one's friends.” And he should know about that than virtually any of us.

The notion of sacrifice really goes against our cultural grain. I remember about five years ago, when I was the point person for stewardship on the Connecticut Conference staff, having a discussion with Bill Green, the stewardship honcho from Cleveland, and I asked why the notion of sacrifice was never mentioned in the UCC's stewardship information. He shook his head and said, it just won't fly in this day and age. I'm not entirely sure I agree. I think the need to make sacrifices for the good of the whole is an important spiritual discipline in a world that would rather have us be self-centered, never-satisfied consumers.

One of the complaints leveled at the president is that he never asked us as a nation to sacrifice anything in the war against terror, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. We haven't lowered the speed limit to 55 mph, nor have we required the automobile industry to adopt higher mileage standards, nor have we invested more in public transit. Instead, we mortgage our children's future with enormous federal debt and hamstring them with continued dependence on fossil fuels purchased from regimes we would not support if they didn't have oil.

Perhaps our political leaders don't have the stomach to ask us to sacrifice, either. Do we have enough love for our children and grandchildren to sacrifice something for them?

Sometimes, we who are parents might think that – given the chance – we would trade our own lives to save our children. That's a dramatic sacrifice. But if we truly love them and the others with whom they will share God's world, we will agree to start making sacrifices on their behalf. Individual efforts are great, but systemic changes are even better. You may drive a Toyota Prius, but there are still plenty of Hummers on the road, using three times the amount of gas. What if we had invested the \$282 billion we've spent on the war in Iraq on developing alternative fuels and public transportation? According to one source, we could have equipped over 500,000,000 homes with

renewable electricity. Do we love our kids and grandkids enough to change your driving habits and invest in the future, or do we want to continue our self-indulgent addiction to oil?

Another example of sacrifice is that of young men and women who volunteer for the military, willing to give their lives for their country. Some of you have been in that position, and others of you have worried about your sons and daughters in the military, and others have lost a loved one. These young men and women are being asked to sacrifice themselves for the good of people like you and me. And that's an amazingly noble attitude.

What would you give your life for? Would you sacrifice yourself for your family? Your country? Your democratic ideals? The thing about sacrifice is that anyone can do it. Pacifists and hawks; women and men; the old and the young.

And here's a question to ask yourself: would you sacrifice yourself for your faith? More often than not, we have a faith that demands very little of us. But Protestantism, and Congregationalism in particular has not always been so safe and comfortable. 27 years before the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth two English Congregationalists, Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, were martyred in London because of their fervent objection to the Book of Common Prayer, the office of bishop, and the notion that the Queen was the head of the church. Both were incarcerated in the Fleet Prison for seven years. They were brought not once, but three times, to Tyburn where public hangings took place in London (near the current Oxford Street and Marble Arch). The first time, they won a temporary reprieve. A week or so later, they were returned and the nooses put around their necks, and again there was a temporary reprieve. The third time they were brought to the gallows, they finally were executed.

Chances are that you will not be asked to sacrifice your life for your religious beliefs, but its good to remember that the views you now hold would have gotten you killed 400 years ago. How far would you go along that continuum of standing by your faith? Would you give up your profession and all your assets? Would you be willing to emigrate to somewhere you could practice your faith? Would you be unwilling to recant your "heresy" and go to the gallows? It is worth pondering, and it is also good that we remember Barrow and Greenwood in prayer. It is good to remember that our tradition is not one that requires minor commitment.

And if you think people seldom give their own lives for their faith anymore, remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in wartime Germany.

I was talking with someone about this one day, and they reminded me that the guys in the cockpits of planes on September 11 considered themselves martyrs, too.

But there is an immense difference between standing firm in one's faith as others persecute you and murdering thousands of innocent people. That was not an act of martyrdom, it was an act of atrocity. And as virtually all of my Muslim colleagues have said, it's no way to gain entrance to Paradise. Martyrs are those who are killed because of what they believe – like Gandhi and King – not those who murder others and kill themselves in the process.



Jesus issues only a single commandment, quoted twice in John's gospel. In chapter 13, he announces, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." And then he reiterates it in this morning's lection: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Do you hear the significance of that? There was no new commandment to perform a ritual or rite, nor to avoid or consume certain foods, nor to ostracize certain types of people who might be considered unclean. That is what leads Marcus Borg to conclude that “Jesus deliberately replaced the core value of purity with compassion. Compassion, not holiness, is the dominant quality of God, and is therefore to be the ethos of the community that mirrors God.”<sup>1</sup>

Compassion is the attitude that enables each of us to feel another’s suffering. It is not an act of pity, but of being *in* the experience of suffering with someone. It is from the perspective not of master to servant, but rather of friend. That level of engagement drives people to do something about suffering and change the system. Compassion may be the highest form of love that you and I can experience on a day-to-day basis.

A couple of weeks ago, we sang that wonderful hymn, “Won’t You Let Me Be Your Servant,” which contains a beautiful description of compassion: “I will hold the Christlight for you in the shadow of your fear, I will share your joy and sorrow, speak the peace you long to hear.”

As Christians, we must be willing to lay a piece of ourselves down for others, even if it isn’t our whole life.



Sometimes love stinks. Not the romanticized vision of love, but deep, self-giving love. There was once an upper-middle-class woman, who became intensely unhappy with the way her life was evolving. She suffered from depression as well, and rather than seeking professional help, she self-medicated with ample quantities of alcohol, which made the depression worse. She wasn’t one of those fall-down-in-the-gutter alcoholics, but one who was able to maintain her job, and she drank only when the cocktail tray came out in the evening and on weekends. Most people who knew her thought she seemed like a “social drinker,” but those who knew her well saw the disease of alcoholism ripping her apart. If you were her husband, and you loved her deeply, what would you do? Would you ignore her drinking and hope things would get better? Would you listen to her and try to help her through it yourself? Would you drop subtle hints that perhaps she should try Alcoholics Anonymous? Or maybe you would threaten to leave unless she stopped drinking. Or perhaps you would just leave and let her “hit bottom” and get into recovery.

What do you think the most *loving* course of action would be? Not necessarily the one that’s easiest, nor the one that has the fewest ramifications for you, but the most *loving* response. What if it costs you your marriage?

But it’s that one commandment again. Love seldom comes easy or cheap. And self-giving love isn’t necessarily instinctive for humans...it’s learned. And it’s countercultural.



Over the last five years or so there has been a lot of to-do about posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms and courthouses. Perhaps that reflects a view more about purity than compassion. And I wonder what it would be like if a lot of Christians had instead suggested that we simply post the one commandment, perhaps without attribution: “Love one another.”

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 54

Love must withstand fear. As William Sloane Coffin wrote, “Fear has so many ways to destroy life. Love alone can hold onto and recreate life. Only love can create intimacy, and freedom too, for when all hearts are one, nothing else has to be one – neither clothes nor age; neither sex nor sexual [orientation]; race nor mind-set.”<sup>2</sup>

So, friends, let us dare to follow the one commandment.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*. (Louisville: WJK Press, 2004), p.21