

Love Sermon 28 July 2019: "Being a Baptist and Keeping the Commandments."

Good morning. I'm Tom Hanks, a name that has caused lots of quiet laughter from my students. As you may have read in the worship guide, I'm Lakeshore's College Minister, and have been since you ordained me in 2005

My sermon title today looks back at my early years in church. In the 40s and 50s in Springfield, Missouri, we always seemed to focus on "keeping the commandments." I got the idea that being a Christian was at heart a negative activity. "Thou SHALT NOT" was the phrase I connected with being a Christian. For me, and perhaps for many of the older members of this congregation, "keeping the commandments" gained a sour flavor as we grew up in our churches. As Dorothy Sayers once pointed out, many of us were raised to view commandments chiefly as stern orders saying that "thou shalt not" do this or that; or, as she puts it in *Letters from a Diminished Church*, God first created the world, then "imposed on man conditions impossible of fulfillment, [and] . . . gets very angry if these are not carried out" (Sayers, "The Dogma is the Drama" from *Letters from a Diminished Church*). I was raised that way: my maternal grandfather was a stern Southern Baptist preacher, and I pretty much thought that God *was* Grandpa, but with a beard. The God of "thou shalt not" was easy for me to believe in.

But things changed. Carole and I left the churches of our youth for several years, just paying attention to ourselves, friends, and family. Carole was a Methodist from a conventionally Methodist family, and I was a Southern Baptist; neither of us felt moved to do much in the Christian world. In graduate school we began to move back into that world, though, chiefly for our daughter Kirsten.

Then we moved to Waco in 1976, and Jim Vardaman recommended that we visit Lakeshore Baptist Church. Things changed still more. Kay Avant strong-armed me into the choir, and a year and a half later Carole and I joined the church. Finally in this progression, about ten years ago or so the choir practiced, then sang, Thomas Tallis's "If ye love me, keep my commandments." I had read that "Love" passage before, I think—Vivian read it for us again today. For the College Class, a few years ago, I finally thought to look up Christ's commandments and see just what it was that he had asked me—and you—to observe. What WERE Christ's commandments?

You heard them today, from our children. Let me return to the points that Caedmon, Lincoln, Laurel, and Vivian made for us as they read the Gospel passages: none of those passages, you note, says "thou shalt not." Each of them is instead a positive suggestion of what we ARE to do: love God, as Caedmon said; Lincoln read, love our neighbor AND OURSELVES; that we should love our enemies and wish them well, Laurel said; and finally Vivian read to us the last

commandment of Jesus: you and I are commanded—not suggested, not wished, but **commanded**—to love one another. I venture to guess that you and I are not always perfect in following these four commands. You may not even have thought of them as THE commandments, replacing the Big 10 with positive words of love. But I remind you of the relationship Jesus says that he has to the ten commandments, indeed to the entire LAW of the older scriptures: “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them,” he tells us in Matthew 5.17. My early church had not quite gotten that message, and my grandfather’s idea of love was very tough love indeed—but Jesus has a gentler approach. Indeed, he models what you and I have come to see as the greatest possible love: in John 15 He says to His disciples, and thus to us, that ⁹“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

We see three parts to this last passage: love, joy, and an act of will: if need be, “to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” We recall 9/11/2001, when we saw that sort of love as male and female first responders rushed into the falling Towers and laid down their lives for friends they didn’t know. Let me stop to say the

names of the three women who died there: probably you have never heard those names, but they ought to be heard. They were police captain Kathy Mazza, emergency med tech Yamel Merino, and policewoman Moira Smith.

You and I will probably NOT be called upon to show Christ's love by rushing into a falling building. He has commanded us, however, to love one another. His own actions made it clear that his group of "one another" was about as big a group as you could find in ancient Palestine; it included a Syro-Phoenician woman, a group of lepers whom he had never met before, a sick man at the pool of Siloam, and a little girl to whom He said "Talitha cum"—little girl, rise up. It included a lawyer who asked him what was the greatest commandment and seemed actually to want to know the answer. It included a woman taken in adultery, one whom He refused to judge. The group also included 12 men—one of whom betrayed Him—whom he commanded to love others as he loved them. And it seems that the first group of twelve still expands. It includes you and me, for example, warts and all. It includes the outcasts of our culture, whether they are struggling to pass through our borders or struggling to keep others FROM passing through our borders.

Okay: time to get practical. What, precisely, might it mean for you and me to love our fellow humans? Most of us are not first responders; most of us will never

be asked to love others by dying for them. What DOES Jesus ask us to do, when he asks us to love one another?

I didn't have an answer when I first posed this question to the College Class. Fortunately, I had resources who DID have answers: today I cite two of them: C. S. Lewis and Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa probably still lives in your memory, though she died 22 years ago; her advice to us was, so far as I know, never voiced. She just lived her advice. She didn't necessarily LIKE the people she aided in her 87 years—but she did love them, in the terms that Jesus set down: in crowded, poverty-stricken Calcutta she fed the hungry, cared for the sick, and clothed the naked for nearly 50 years.

C. S. Lewis lived at the other end of the spectrum: he was a professor at Oxford, as you know; he was also the writer of *The Chronicles of Narnia* and many other works, for which he was paid a great deal of money. He donated ALL of the proceeds from his Christian writings to various charities—and he also left us some good advice about love. Here it is in a few paragraphs from his *Mere*

Christianity:

C. S. Lewis on Love

... love, in the Christian sense, does not mean an emotion. It is a state not of the feelings but of the will; that state of the will which we have naturally about ourselves, and must learn to have about other people....

Our love for ourselves does not mean that we *like* ourselves. It means that we wish our own good. In the same way Christian Love (or Charity) for our neighbours is quite a different thing from liking or affection. We ‘like’ or are ‘fond of’ some people, and not of others. It is important to understand that this natural liking’ is neither a sin nor a virtue, any more than your likes and dislikes in food are a sin or a virtue. It is just a fact. But, of course, what we do about it is either sinful or virtuous. [*Mere Christianity*, part 42, from Harper Collins edn. 1952, rpt. 2001, pp. 129-130: <http://merecslewis.blogspot.com/2011/10/love-charity-part-1-theological-virtue.html>]

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him [or her]. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him[/her] more. If you do him[/her] a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him[/her] less. . . . whenever we do good to another self, just because it is a self, made (like us) by God, and desiring its own happiness as we desire ours, we shall have learned to love it a little more or, at least, to dislike it less. [from *Mere Christianity*, Bk. 3: Christian Behavior (part 9, Charity), Harper Collins 1952.] <http://merecslewis.blogspot.com/2011/10/love-charity-part-2-theological-virtue.html>

So—in practical, day-to-day terms on the level of Mother Teresa’s actions, on the level of Lewis’s charitable donations, what is it that Jesus has asked us to do? If we believe Lewis, Jesus has not asked us to develop warm fuzzy feelings for everyone we meet. No—we can even DISlike some of the people we meet, as we sometimes dislike ourselves. But what Jesus COMMANDS us to do is actively to DO THING for the people we meet who **need** to be done for. We may decide to

carry water bottles in our cars and give water to homeless people begging on the streets; we may even buy, then give to them, MacDonald gift certificates for meals. We may, as many of our fellow members here do, deliver for Meals on Wheels, or give them money to buy food for the elderly (a group of whom I grow increasingly fond as my own years roll by). According to Lewis, and according to Jesus in Matthew 25, what we are COMMANDED to do is to take active steps to feed, or clothe, or comfort, or cure, those of our neighbors whom we encounter and who are needy. I close today with that story from Matthew 25, here read from the *Message* version of the Bible:

Matthew 25:31-46 The Message (MSG)

The Sheep and the Goats

³¹⁻³³ “When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

³⁴⁻³⁶ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
 I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
 I was homeless and you gave me a room,
 I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
 I was sick and you stopped to visit,
 I was in prison and you came to me.’

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ “Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And

when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?' Then the King will say, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.'

⁴¹⁻⁴³ "Then he will turn to the 'goats,' the ones on his left, and say, 'Get out, worthless goats! You're good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.'

⁴⁴ "Then those 'goats' are going to say, 'Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn't help?'

⁴⁵ "He will answer them, 'I'm telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.'

⁴⁶ "Then those 'goats' will be herded to their eternal doom, but the 'sheep' to their eternal reward."

May God add God's blessing to these words you and I have shared. Amen.