

Emulate to Habituate
Reading from the Gospels: John 15:9-17

In his classic sitcom, Jerry Seinfeld once broke up with a woman because she ate her peas one at a time. In the rom-com *You've Got Mail*, Tom Hanks professes that he could never be with someone who listens to Joni Mitchell. An actual meeting of church prelates in Europe was canceled because a couple of the clergy didn't like their seating assignments. And future Confederate general George Pickett almost led the U.S. into war with England over a shoplifting pig. How do relationships survive the peculiarities of the populace?

The noted relationship researchers of the Gottman Institute estimate that 69% of couples' problems are perpetual. Some arguments won't be resolved. In addition, they claim that after listening to a couple talk for about five minutes, they can determine with 91 percent accuracy whether the couple (straight or gay, rich or poor, childless or not) will survive (Heidi Husted Armstrong, *Presbyterian Outlook*). In five minutes they can detect the factors that will sabotage relationship.

I think its safe to assume the same holds true for friendships, partnerships, and maybe even British Rock Bands. *It couldn't have been all Yoko's fault!*

52 weeks a year we gather to dissect the mysteries of love's demands, and after thirty-one years of laying a scalpel to it, I can confidently say I know I have only scratched the surface of love's complexities. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Straightforward and inconceivable at the same time.

We know we're supposed to love one another. In fact, we understood the rule to love before we were potty-trained. I saw a preschooler put in time-out at the post office the other day. It seems his younger brother had missed him terribly while the older brother was toiling away at preschool, and the younger brother was attempting to hug him, but the older brother was having none of that. I'm not sure what he did to the little guy, but in the time it took me to drop a letter in the box, the dude was unceremoniously remanded to Post Office jail. So, I guess you could say it was a federal crime; alienation of affection.

The older brother wasn't confused. He knew what he was supposed to do, and he knew what he did not want to do and was not going to do. We know we're supposed to love one another. It's not a knowledge problem, and to a certain extent, it's not even a problem of will. We're not necessarily opposed to the idea of loving one another. We're just not very good at it and it could be observed that we are shockingly unpracticed at it.

Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Straightforward and inconceivable at the same time." Really Jesus? Aren't you forgetting that you are God and we are not, so how can we have any hope of attaining any semblance of the standard for love you established?

The key here may just be found in a conjunction. "Love one another **as** I have loved you." The Greek conjunction, *καθως*, translated **as** in our text, has two senses of meaning. In one sense the conjunction is implying a comparison – Love one another *in the same way or like* I have loved you. Jesus' daily walk was a Montel Jordan dance track, *This is how we do it*. How do we love one another? We simply look to the template Jesus provided throughout his public

ministry: touching the leper; feeding the hungry; ignoring social convention and society's arbitrary borders and restrictions so that an outcast could feel included and welcomed; forgiving his persecutors.

Love one another as I have loved you. In his life, Christ gave us the blueprint: He who has two coats, give one to someone who has none; When I was hungry you fed me; When I was a stranger you welcomed me; just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me;' blessed are the peacemakers; let the children come to me; and from the cross, forgive them for they know not what they do. The Gospels are saturated with images that reveal what love looks like. Christ did not leave us without a map. Aristotle said that one of the best ways to habituate oneself in a particular virtue is to emulate those who already embody it. Emulate to habituate. Jesus has given us the map.

However, even if we manage some familiarity with the map through the Incarnation of God in Christ, we may feel discouraged by the seeming impossibility of the path Jesus is asking us to follow, particularly when he starts with the crazy talk in the next verse when he says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for

one's friends.” Whoa! Let’s not get carried away there, Jesus! I’m reminded of James Gregory’s riff on the instructions the flight attendant gives at the beginning of every flight. You know the drill, if there is a sudden loss of cabin pressure the oxygen masks overhead will drop down, and if this happens they tell you to breathe first before you hand it to the person next to you. Gregory says, “Well, I was going to do that anyway. I mean I’m a pretty nice guy, but I just can’t see myself looking at someone I don’t even know, and saying, ‘Well I don’t have anything to live for. Why don’t you breathe.’”

Knowing what to do and actually doing it are two separate propositions. The older brother in the Post Office. He knew what love demanded. He just wasn’t going to act on it. And it’s not just stubbornness that prevents knowledge from becoming action. Often, we not only know what love demands, we actually may even want to act on what love demands, but somewhere between desire and deed, we trip over ourselves. You actually intended to write that note, make that phone call, be present to the friend in crisis, sacrifice something precious for the benefit of another, even lay down your life for a friend; but for all manner of reasons desire doesn’t translate into deed. The

Apostle Paul understood that better than anyone. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” He says, “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Straightforward and inconceivable at the same time. In and through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we have the map, so why do we keep getting lost?

Our hope may just be in that same simple conjunction. Remember that I said that the conjunction *κατησ/as* contains two senses. The first, as we’ve discussed is comparison – *Love one another (in the same way, just like) I have loved you*. We’ve got the map. However, there is also a second sense conveyed by the conjunction and that is *causation*. Love one another as I have loved you. The second clause makes possible the first clause. In this sense Jesus is saying “the Father’s love has not

only supplied the model but also the motive and power for Jesus' love for the disciples and Jesus' love for the disciples has the same causative or constitutive effect." (George Ramsey, *Feasting on the Word*) The first letter of John explains it like this: In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins ... We love because he first loved us."

Jesus not only gives the command, Jesus is the command enacted, and in this Jesus provides us the means and the power for us to obey the command. The great theologian Augustine said, "He gives what He commands when He helps him to obey whom he commands." In describing the Trinity, Augustine put it this way, "God is the lover, the beloved, and the love that unites them." In other words, God desires love, Jesus reveals and fulfills the demands of love, and the Spirit awakens us to this love and sustains our efforts to love one another.

Do you remember the Gottman's claim that in five minutes, they could discern with 91% accuracy whether a relationship would survive? Do you want to know how they could tell? They say signs of criticism and contempt are lethal to relationship. Survival, it seems, boils down to showing kindness and respect. You don't awaken each morning

hoping to have it out with someone. You may actually begin the day hoping others will know your love for them. So how do we keep from tripping over ourselves on the path of love?

I'm reading a good novel currently entitled *A Gentleman in Moscow*. It's the story of a royally connected Russian count who with the 1917 Revolution is stripped of his properties and status and consigned to a life within the walls of Moscow's once grand Metropol Hotel. The story tracks his adjustment to his new life and his interactions with the great variety of people who cross the threshold of the hotel. Once, upon realizing his first impression of someone had been off the mark, Count Rostov observes, "By their very nature, human beings are so capricious, so complex, so delightfully contradictory, that they deserve not only our consideration, but our reconsideration – and our unwavering determination to withhold our opinion until we have engaged with them in every possible setting at every possible hour."

(Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow*)

Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Christ is not only the map, Christ is also the

means and the motivation to take us where we didn't think we could go out of love for those we didn't even think we could love. Amen.