

## Keeping it Going

*John 15:9-17*

<sup>9</sup> “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command. <sup>15</sup> I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. <sup>17</sup> This is my command: Love each other.”

*[Note: this message begins with a DVD presentation of Rob Bell's Nooma series, entitled "Corners". In this DVD Rob talks about Deuteronomy 24: 19 – 22, where Moses instructs the people of Israel to leave 'corners' in their harvest – i.e., don't go back to get what you missed the first time through. He says, this may seem 'unfair' but the point was that the Hebrews would never forget that they once were slaves in Egypt – that is, they too were recipients of grace. Bell suggests that this passage may be a warning to all of us regarding the danger of 'success', which leads us to not appreciate what we have any longer. A life may be lived inwardly, contracting in on itself, or outwardly, expanding, growing. And the key to it all is our willingness to give, to reach out – not simply with money, but to give something of ourselves in some way that is meant to alleviate some suffering... And thereby remember that we are all recipients of God's amazing grace.]*

I'm often asked how it is that I come up with sermon topics from week to week. Usually I just smile and say, “Prayer”, which is kind of a summary of how this typically works. I can't always explain it but things just tend to fall together, and I can eventually ‘see’ where, *hopefully*, God is leading me ...

Like today's message: Two weeks ago was our Missions Conference. And it was a wonderful, powerful weekend. Those of you who were here for more than one service on that weekend understand what I'm talking about when I say that it was a *cumulative* weekend, it just got better and better, and it was truly a joy, and an inspiration to hear about the work that is being done for Christ in these two corners of our world.

Anyway, I'll be honest with you, with the economy such as it is, and the fear that is driving so much everywhere, I was a bit concerned about how this was going to ‘play out’. Were we going

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to be able to continue to support our missionaries, and mission agencies as we have in the past? How would the people of FUMC respond?

In preparation for the 8:30 service that weekend, Jim Hendriks had asked me if he could show a DVD. And I said, 'Sure'! So I came in early Sunday AM and set up everything. But I wanted to test the system and make sure the sound level was OK. So I looked through a stack of DVD's in my office that I brought back from the National Pastor's Conference last February. I discovered there this one by Rob Bell, I didn't know they had put it in my pack, a freebie preview of a series called Nooma. (We use Nooma's all the time, btw, here.)

So I watched it – just as a 'sound check' – alone in the chapel, about 7 am on the Sunday morning of our Missions Conference. And it was one of those things: God touched my heart, it was a clear reminder to me of why it is that we do stuff like that weekend. Why do we have faith promise mission pledges? Why do we have a missions program at all? Why do we send out mission teams all the time? Why do we host Interfaith Hospitality Network, and youth ministries, and SS, CROP walks, food pantries, and everything else we do here with a focus outward?

As Rob Bell points out, drawing from that Deuteronomy 24 passage, we do these things so that we will never forget that 'we were once slaves in Egypt'. We are people who have received great blessing from God – more than we could ever hope to repay, grace upon grace... as Pastor HeyYoung preached about a few weeks ago, grace that God has 'wastefully' poured out on us.

But we are *human* beings, and we tend to have very short memories. Gifts that are freely given, but given regularly, can quickly become '*entitlements*'. And abundance can easily become *necessity*. So God speaks to his people as they are just beginning to settle into their new homeland, and says, 'If you want to survive, if you want to *really* prosper, you need to remember where you came from. And one way to do that, is to be people who give.'

As I said, this message really spoke to my heart, it was a gentle and clear reminder that we're not only doing the right thing, but we're doing a *necessary* thing for ourselves. God has blessed us,

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now how do we ‘keep this going?’ Well, it’s by passing along some of those gifts that God has given to us.

I thought, “I think I’d like to give a message on that at some point in the near future.” Then last week I read the Lectionary Reading from the Gospel of John for today. Jesus, as you likely know, here in John 15, is speaking to the disciples in the Upper Room. Although they don’t know it, Jesus knows that he is preparing them for his death, which was going to come very quickly. And he is giving *them* some instructions on how to ‘keep it going’, i.e., how to keep going in their newfound relationship with God. How to live “*abundantly*” (Jesus’ word elsewhere!)

First, he reminds them of who they are: people who are loved by God:

<sup>9</sup> “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.* Then he says, in effect, ‘Don’t forget this’  
Now *remain in my love*. Keep it going.

And he gives some simple instructions on how we *can* ‘remain’ in his love.

Lets look at just two verses:

<sup>11</sup> *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.* <sup>12</sup> *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

First, Jesus clearly tells us the reason why he gives these instructions. It’s not so we can ‘grow strong by suffering’, it’s not so that we can be of some use to the world, it’s not so that we can demonstrate our loyalty to Jesus by being willing to sacrifice or do something he tells us to do that we may find distasteful. No, the reason he says these things, is for our benefit:

*...that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.*

In other words, this is the way to happiness! We’re not going to find joy any other way, we’re not going to be fulfilled by ‘doing *our* thing’, only *his* thing.

And then, here’s the command: (pretty simple)

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*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

Now, he goes on, in case we may miss it, to explain that love is an action word, not a 'feeling word'. Love is a *giving* word. A *doing* word. And here's the thing, it is basically the same principle that Moses taught the Hebrews in Deuteronomy 24. If you want to be happy in your new land, if you want to be 'full of joy', you're going to have to remember where you came from. And you're only going to do that by giving. Jesus says, Love each other as I have loved you.

Here's how I loved you: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus 'ups the ante', but 'laying down your life' in practical sense (because while I've read about martyrs, I've never met one) for most of us, then, 'laying down your life' for another is just another way of saying – 'when you harvest your grain, leave the corners'. When you beat your olive trees, or harvest the grapes... leave some for someone else. You were once a slave, too. Never forget that.

For us, giving, serving, going – all are ways that we 'lay down our lives'. Jesus, I think, expanded this into the moral/ spiritual realm as well. Tonight we're going to talk about forgiveness using the Rwanda genocide and reconciliation movement as an example. We wouldn't be talking about that if Jesus hadn't specifically taught us: you need to forgive, *because you are forgiven people*.

Never forget, you were once slaves, too.

A man by name of Mark Galli, wrote a painfully honest article in Christianity Today a year or so ago...

"Many years ago, my wife and I were having a marital "moral discourse," and I was becoming increasingly agitated. In my fury, I yelled at her and aimed my fist at a section of the dining room wall. Unfortunately, the Holy Spirit failed to guide my hand between the studs, as he usually had done, and instead I hit a stud right on. I broke a knuckle.

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A deathly silence settled in the room. While I came from a family in which nothing got done until someone yelled, Barb came from a family in which yelling brought things to a standstill. She was not going to speak to me for weeks. As I writhed in physical pain, I also writhed in emotional pain. I was a moral failure of a husband. ...

As I tried awkwardly, with one hand, to sweep up the bits of sheet rock strewn on the floor, I felt a hand on my arm. I turned around, and it was Barb. She said something apologetic. I said something apologetic. And then she embraced me for a long time.

She had every right to pronounce a grand moral imperative, condemn my behavior, and distance herself from me. That surely would have taught me a lesson. Instead, she embraced the angry sinner, and rather than teaching me a lesson, she helped heal me.

Galli continues: [On Good Friday] we Christians celebrate a similar event, albeit one of cosmic proportions. In his life, Jesus so identified with the immoral, spent so much time with them, that the good people of his day mistook him for a sinner. On Good Friday Jesus continued the story. He did not distance himself from sin as much as embrace it in himself. And by this embrace, he made redemption possible.<sup>1</sup>

And he tells us, ‘if you want to be happy’ ... do what I did. Love each other as I have loved you. Leave the corners... share, serve, come among your neighbors as a witness for me. And never forget who you were.

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<sup>1</sup>Mark Galli, “The Good Friday Life,” *Christianity Today* (4-4-07)