

## **Sermon: Commanded to Love**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, May 9, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts  
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I love my mother. She is a wonderful mother — caring, understanding, kind, protective, positive, firm when needed, and forgiving when appropriate. I couldn't ask for a better mother. If you put the same question to my wife Daisy, she would tell you that she couldn't ask for a better mother-in-law. Mom really is a model mother.

She is also the matriarch of the family when it comes to the Christian faith. She is the first to come to faith, a never tiring evangelist who is always ready to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. She is fond of telling her story of rounding up neighbourhood children and bringing them to church weekly, to attend Sunday school which Mom taught. One of them kids was Daisy, when she was only 8 or 9 years old. Mom always uses that story to encourage other women to do the same, because one never know if it could result in a fine daughter-in-law or a good son-in-law, sometimes later down the road.

When Mom was in Taiwan, she regularly traveled to different congregations, giving testimonial of her conversion to the Christian faith. She was a really good story teller, weaving her life, her struggles, her transformation into a beautiful tapestry of a redeemed and blessed life. When my family immigrated to Montreal in the 80's, Mom was instrumental in gathering the Taiwanese immigrant community in that city and forming a community of faith, a congregation, in that process.

She has been a pillar of family, of faith, and of community. That is why the single most difficult decision that I had to make, was to ask her to step down as a session elder, of the pastoral charge I was serving, about three years into my ministry. Yes, that congregation was my home congregation, and yes I was warned by my seminary professor not to return to one's home congregation, as there are just too many potential pitfalls — role-transition being one.

It wasn't that Mom had all the sudden became a bad mother, or an unsuitable elder. Rather she was being herself, protective of me, way too protective, like a mother bear guarding her cub. No one in the session dare to raise concerns they may have of me; no advise, friendly or not, was able to pass muster under Mom. It was seriously impacting normal working relationship in a session, and it was seriously impacting her emotional well-being. So I asked her

to step aside from her active role in the session, and to continue to support my ministry in different ways, namely by praying and by paying. You see, my parents were always very generous when it comes to giving to the church.

I imagine that a similar role transition was taking place in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 3:31-35, *“Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”*”

The use of figurative kinship language was common in antiquity. For example, one could call a respected older woman “mother” and call fellow members of one’s ethnic group “brothers”. Nevertheless, the refusal to give higher priority or to even acknowledge one’s own physical family, one’s own flesh and blood, is offensive in most cultures.

Yet, such role-transition was necessary, and Jesus used that occasion as a teaching moment, to re-orient kinship in God’s family, and to re-define one’s relationship to the Son of God. Whoever does the will of God is brother, sister, and mother to Jesus the Christ.

Doing the will of God means keeping the commandments of Jesus, that is to love one another as he have loved us. Not instruction, not advise, nor pleading, but commandment. Having the same stature as what Moses handed down to the Israelites on Mount Sinai, Jesus handed to us this commandment *“love one another as I have loved you”*.

Early in my marriage, Daisy and I were still trying to figure out the best way to divi up household chores. On the issue of washing dishes, we had our differences. I had the habit of piling up dishes in the sink, and wash only after the sink is full. She, on the other hand, has the tendency of washing dishes diligently, leaving very few dirty ones to accumulate. So guess who did most of the dishes? She did, of course! I must admit I took full advantage of her on this issue.

I remember one time, perhaps she was busy or was simply exhausted, dishes were left unwashed in the sink for a few days. I had mentally noted that I was eventually going to get to it, to show my love by ‘helping her out with the dishes’. Before I was able to get to it, she came to me first, asked me pointedly to wash those darn dishes. I did so, but not without a bit of grumbling at the back of my throat.

It got me thinking why I was feeling and acting the way I did? Why was I resentful to being told what to do? From a person that is dear to me, who clearly

loves me without reserve? Even when the thing that I was told to do, I was already planning to do? Resenting being told what to do, or rebelling against commandments, I suspect is not my problem alone. We see this surfacing in many facets of life, in family dynamics, in workplaces, in schools, and in society as a whole. Is it really so difficult to put on masks during a respiratory pandemic? Is it really so much to ask to get oneself vaccinated?

Theologically speaking, disobedience is the root of the original sin. One could make a case that disobedience never really left humanity, and has become deep rooted in all of us. Why then did Jesus feel necessary to command us to love one another? Isn't love the simplest, the most natural thing to do? I would suggest no. The answer lies in what Jesus actually asks us to do...to love in the way he has loved us.

Not *eros* love, the Greek word for physical love between lovers. Not *phileo* love, the kinship love between parents and children, between brothers, sister, and other family members. Jesus commanded us to *agape*—the sacrificial love of laying down one's life for another. "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (John 15:13)

Here comes the most important role-transition: when we obey this commandment of Christ, we become friends of Christ. Jesus explains in verse 15, "*I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*"

Servant, or *doulas* in Greek, should really be translated as 'slave'. Slavery in antiquity was not only institutionalized, it was quite common. The relationship between a master and a slave was governed by strict obedience. Disobedience of a slave was punishable by death, at the hand of his or her master, and enforced brutally by the state.

At this past Friday's Bible Study group, we came across Psalm 123, where the psalmist, taking the posture of slaves, looking up to God, pleaded for mercy, due to mistreatments at the hand of earthly masters. In the Message version of that passage, verse 3-4 reads, "*Mercy, God, mercy! We've been kicked around long enough, kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men, kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes.*" The brutal condition of slavery was viscerally depicted.

Yet when we obey the commandment of Jesus, we are no longer called slaves, but friends by Christ. Slaves do not know the will of their master, they are to do what was commanded, blindly without question, but not friends. Friends understand the needs of one another, they acknowledge that their own well-beings are intimately tie to the well-being of their friends.

Friendship with Jesus also comes with a unique catch, that is being friend to the servant of all humanity, as in Mark 10:45, "*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*" Friendship with Jesus is not for privilege but for service. While it is possible to be a servant without being a friend, it is impossible to be a true friend of Christ and not be a servant.

Christ gives us a new commandment: love one another as he loved us. As the Father has loved us, so we shall love. As the Father sent Jesus, so God sends us as servant-friend to love, to bear fruit. Perhaps love without obedience is not really love, at least not the self-giving, sacrificial love of Christ. Perhaps this is what Jesus is confronting us, teaching us with his own life when he took up that cross. Love is always tied to obedience, and it is practiced not in isolation but in the community of faith that professes Jesus is Lord, in local congregations with multi-faceted expressions of that same love.

This is what I love about congregational ministry. Yes, we could find people of same age, same interest, same background, or same theology, but we will encounter people who are vastly different from us. We will have to sit with them in the same pews, to shake their hands or touch their elbows during the Passing of the Peace. We will have to break bread with them during coffee hour, occasional meals, or partaking in the Holy Communion. We will serve with people vastly different from us in committees, boards, sessions or presbyteries. From time to time, we will even have to face those we dislike, distrust, and will be called upon to get along, to let our better angel prevail, even to love, by laying down our lives for others, all for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is precisely in congregational settings that love of Christ is practiced, perfected and sent out to the ends of the world, by the followers of Jesus, no longer called slaves or servants, but as friends, brothers and sisters in Christ.

Today is Mother's Day, and we should celebrate and remember our earthly mothers. If your mother is still around, do connect with her, safely of course, and just say 'thank you Mom, for all that you have done'. However, our denomination the Presbyterian Church in Canada sees fit to designate today as Christian Family Sunday, perhaps as a way to not neglect contributions from our earthly fathers. More importantly, our Scripture readings today remind us that, truly in Christ, you are my mothers, my brothers and my sisters, and we have one Father, that in Father in heaven. Now go and love one another, as Christ has loved us.

**In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**