

Easter 6, Year A, 052911

*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

As you surely have noticed by now, we have been reading from the Gospel of John ever since Easter (with the exception of one Sunday when we read Luke), beginning with the account of Thomas, who missed out seeing Jesus the first time the rest of the disciples did. According to the chronology of the writer of this Gospel, this event happened on Easter evening.

Last week's Gospel reading, in which Jesus told the disciples that there are many dwelling places in his Father's house, takes place in John's chronology on the night before Jesus was crucified. It is part of what is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse, a VERY lengthy series of talks (from the last part of chapter 12 through chapter 17) in which Jesus tells his disciples what to expect and how to carry on their lives after Jesus is gone. Since it goes on for several chapters, John makes Jesus repeat himself an awful lot and things get confusing.

In today's reading, from the same chapter and the same farewell discourse, Jesus says to his disciples, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And in verse 23 of this chapter, which is unfortunately left out of the reading, Jesus says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."

Two parts: 1) love me, keep my commandments and 2) we will make our home with you. I would venture to say that when most of us hear the first part, we think that it is a conditional statement - no grace involved: if you love me, you WILL keep my commandments. And I also would guess that most of us equate 'my commandments' with those 10 pesky ways to live that some people want to put on courthouse walls.

Well, the commandments that mattered most to Jesus were the two about loving God and loving our neighbor, which include forgiveness, praying for our enemies, caring for the poor and the marginalized, and treating everyone with dignity.

And I would suggest that the requirement part is not Jesus' intention at all. Rather, what he is saying is that when you really, really love someone, doing what is good and right comes so much more naturally and easily. So when Jesus is gone, the disciples can continue to love him by doing his works and by keeping his commandments. That is, they will move out of their private experience of Jesus ,

and begin to live what he taught them and demonstrated in his own life. Their love will express itself in obedience and in keeping his words. And it is then that they will find themselves again in his love.

The second important part of this passage is the idea that Jesus and his Father will make their home with those who love them. For me, that statement evokes such a feeling of comfort and strength - it makes it possible to put aside worries about being alone, about being left without anyone who knows you better than you know yourself. That is the action of the Spirit in our lives - to help us to know that we are not alone, that we are comforted and strengthened by the presence of the Spirit in our lives. And through that presence, the comfort and strength and love of God overflows from us into the lives of others. Our lives will be evidence of the presence of the Spirit in our midst, and will be the point from which we are sent out with good news for the whole world.

And now, because it is not likely that anyone would remember these ideas as I've presented them, here's a story that might make all this stick so that we could use it again later when we need it:

The patient, we'll call her Janet, entered the Medical Center for quadruple-bypass surgery. Since being moved into ICU, she had barely moved, or even opened her eyes. It had been days now, and volunteer Tricia Jones was getting concerned. The situation was getting desperate. So she decided to call in a member of the canine corps.

Help arrived moments later. Della, a 145-pound shaggy white Great Pyrenees, crawled right up on Janet's hospital bed and snuggled in beside her. There she lay beside her patient, nuzzling her warm and furry body in next to Janet, who hadn't twitched a muscle for days. Tricia and the other nurses gathered around to watch, tense and concerned.

Then, they detected movement. Janet's hand came alive. It wasn't long until her hand was inching toward the dog. She began to stroke its fur. Within minutes she was smiling and talking, calling the huge dog her friend. Tricia stood close by and watched the monitors next to her bed. The blood pressure monitor began to go down, down, down to normal levels.

Della is not the only dog in the corps therapy dogs across the country. Therapy Dogs International screens dogs for personality, obedience and training and provides certification for more than 4,500 pet partners who provide service for 350,000 patients in the United States.

What is it about dogs that evokes such a positive response? How are they able to provide such comfort and reassurance? Whatever *it* is, we know that dogs demonstrate loyalty and obedience, and offer comfort and a sense of well-being.

The point? Well, maybe we could try not only to be godly but also *dogly* in our daily lives! The marks of a *dogly* disciple can easily be seen in the sentence: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." The *dogly* disciple is on the receiving end of the Spirit's comforting and reassuring presence and also offers that to those around him or her.

If we were to be *dogly* disciples in our churches, homes, schools and communities like therapy dogs do in hospitals, what could that look like? What would faithful obedience to the will of God, and a willingness to "come" to the side of others as their Advocate mean in the lives of those around us?

To answer these questions, we should explore the fundamental nature of *dogness*, or *doghood*. There are 10 dog-truths that will help us do what we are called to do:

1. **Greet loved ones with a wagging tail.** Nothing is more important than feeling loved, and there's no creature on the planet that does it better than a dog. The wagging tail affirms that this is where we belong: This is our home, where we live, where we're safe and where we're loved.
2. **Eat with gusto and enthusiasm.** You know how dogs eat: slobber flying everywhere, and licking the dish clean until every last scent of gravy is gone. Dogs know that eating is a celebration of life. Breaking bread together is holy. To nourish the body is not a chore, but a sacrament. Animosities are dissipated at meals, barriers are broken down, and friendships are renewed and strengthened. So, eat with gusto. Enjoy all the flavors and spices of creation.
3. **On hot days, drink lots of water and lie under a shady tree.** Relax, slow down and enjoy. Give yourself a time out. Opt out, unplug, and get lazy.
4. **Run, romp and play daily.** Physical exercise is as important for the soul as it is for the body. No disciple of Christ can be as faithful and effective when

the body is run down and health is unnecessarily poor. When we learn how to play and stretch and get in some exercise we'll feel better from the inside out.

5. **Be loyal.** Loyalty is a good thing, and if your dog is nothing else, he is loyal to fault. Loyalty has fallen on hard times. Loyalty is a critical element of discipleship, for it speaks to our relationship with others: our spouse or partner, our vocation, our community and our friends.
6. **When you're happy, dance around and wag your tail.** Thankfulness and celebration are powerful dynamics for successful and healthy living. Gratitude is a gift we give ourselves that enables us to affirm the essential goodness of life. Even when adversity strikes, gratitude helps us maintain our perspective and carries us through the low moments.
7. **If someone is having a bad day, be silent, sit close by and nuzzle gently.** We all have bad days. That's why we need encouragement and affirmation. When we are depressed, we know that it takes only a quiet word, a gentle touch to bring us around. A dog has this instinct that tells it when to be dancing and jumping around and when to just be there beside you. Words are not always needed, or even helpful, to convey empathy. A gentle nuzzle will do.
8. **No matter how harshly you're scolded, don't pout - run back and make friends.** Carrying grudges makes life a chore. Make friends and keep them. Overlook faults and assume the best. Don't keep a scorecard of rights and wrongs. Don't take offense.
9. **Avoid biting when a simple growl will do.** We do not need to injure others by what we say or do. We can be strong with love; firm with kindness.
10. **Bark with your buddies.** Barking is an act of commonality. Barking says we belong in this together. We are one.

In the three years the disciples traveled with Jesus, they had incredible experiences together and learned a lot. They learned something about love, about faith, about affirmation, about friendship, about ministry, about eating together, about acceptance, about patience and humility. The list of things we can learn from dogs makes it seem possible for us to experience the same things the disciples did.

At the very least, let us remember that we are a community, charged by Jesus to love God and to love our neighbors. Let us offer the comfort and strength given by the Spirit to those around us. And by all means, let us gather around this table in celebration, and eat with gusto the bread of life.