

## Sixth Sunday of Easter, Cycle A

John 14:15-21

We have reached the point in the current pandemic where everyone is discussing reopening the country. In fact, some places have begun to do so at the direction of government officials. In other places, government officials have ordered everyone to resume work willy-nilly. Meanwhile, some individuals have stopped sheltering in place, in defiance of the rules. Protesters even shout that their rights are being violated, while science predicts a resurgence. What should our attitude be toward the rule of law? While Americans have had a growing disregard for authority since the sixties, perhaps we have thrown the baby out with the bath water.

In this Sunday's gospel, Jesus links loving him with keeping his commandments. He starts by saying, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments," and later repeats, "Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me." Love may seem to us to have little to do with keeping commandments. In our culture, we frequently associate the latter with authority and scrutiny in one party and restriction and guilt in the other. Love, on the other hand, implies intimacy and mutuality. Why does Jesus link love and keeping the commandments?

Keeping the commandments has been an essential piece of the divine-human relationship since God established the covenant with the Israelites on Mt Sinai. Three distinguishing features of the Ten Commandments and the Code of the Covenant, which follows immediately in Exodus, reveal aspects of rule keeping modern folk might miss. The laws are written in the second person – "You shall ..." – not in third person as other law codes of the time. God addresses the Israelites directly asking them to express their love with their lifestyle. Second, the Torah uniquely requires the Israelites to treat human beings fairly and respect life. Furthermore, the Israelites were commanded to treat others with the same mercy God has. God's mercy becomes the benchmark and pattern for human behavior. Those who follow the law mirror God's activity and attitudes. Mirroring God in one's interactions with others shows love and commitment to God. So the Torah contradicts our culture's negative connotations around following laws.

This Jewish understanding of rule keeping underpins Jesus' double reminder that loving him will take concrete form in keeping the commandments. The Greek word for love which Jesus uses is *agape*, not *philos*: it is not about friendly love, but rather active concern for the dignity and rights of others. If we *agape* Jesus, we will *agape* others; we will live, as the Israelites did, in a way that mirrors the mercy of God.

There is most certainly a distinction between God's laws and any government's laws. We most certainly must determine the righteousness of each human law, rather than follow blindly. If our yardstick for a valid societal rule is whether it cares for the rights and dignity of others, continuing to shelter in place in order to hold down the spread of COVID-19 so we can save lives meets that criterion.

This may be hard. We are all tired of sheltering in place. Many are struggling financially. Anxiety and loneliness gnaw at our hearts. Spring is calling. Normalcy is calling. A desire for control is calling. Our families are driving us nuts and our to-do lists are covered in cobwebs. We long to mourn losses and celebrate joys in public.

Between the double reminders that connect loving Jesus with keeping his commandments, Jesus expounds on the benefits of being in a relationship with him. His tender words address the ache of our hearts. The Advocate will be with us always. The Spirit of truth remains with us and will be in us. And, finally, the poignant promise: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you." That is the flip side of keeping the commandments. The commandments are our duty in the covenant. God's duty is to free us from slavery, perform awesome deeds to save us and provide us with a Promised Land overflowing with everything we need. These are not "past tense" promises. Jesus is with us now and gives us depths of strength we have only begun to tap. We *can* keep choosing to respect the dignity and rights of others. Please let the mercy of God be mirrored in your lifestyle; please continue to shelter in place.

- ❖ Think back on your recent decisions about social distancing. Were they merciful?
- ❖ How can you get better at keeping the commandments in order to express your love for Jesus?