

## John 14: 15-21      How Do I Love Thee?

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,” wrote the 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning. And she proceeds to describe seven imaginative ways she loves her beloved before closing the poem with this line, “If God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.”

Although this poem is often understood as the poet writing to her husband, Robert Browning, the poem never mentions who the speaker is, nor the object of his or her beloved. So, this beautiful poem about an unconditional, transcendent, and eternal love can apply to other situations of love, the love of a mother for her child, for example.

Maternal love, brotherly love, divine love, we put love into different categories, but whatever the form of relationship through which the love flows, the closing line of the poem, “I shall but love thee better after death” speaks to the truth: love is stronger than death. Because the source of such love, that vivifying energy, is God, in whom all are one, now and forever.

While Elizabeth Barrett Browning delighted in counting the ways she loved her beloved, Jesus zeroes in on the One Way to love him. “How do I love thee?” To this question, Jesus has one answer: keep my commandments. In fact, today’s passage begins with him saying “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” and ends with him saying “Whoever has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me.”

With these words, Jesus shows us what it means to love him; not what it takes to love him but what loving him looks like. He says this not as a conditional demand, as if to say, “if you love me, you’d better keep my commandments.” No, he simply presents the only way in which one’s love of Jesus shows itself; it shows itself, inevitably, in faithfulness to his commandments. Keeping his commandments is not something I might do, among other things, if I loved Jesus, but it is one and the same thing. Jesus often talks about faithfulness to his words as the mark of belonging to him.

And what commandments is he talking about?

Reading this passage on this Sixth Sunday of Easter is a kind of flashback, because in this passage, we are still at the table with Jesus during his last supper with the disciples. It’s a Throwback Thursday to the Maundy Thursday when Jesus washed the disciples’ feet as an example of serving one another in love. This is Jesus still speaking during his farewell meal. We are listening to his parting words.

The Gospel writer John was writing this to his little church community years, even decades after that first Easter. So, the original readers of John's Gospel knew, as you and I know, that Jesus would die on the cross, and God would raise him up, defeating death and all that resists God's love for the world; love overcame death.

But here, the disciples don't know that yet. Jesus has been telling them that he would be going away, returning to his Father, and Jesus is doing his best to prepare the community of his followers for life in his absence.

And this "life in his absence," the physical absence that is, is the life we share with all the generations of Jesus lovers ever since. Can the disciples still love him when he is gone? Can the next generation and the generations after that love Jesus, without having had a personal relationship with him? So, for us the question really is, "How do I love thee, when thou walketh with me not?"

It was then, Jesus says, having washed the disciples' feet, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another."

You might recall Jesus's summary of the Law in Matthew's Gospel, the Double Commandments where he combined two separate commandments from the Law of Moses: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. But this command --- that his disciples love one another --- is the only recorded commandment in John's Gospel.

So, there we have it, to keep his commandments is to live a life of love and service grounded in Jesus's own love: "Just as I have loved you, you also must love...." The future of the community of these disciples was envisioned in Jesus' voice, and for us, the post-Resurrection church, it is "our present" we are called to live into.

For them then and for us now, relationship with Jesus does not depend on physical presence, but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the community. And the love for God is present whenever those who love Jesus keep his commandments.

So, we've come a full circle. To love Jesus is to keep his commandments is to love one another. It is in loving one another, serving one another, we get to continue loving Jesus, and Jesus's own life continues into the life of his followers, continuing the work Jesus was sent to do in this world; he set us up well, I'd say.

But to continue the work of the one whom God sent into the world? How could we, who only know how to love rather poorly, do that, and do that without him? Now the question really becomes “**HOW** do we, period.” Jesus’s singular answer is “keep my commandments,” but Jesus doesn’t quite stop there.

You see, Jesus knew how frightened and anxious his disciples were, anticipating his “going away.” They were like little children, who would have to live on without a parent to guide them, protect them, and look after them.

As for the original readers of John’s Gospel, even though they believed Jesus was their Risen Christ, they, too, were facing persecution, in conflict with the synagogue which was their original religious home, and under the oppression of the Roman Empire.

And as for us, God knows we, too, succumb to despair and hopelessness, when a tragedy strikes our personal lives, or just looking at the state of our world, full of suffering: the broken relationships and rampant injustice, and nations and their peoples torn up and blown apart by violence. Even with our best intention to love and keep Jesus’s commandments, it all can feel well over our heads. We grieve.

Jesus knew this about his disciples and God knows this about us. So, having told his disciples that if they loved him, they would keep his commandments, Jesus immediately says he will ask God to give them another Advocate. Another Advocate, for Jesus is already our advocate, interceding for us.

Perhaps you’ve heard of the Greek word translated here as Advocate, which is Paraclete: it can mean “the one who encourages, the one who comforts, the one who helps, and the one who makes appeals on one’s behalf. The work of the Paraclete is to keep the truth of Jesus present to the world after Jesus’s departure. And this Paraclete is the Spirit of Truth who will not go away but remain with us and in us forever.

“How do I love thee?” Jesus answers, “keep my commandments, **AND** you don’t go it alone.” I am coming to you in the Spirit of Truth. You love me and keep my commandments and love one another *with the help of another helper* given to you by God as the abiding and indwelling presence of God with those who love God. This Advocate, then, is a game changer, because it is the Spirit of Truth that remains in us forever, teaching us, guiding us, showing us the way to love Jesus and keep his commandments.

Jesus ALSO says, “On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” When this Spirit of truth enters our lives and the life of the community, something shifts in that circle of “loving Jesus is to keep his commandments is to love one another.” The Spirit not only empowers us to do that, but also unites us, not only with Jesus beyond time and space, but also with others who love God and are loved by God, beyond time and space, all of us made One in God; I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” “I will not leave you orphaned.”

The Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, who comes to live in all who love God, brings us into Oneness with God, who is the love that engulfs us, the love that is stronger than death. This is the reality the world cannot see and the peace the world cannot give. May God grant us the eyes to see and know the peace, even in this broken and fearful world.

I will close with the closing words Elizabeth Barrett Brown ’s poem. “If God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.” And God does so choose. Halleluiah, Amen.