

WGUMC May 10, 2015 I John 5:1-5  
"She Who Must Be Obeyed"

I had no desire to preach on this love text today because it's another one of those passages in the Bible that engage in circular reasoning. In the previous Chapter, the author says, "Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." [I John 4:7-8] And this meditation on love carries on here in Chapter 5.

What is happening in these first few verses is yet another restatement of that familiar summary of God's commandments. The whole law is summed up in these two: love God and love others. But the argument is circular. We know that we love others because we love God and obey God's commandments. But what are God's commandments? Love God and, by extension, love others. Do you see the circle here? We show our love by obeying the commandment to love.

Sounds peachy, but it doesn't help us to understand what love means or what it demands. Is the author of First John just another guy writing about love without really saying anything? And is this going to be another sermon on love that doesn't go anywhere? Isn't that what we expect on Mother's Day anyway?

If it's any consolation, this is going to be a sermon about obedience instead of love or, more accurately, obedience as an expression of love. This should stir the women in the congregation who thought that they had gotten away from that word. The wedding service no longer requires women to promise to "love, honor and obey" their husbands. And I wholeheartedly agree with the change because that old language implied that the husband was Lord over his wife. But somehow the concept of obedience got caught up in the gender wars, not to mention the Vietnam War, and the upshot is that it's been an unpopular idea ever since.

Today, I make the claim that obedience is the love language of God. It's pretty old by now, but some of you married folks have probably read Gary Chapman's book, *The Five Love Languages*. If not, here's a quick review. Chapman says that one of the reasons that married couples have a hard time sustaining a relationship is because they speak different love languages, without realizing it. Different people feel loved in different ways. For some people, they feel loved when their spouse gives them words of affirmation; for others, when their spouse spends quality time with them. Some feel loved when their spouses give them gifts and others when their spouse does acts of service. And some feel loved primarily when their spouses touch them lovingly.

Learning these five love languages and which ones matter most to you and your spouse has been very helpful for married couples to strengthen their relationship. But when we think about it, these languages work just as well for strengthening

our relationship with God. How do we express love for God? Through words of affirmation, otherwise known as songs of praise. Through spending quality time with God: "a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere" [Psalm 84:10] And by giving gifts: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house...says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." [Malachi 3:10]

We also show our love for God through acts of service. Joshua says, "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." [Joshua 24:15] And finally, we can even express our love for God through physical touch. We can't, as doubting Thomas did, put our fingers in the marks of the nails on Jesus' hand, but there is still a physical body to love. The Church is the Body of Christ in the world today. And we can physically feel his presence when we eat the bread and drink the fruit of

the vine. And we can physically love Christ by caring for others in this body.

When it comes to God, all five of these love languages are important. But Chapman says that most of us have a primary love language, and according to my read of the Bible, God's primary love language is acts of service; in other words, obedience.

In case you hadn't noticed, the Bible is big on obedience. All throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is an emphasis on obedience: Obey God and blessings will come upon you and overtake you; disobey God and curses will do the same.

[Deuteronomy 28]

So, on this Mother's Day, we might think of God as "She who must be obeyed." Not like the queen in the nineteenth-century novel *She*, and not like the wife of Rumpole of the Bailey, but more like our own mothers. Don't mothers feel our love when we willingly obey them! At least, that was true in my

house growing up. Dad was always at work, so Mom had to be the disciplinarian. But she didn't have to discipline much. Back then, you just knew what you were supposed to do and didn't dare do otherwise. And though I didn't hear it a lot, I never doubted my mother's love.

In many ways, parenting is more challenging these days. Are there any passages in the Bible on obedience that could be of some help to modern-day moms and dads? Try this one on your kid the next time he rolls his eyes at you: "The eye that mocks a father and scorns to obey a mother will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by vultures." [Proverbs 30:17]

Lest you think that the emphasis on obedience is confined to the Old Testament and its antiquated ideas about childrearing, among other things, think again. For Jesus himself said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my

Father in heaven." [Matthew 7:21] And after he was resurrected, he commissioned his disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." [Matthew 28:19]

The emphasis on obedience continues in the early Church, as we see in this first letter of John. Here we are promised that all who obey God's commandments, abide in God and God abides in them. [I John 3:24]

So obedience is an important love language for God. But where do we go from the commandment to love? *How* do we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind and our neighbor as ourselves?

When Jesus was asked that question, he told the story of the Good Samaritan. The point of his story was to tell us that if

we love the one who is hardest to love, then we can begin to understand what is involved when God loves us.

There's someone in my house who puts all my loving and parenting skills to the test. This someone is always demanding attention, always trying to annoy me, and refuses to abide by the most basic rules of decency and courtesy. I'm talking of course about my cat.

I have to remind myself that loving Lord Peter Whimsy is not a feeling; it's a choice. I choose to feed him and groom him. And I give him his inhaler every day and Prednisone every other day not because I like him, but because I love him!

But what about those who are even harder to love than my cat? How are we supposed to love them when they are incapable of loving us back? And yet that is exactly what God commands us to do, and furthermore, our text today says that this commandment is not burdensome. [1 John 5:3] How do you figure?

Well, here is how John Wesley explained it. When the commandment says to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves, we complain that this is impossible, but it really isn't. All things are possible with God. [Philippians 4:13] In fact, every one of God's commandments is what Wesley called a "covered promise." [Sermon #25; *Works*, Vol 1, p. 555] What he means by that is that when God commands us to do something, God also promises to give us what we need to do it. In other words, God will not ask us to do something that God's grace won't empower us to do.

And that is the Good News for mothers this Mother's Day. First John says, "whoever obeys God's word, truly in this person, the love of God has reached perfection." [I John 2:5] I'm a mother so I can say that a mother's love is lacking in many ways, but mothers and all others can count on the grace of God to make up for what is lacking in our love by filling in

the gaps, forgiving the failures, and perfecting our less than perfect efforts.

And that's a good reminder for those of us who had mothers who couldn't or wouldn't speak our love language, who didn't give us those words of affirmation or couldn't spare us any quality time or whatever. God's grace can fill in the gaps for us, too, and heal the hurts and mend the memories. All we have to do is learn God's love language—all we have to do is obey God's commands—and God's grace will fill up our love tank, full to overflowing, and then they will know we are Christians by our love. Happy Mother's Day.