**Text**: **John 15:9-17**

 **The Bethel Pulpit**

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As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” The Gospel of the Lord.

 May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Grammar has never been my strong suit. Sentence structure, parsing verbs and all that kind of stuff just escapes me – in fact, there are times when I am just happy that I am able to spell a word correctly. I am not sure if the problem has been more with my ability to understand or with my desire to understand or maybe a bit of both. What I do know is that while some children had problems dissecting a frog in school, I had problems dissecting a sentence.

So, imagine my level of excitement when one of my seminary professors began a class session with the following announcement: “Today we are going to talk about indicative and imperative verb moods!”

When I heard that announcement, my first thought was a bit snarky and it had something to do with wishing that I had brought my pillow to class. But clearly, the class session made an impact – after all, it took place over 25 years ago.

My professor began by stating that an indicative verb mood is used to make factual statements, while an imperative verb mood is used to make a request or command. He also shared with us that in the New Testament an indicative verb mood is a statement that is used to identify something that God has done, is doing or will do; and an imperative verb mood is a statement that is used to convey what humans should do.

What I found most interesting is that he told us that in the New Testament there is a specific relationship between these two moods in the area of sanctification –salvation. He said, in the New Testament, what God commands us to do (which is the imperative) is based upon what God has done, is doing or will do (which is the indicative). This pattern reminds us again and again that sanctification – salvation – is dependent upon God, calling for a human response.

It is not at all uncommon for parents to use indicative and imperative verbs with their sons and daughters – especially at those moments when their sons and daughters are leaving home. Maybe you are one of those parents or maybe you had one of those parents. Parents who would say something like, “John, remember you are a Swanson!”

Or, imagine son Michael is going to prom with his girlfriend and Mom says something like, “Michael, remember who you are” or daughter Abbie is being dropped off at her college dorm for the first time and Dad says, “Abbie, remember where you came from.”

They are words spoken by parents to their children at those big moments in life – at those moments that are big because they are really exciting for the sons and daughters and really terrifying for the parents. Such words are uttered by parents to serve as a reminder of all that they have said and taught through the process of raising a child – things like you are loved, make good choices, be kind, don’t steal, be good, go the church, do your homework, say your prayers, on and on.

The imperative for those children is to remember. The indicative is the fact that they are part of a family. This kind of language is precisely the kind of language that we have in today’s reading from John’s Gospel. This reading is really an extension and a clarification of last week’s Gospel, where Jesus said: “I am the vine and you are the branches.” We, as followers of Jesus, are admonished to abide in Jesus, to abide in the vine, so that as branches on the vine we might bear much fruit.

The theme continues as we move into today’s Gospel, only it talks about it in terms of God’s love for us rather than using images of vine and the branches.

Our Gospel begins, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love..” Then we are told that if we keep Christ’s commandments, we will abide in his love. Here is Christ’s imperative for us. We are to keep his commandments. That is an imperative. It is an imperative that grows out of an indicative. The indicative is that God loves us. That is who we are. So Jesus calls us to “be who we are.” It is like Jesus is saying, “Remember who you are. You are loved by God. You have God’s family name to live up to.”

As we move through our Gospel for today and hear so much about love and commandments, it is important that we understand the way that this love flows. When we hear, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” we might be inclined to think that Jesus is saying that God’s love is conditional – that God will love us only if we keep God’s commandments.

But thanks to my professor who brought grammar to his seminary classroom and pointed out what happens when imperatives and indicative verb moods are used together in the New Testament, we know that when Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” he is not saying that God’s love is conditional. Instead, Jesus is saying to each of us, “You are loved by God, so act like a loved person by keeping the commandments.”

It is the same thing parents are saying – “You are a Swanson – act like one.”

Jesus uses other figures of speech in these verses to say the same thing. “I have called you friends,” Jesus says. That is the indicative. That is who we are. We are friends of God and the way we reveal that – the imperative – is by being friends with others.

Jesus also calls us chosen ones. “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit ...” We are a chosen people. That is the indicative. Chosen people are fruit-bearing people – bearing fruit is the imperative.

And in verse 12 Jesus puts it most plainly when he says, “... love one another as I have loved you.” We are loved people - that is the indicative. And we are called to love people – that is the imperative. Loved people, love people. The Father loves Jesus. Jesus loves us. We love each other - loved people, love people.

Loving one another – that is finally what this scripture passage is all about. God loves me, therefore, I have the wonderful opportunity and at times the great challenge, of loving others.

I recently read a list of things a loving and apparently very patient father had learned from his children.

1. You should not throw baseballs up when the ceiling fan is on.
2. A ceiling fan can hit a baseball a long ways.
3. Glass windows (even double pane) don't stop a baseball hit by a ceiling fan.
4. If you use a waterbed as a home plate while wearing baseball shoes, it does not leak. It explodes.
5. A king-size waterbed holds enough water to fill a 2,000 sq. ft. house almost 4 inches deep.
6. When you hear the toilet flush and the words "œuh-oh," it is already too late.
7. Play-Doh and microwave ovens should never be used in the same sentence.
8. Super Glue is forever.
9. No matter how much Jell-O you put in the pool, you still can't walk on water.
10. Pool filters do not like Jell-O.
11. Always look in the oven before you turn it on.
12. The spin cycle on the washing machine does not make earthworms dizzy.
13. It will, however, make cats dizzy.
14. Cats throw up twice their body weight when dizzy.

Love is not always easy. While silly, these humorous insights remind us of the serious and significant challenge that can accompany loving some people.

Some people drive us crazy. Some, because they are stubborn or lazy, others because they are opinionated or cheap; regardless, there are some people who we would rather not love because, frankly, it is too much work and not enough reward.

I get that – I really do. But I also get that love is not something we do only when we feel like it. Love is a way of life. Love combines attitudes and actions, commitment and conduct.

Christ’s command is that we are to love one another as Christ loved us. That is an incredibly demanding standard. That means that love is an action. How did Christ love us? He laid down his life.

You and I might prefer to define love as a warm and fuzzy emotion. But we cannot command an emotion. If I held a gun to your head and said, “Get happy!” the best you could do is fake it. And even then, you probably would not be very convincing.

But Jesus is commanding us to love one another as he loved us. He is not talking about an emotion. The love that Jesus is talking about is an action – it is a decision.

It is a decision to humble ourselves. It is a decision to give up our own self-interests. It is a decision to let go of our own agendas. It is a decision to stay faithful, even in the face of pain. It is a decision to give of ourselves, even when we do not feel like it. This is the kind of love Jesus has for us, and it is the kind of love he commands us to have for one another. Loved people, love people.

With all of that said, we humans really resist this simple commandment to love. We can come up with all sorts of reasons why it is difficult to love this person or that person – but I think our greatest fear is that we might become vulnerable and in the process we might get hurt.

The other day I was driving down East Washington coming towards downtown from the east side of Madison. Just after passing East High School I noticed a group of people waiting at a bus stop. Amongst the group was a young man who had Down ’s syndrome.

This young man was happy – I could tell that he was happy because he was absolutely animated. As the rest of the people waited motionless for the bus, this young man was exploding with happiness – sharing his joy/his love – with everyone who was waiting for the bus. And, thank God, all who were waiting received this young man’s love warmly and graciously.

That does not always happen. When we become vulnerable and share God’s love with others, we run the risk of being laughed at, rejected, mocked, ignored or worse. There is risk. But when that risk is taken, when we move outside of our comfort zone and loving connect with someone else, new possibilities begin to sprout. Lives can change.

We do not know how God works through the love that we share, we just know that God loves us and God commands us to love others. We know that loved people, love people. So let’s get at it! Amen.