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The Challenging Order. St. John 15:9-17; 1 John 3:18-24

This mandate is just problematic: “This is my commandment,” said Jesus, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” (St. John 15:12). It is difficult for many reasons, but we will explore only three.

First, it is arduous because we cannot love others until we first know we are loved. Jesus said, “*Love one another as I have loved you.*” God’s gift of love for all is magnificent, but that knowledge must pierce our armor-plated hearts.

I assure you, the biggest barrier to entering God’s Kingdom isn’t a refusal to repent of sin: the biggest barrier to people entering the Kingdom is a refusal to give up control over the guest list.

Second, this demand is challenging because *love* and *command* do not go together. We love because we feel deeply and passionately, and have desire for another. We love because of something inside, a longing, a need, a desire—wells up, and we act on that.

Third, the mandate is awkward because we are still in distress, over linking our love for God and our love for others. We love Jesus. We sing about our love for Jesus. We learn as children we are to love him, and he loves us. Loving Jesus is not hard. The tricky part is converting our love for Jesus into loving others.

One of the biggest reasons so many Christians never truly enter the Kingdom is simply because they object to whoever they’d have to sit next to.

Therefore, how do we renovate this thorny commandment into an awesome agreement? Today’s New Testament lessons give two clues. In St. John 15 and 1 John 3, the key word is *abiding*. Jesus said, “*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.*” (St. John 15:9). The writer of 1 John 3:24 put it this

way: "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them." The word *abide* in the Greek is '*menao.*' It means to dwell in, to stay with, to be connected to, or to draw life from.

In Jesus' metaphor of the branches and vine, where the branches receive life from the vine; "Followers of the Way" are to be joined to Jesus Christ, who offers us the ability to love others as he loves us. This discomfiting commandment becomes breathtakingly powerful, when we grasp deep within our being, that we have no inner life ourselves without Jesus Christ. We may be in the center of church life, but if we are not abiding in Christ, our life is spiritually dead.

Let's look again at the dilemma of being commanded to love. As a child, I recall how stressful it was to obey my parents, when I was being asked to do something I didn't want to do. Loving and caring in Christ, means we decide to act in loving ways even when we don't feel like it. If we wait until we feel like it, most likely we will never do it. Someone has said, "*It is easier to act your way into a new way of thinking, than to think your way into a new way of acting.*" Most of us have that backwards.

I sometimes think that if I ruminate about loving someone in Jesus long enough, I will live in loving and caring ways. This is, of course, not true. The more I ponder the situation, the larger the distance I create between the person and ourselves.

"*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" This brings us to the heart of the matter: we must choose whether we are going to agree with Jesus Christ; not because we feel like it, or because it is expedient, or even out of dread. No, our choice must be because Jesus asks us to obey. We live from awkward to awesome by acting in a loving manner.

In the little book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom records tender moments with his beloved college professor Morrie Schwartz. In a scene, Mitch tries to comfort Morrie by rubbing salve on his feet. He says, "*Morrie, we must love one another or die.*" Morrie realizes that the student really doesn't believe it, so he

says to him, *“Do you really believe that? I don’t think you really believe that. There is something you find suspect about the spiritual reality of life. You think it is just syrupy sentimentalism, just gooey sentimentality. But we must love one another, or we die.”* (New York; Doubleday, 1997)

O that this would be our credo, our creed, of the Christian faith. We must love one another or we die. Here is the central reality of the whole Christian story. The Holy Scriptures summed up here: *“Love one another as I have loved you,”* and move from awkward to awesome. Alleluia. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria.