

**They Say You Can't Command People to Love (except, Jesus did)  
Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad**

How wonderful to be home again! My roots will always be in Iowa no matter how long I have lived in New York City. I was grateful to worship with you this morning and witness the ordination and commissioning of so many women and men for ministry in Christ's church. Your conference theme was visible in all those painted chairs, waiting for people to come in and sit down. "Radical Hospitality: Offering God's Love." That's a wonderful theme, but what does it mean to offer God's love? What about our love? I have a friend who was a pastor for several years in the Netherlands. A woman in the congregation was caring for her little granddaughter. She told my friend that one night she heard the little girl crying and went into her bedroom to see what was wrong. "I'm scared," said the little girl. Her grandmother hugged her and listened to her fears. "You know God loves you and is always with you," said her grandmother. "Oh I know God is with me, but sometimes I just need someone with skin on."

We do, too, don't we? We need someone with skin on. Perhaps that's why we go to church. Does God's love have skin on? That word *love* is elusive. We toss it around with abandon: I love ice cream, I love my dog, I love Methodists, I love Jesus. We also say that you can't command people to love. Love is something you either feel or you don't. It's a gift. We FALL in love – we don't schedule love on our Blackberry or clergy desk calendars. Love can't be forced or bused or legislated or taught. They say you can't command people to love -- **except, Jesus did.** "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 34-35)

They say you can't command people to love. But Jesus did. He gave this commandment to his disciples shortly after he had washed their feet, after they had shared the Passover meal

together in the gospel of John. Jesus knew this would be his last chance to talk with the disciples before he was arrested and taken away to trial. While they sat at table, Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment.” But it isn’t really new, is it? The heart of Torah was summarized in love commands: “Love God with all your heart and soul and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.” Maybe it was the next part that was new: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” What does that mean? We might understand it this way: because I have loved you, you should love one another. OR since I have loved you, you should love one another. But there is another possibility: In the way that I have loved you, you should love one another.

“**In the way that I have loved you...**” What does Jesus’ love look like? Then and there in John’s gospel Jesus’ love bends down. The disciples had just experienced that love when Jesus took off his robe, took up towel and basin, and bent down to wash their feet. Like a servant, he got down. This is bending-down love, serving love, love with skin on. Are our churches shaped by that bending-down love? As of last August, the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are in full communion — and for that, we give thanks! As we listen to conversations around our denominations it may seem that “full communion” means both our churches are worried about success and finances! We’ve seen the graphs that chart the downward membership trends and the graying of our people. We worry about taking strong stands for justice fearing that people who disagree may leave. Jesus calls us to be bending-down churches no matter what the statistics tell us.

Now John’s gospel isn’t known as a social action gospel. We’re more likely to turn to Luke or Matthew or one of the prophets. But we may have missed the radical love in John’s gospel. After all, this is the gospel which proclaimed that the Word became flesh — the Word had skin on. **So come with me back into John’s gospel, back to chapter 4.** Jesus meets a woman at the well. A Samaritan woman. What did love look like at Jacob’s well? “Give me a

drink,” Jesus said to her -- knowing full well he shouldn’t be talking to a woman in public or drinking from a Samaritan’s cup. What sort of love did Jesus show us there at Jacob’s well?

This was a reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love.

What does such love look like in the current debates about immigration? What does this love look like in Postville or Storm Lake or any other Midwest city that has a meat packing plant? Love-with-skin-on calls us to reach beyond boundaries and welcome those whose skin is different from our own.

**Jesus met another woman in John, chapter 8.** Her story is often found in tiny print at the bottom of the page because some scholars question its authenticity. (Or maybe the story is troubling.) Jesus bends down – he seems to do this often! He bends down with the woman in the midst of the vicious circle, surrounded by her accusers. She has been caught in the very act of adultery and they are planning to stone her. IF she was caught in the very act, where was the man who was with her? (I guess he got away.) The woman’s accusers have the written texts on their side. Jesus doesn’t debate with them. Saying nothing, he bends down to enter her silent world. He writes on the ground, not once but twice. We never know what he wrote -- perhaps the name of the man who got away! Finally, Jesus speaks: “Whoever is without sin cast the first stone.” When he looks up, they have all walked away. What kind of love is this? This is a people-before-rules kind of love. This is love expressed in this poem by Gerhard Frost, a poem titled “Loose Leaf”:

When your options are either  
to revise your beliefs  
or to reject a person,  
look again.

Any formula for living  
that is too cramped  
for the human situation  
cries for re-thinking.

Hard-cover catechisms  
are a contradiction

to our loose-leaf lives. (1)

Have you seen this love? Recently there was a celebration at St. John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta. Pastor Bradley Schmeling had been removed from the ELCA clergy roles because he was gay and in a committed relationship. Because the ELCA voted last August to ordain partnered gay and lesbian people, Bradley has been reinstated and the people of St. John's are ecstatic! In the hallways of that church there are pictures of the Men's Bible Study classes from the 1940's and 50's. The men are wearing straw hats and seersucker suits. Some have those thick black-rimmed glasses popular at the time. The men are looking straight into the camera. They are also looking out at a future they couldn't have imagined in their congregation. St. John's had learned to welcome people before rules.

Now don't worry: I won't stop at every chapter of John! But if we stopped at Chapter 9 – the story of a man born blind -- Jesus would remind us that disability is NOT caused by sin! If we stopped at Chapter 10 we would hear Jesus the Good Shepherd speaking assuring words to us: "I know my own and my own know me." Just when we're closing the church doors, happy to be inside, Jesus sticks his foot in the door saying, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also..."

Then we come to Chapter 11. **Let's stop at the cemetery in Bethany.** Jesus' friend Lazarus has died and has already been in the tomb three days. "If only you had been here my brother would not have died," says Martha. When Jesus tells her that her brother Lazarus will rise again, she replies, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus turns to her and says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." What sort of love do we see there at the place of death? This is a here-and-now-present-tense kind of love. I AM the resurrection and the life. Present tense. Not "if only" – If only we could count on heaven or if only we could go back to the way things were. But the way things were weren't all that great for some people. Tim Wise, white anti-racist activist reminds us of that reality:

“Leave it to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best” portray an America so divorced from the reality of the times in which they were produced, as to raise serious questions about the sanity of those who found them so moving, so accurate, so real...

Just two months before “Leave it to Beaver” debuted, proposed civil rights legislation was killed thanks to Strom Thurmond’s 24-hour filibuster on the floor of the US Senate. One month before that show aired, Arkansas governor Orville Faubus called out the National Guard to block black students from entering Little Rock Central High; and nine days before America was introduced to the Cleavers...black students were finally allowed to enter, amid the screams of enraged, unhinged, viciously bigoted white people...All of that while Ward Cleaver was going off with his brief case and June was doing housework in heels. That was America of the 1950’s. (2)

Can I and other white people admit that our experience in America is different from the experiences of Black people? Can we move beyond “if only” – if only everyone looked like the people in my hometown, if only women stayed at home, if only we had a white president? Jesus calls us to love one another in all our wondrous diversity – here and now, in present tense.

*“As I have loved you...”* In the way that I have loved you, so you are to love one another.

Jesus doesn’t leave us wondering, making up whatever kind of love we want.

- This is a bending-down kind of love.
- This is a reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love.
- This is a people-before-rules kind of love.
- It’s a here-and-now-present-tense kind of love.

At the end of his life, Jesus looked down from the cross. He saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her. Then Jesus said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” And to his disciple he said, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. This is a family-creating kind of love where water is thicker than blood. That day at the foot of the cross, Jesus created a new family and redefined family values. He had a habit of doing this every time he talked about families.

*“As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* Not by correct doctrine. Not by liturgies high or low. Not by knowing you’ve been born again. Not by the words of the Augsburg Confession of the Methodist Book of Order. Not by citing Martin Luther or John Wesley. But by this love

you have for one another -- this radical love. By this the world will know that you are my disciples, Jesus said. By this bending-down, foot-washing kind of love. By this reaching-beyond-boundaries kind of love. By this people-before-rules kind of love, this here-and-now-present-tense kind of love. This family-creating kind of love. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

**Discipleship will be measured by this kind of loving.** We now read “disciples” as extending to the Church -- Jesus measures the Church by this kind of loving. Can that really be true? Krister Stendahl of beloved memory says even Paul was surprised in I Corinthians 13:

And then [Paul] ends by saying, so there remain those three: faith, hope, and love, and greatest of them is faith. Well, that’s what he should have said, according to his own thinking...He is the apostle of faith, everything depends on faith. But here, suddenly, there is a breakthrough in his thinking, and he says, “And the greatest of these is love, *agape*, esteem of the other...” (3)

By this love everyone will know that you are my disciples. The church through the ages has measured itself by certain norms. Councils and creeds have described the “marks” of the Church: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Through the ages, the Church has been charged with many things: charged with being irrelevant or trying too hard to be relevant. Charged with being heretical and charged with being too rigid. Charged with being too old-fashioned and with trying to be too modern. Charged with being too liberal and with being too conservative.

Jesus is still waiting for the Church to be charged with radical loving.

Finally John’s gospel comes to an end in chapter 20: *“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”* (John 20: 30—31) That’s the end. Close the book – but it’s not the end! Chapter 21 begins all over again. The disciples are out fishing, they catch nothing, Jesus appears on the shore: “Cast the net on the right side” – and the net can barely hold all the fish. Then Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John do you love me?” Peter answered, “Yes,

Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus tells him, “Tend my sheep.” Three times Jesus asks. Three times Peter answers. Three times Jesus says: “Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Feed my sheep.” Love does. Love acts. “Follow me,” Jesus says. That doesn’t sound optional! Love has feet. Tomorrow, love will have feet – your feet – in the streets of this capitol city. You will bear God’s love in tangible ways into the heart of a world longing for justice. We cannot define this love any way we please. In Jesus Christ this love has skin on...

This is a bending-down kind of love

A reaching-beyond-boundaries like of love

A people-before-rules kind of love

A here-and-now-present-tense kind of love

A family-creating kind of love

They say you can’t command people to love. Except...Jesus did.

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Notes:

1. Gerhard Frost, *Seasons of a Lifetime* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989) 57
2. Tim Wise, “Of National Lies and Racial Amnesia: Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama, and the Unacceptability of Truth” (March 18, 2008)
3. Krister Stendahl, “Why I Love the Bible,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (Vol. 35: No. 1, Winter 2007)