

## **Be Your Dog**

*B Easter 6--John 15:9-17*

My daughter's cello teacher has this embroidered pillow which reads, Be the person your dog thinks you are. Be the person your dog thinks you are. Which, at least for us dog-lovers, is one way of delivering the behavioral piece, the commandment piece, of Jesus' message to "love one another as I have loved you." It is, after all, our behavior that leads our dogs to think we are the people our dogs think we are: benevolent people who are the source of such wonderful things--kibbles, walkies, loving attention--that our mere arrival on the scene can cause canine bladders to leak with joy. Love one another as I have loved you. Be the person your dog thinks you are.

It's an outside-in approach to our journey toward Christ. Act loving, and your heart will follow. Obey this commandment and you will become the way you are acting. It reminds me of this book study that our Parish Leadership Team is doing right now on a book about stewardship as a way of life, a way of acting faithfully with all the resources we have been given. At one point the book analyzes Jesus' famous saying in Matthew, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (6:21)<sup>i</sup>. The author notes that this statement is often misread as if what it says is, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." In other words, we give of our financial resources to the things we care about most. That may or may not be true, the author says, but Jesus actually puts it the other way around: Where you put your financial resources, your heart will follow. Give to the things that you think you should care about, and you will come to care about them.

Act generously with your wallet, and your heart will become a generous heart. Become what you are acting like. Be the person your dog thinks you are.

So that's the behavioral piece, the commandment-following piece, the giving-and-doing piece of Jesus' advice to his disciples today. But Jesus also grounds this active, giving mode in a more passive, receiving state of being. "You did not choose me, but I chose you," he reminds us. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." *Be* in my love. *Exist* in my love. So keeping God's commandments may lead us to abide in God's love, but there is also a sense that abiding in God's love, opening up and submitting to our belovedness of God, will inspire us to keep God's commandments. The giving-and-doing may help us to find our way into a state of love (for where we put our treasure, there our heart will be), but the receiving-and-abiding in that state of love also gives rise to the giving-and-doing. So there's a kind of circularity to Jesus' words. Giving and receiving are parts of the same whole.

Well for the rest of today's sermon, I'm going to focus on this second piece, the receiving and abiding, because although it seems more passive and simple, I think it is actually the more difficult piece for some of us to get right. Those of us who habitually do for others--who are the first to bring over casseroles, or shovel sidewalks, or drive people to doctor's appointments, or coach our friends through their divorces--often have a really hard time accepting similar gestures from others. I'm not sure why this is. Maybe the dark side of who we are is that always being the giver gives us a kind of power that we don't want to let go of. Maybe we seek to protect ourselves from being exposed or made vulnerable by any sense of dependence on others. Or maybe, on some deep level,

we feel unworthy of this kind of care. We can extend love, perhaps, but we cannot abide in love.

But Jesus doesn't say, "Let some of you love and others of you abide in love, each according to his inclinations." Jesus says to us all, "Abide in my love" *and* "love one another," both. And this statement challenges those of us who are better at giving than receiving to come to terms with something we may actually have a hard time accepting: we are loved. We are loved, and we owe it to God and to those who love us to receive and abide in that love. To do otherwise is to disallow the reciprocity that creates a genuine community. It is to prevent others from truly knowing us. It is to insult the love God hopes to pour out for us through the hands of our brothers and sisters. We don't like to think of it this way, of course, because this threatens the virtuous and flattering image of ourselves that being generous gives us. But in fact, being a gracious receiver is as important to our life in Christ as being a generous giver. Abiding in love is as essential to our faith as sharing love. And it may be harder to do.

Sometimes, when I sit down in my living room to read a book, our dog, Mingus, wanders over and plants his tuckus on my feet. (In our family, we like to say that Mingus "honors us with his bottom.") Then he'll turn his head up and beam his big, hopeful gaze at me. His tail thumps on the floor. So I reach down and massage his head just behind his ears. His eyes narrow and glaze into a middle-distance trance, and he starts to rub his tongue audibly against the roof of his mouth. I have the sense that during this experience, time dissolves for him into this eternal now of well-being. If my stamina for this activity were as great as his, I'm sure we'd be there for hours, maybe even days, because in that moment, Mingus's joy is complete. He knows me to be his friend. He abides in my love.

So if the active, giving part of today's gospel message is to be the person your dog thinks you are, then the passive, receiving part must surely be a simpler and yet more difficult corollary: Be your dog. Bask in the positive attention of those who love you. Do not question your worthiness to receive. Abide in love.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Giving to God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006, pgs 48-54.