

Love Whom? How?
A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado
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This same text was read as part of the Maundy Thursday Gospel, so we have a repeat in a little over a month. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 13:34). So is being a Christian, then, obeying this commandment? That sounds like the faith is dependent on our ability, desire, and commitment to being a loving person. What happened to the Gospel of Christ Jesus which declares that “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23-24). Do I have to achieve salvation by obedience or is it simply the Lord’s gift of grace? Martin Luther was adamant about teaching “Justification by grace through faith.” So what’s the deal?

The Gospel reading for today is from John who also wrote the letters of John (1st, 2nd, and 3rd John). In 1st John 4:19, the writer states, “We love because he first loved us.” A fuller statement of this faith declared in 1st John reads, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:10-11).

To me it is very important that we hear about God’s love for us in Christ Jesus which enables us to love one another. Certainly, the Lord Jesus taught us to love one another not as the means of salvation but **as an expression** of the salvation given to us.

Our forgiveness was accomplished by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Christ. No matter how much we love one another, our loving others does not achieve our salvation. That’s basic, fundamental and foundational. The Lord God Almighty has done great things, and holy is his name.

In the newsletter of Bethel Lutheran Church, Madison, Wisconsin, dated March 31, is a column by one of Bethel’s pastors, Pastor Pedro Suarez. He refers to a sermon preached by Pastor Mark Trotter of San Diego, California. In the sermon, Pastor Trotter made reference to a column by Calvin Trillin who told of a man in New York City who was kidnapped. His kidnappers phoned the man’s wife and demanded a ransom of \$100,000. She was shocked and said things like “We don’t have that kind of money. I could never raise that amount.” In the course of the conversation, she negotiated the amount down to \$30,000.

The ransom of \$30,000 was paid, the man released, the kidnappers caught and convicted, the money returned, and life resumed. Calvin Trillin asks us to imagine the conversation when the man returned home and learned of the details of his release, how the criminals holding him had demanded \$100,000 and his wife refused to pay that much and negotiated the amount down by 70%. Can’t you just hear her saying, “I wasn’t going to

pay \$100,000 for you. I told them they had to be kidding. Give me a break. My top offer is \$30,000 and not one penny more.” And the man thinking, “So I wasn’t worth \$100,000 to you, eh, only \$30,000?”

If it was your life and kidnapers demanded \$100,000, wouldn’t you want to think that your wife, family, friends would spare no expenses to get you back? Can you imagine your spouse, parent, or child negotiating a ransom demand: he or she can’t be worth that much. Would you accept \$10,000? Let me call you back about that, because I’d like to think about it before I make any commitment. I need to talk to my family and see how they feel and we need to consult with our attorney.

My guess is that we would like to think that our family members would spare no effort or expense to get us back. We’d like to think there would be no haggling over the ransom, no delay. Restoration to the family alive would be the upper most concern.

When the Lord God Almighty acted to ransom us, nothing was held back. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... (John 3:16). The Apostle Paul interprets this Christ event for us with these words, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). The Great God of the Universe ransomed us through the gift of his only Son, our Lord and Savior. The Lord God gave up his only Son to death on a cross and raised him from death that we might have life and have it abundantly. Returning to 1st John, we read “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). The Heavenly Father gave his all for me, for you, and for everyone.

Since the Lord God in love has done this, we respond by living loving lives. We want to obey what the Savior said: love one another, even strangers and enemies. Thankfully, the love of the Lord for us is not conditioned by how much we love God or others. Certainly, we are conscious of the admonition of Christ Jesus: love one another. I am not trying to minimize Christ’s call to obedience and faithful living, but I am trying to emphasize Christ’s initiative in the whole relational process. It’s not because we love one another that God loves us. It’s since God loves us, we love one another.

A single mother stood in the Chesterfield County, Virginia Circuit courtroom before the judge. Abandoned by her husband who was not sending his court-ordered child support payments, the 34 year old nurse was having a tough time supporting her two young children.

Then her 4 year old son developed chronic asthma and emphysema that confined him to respiratory equipment and required round-the-clock nursing care. This mother quit her job to stay home with her son. She applied for Aid to Dependent Children (this predates the TANF program now available) and began receiving some support. But her son’s medical bills billowed out of control and put her deeper in debt. Her son’s doctor even wrote to the power company begging them not to shut off the woman’s electricity because of her unpaid bills. Cutting off the electricity would have meant stopping her 4 year old’s oxygen feed.

In an attempt to stave off her creditors, she got a part-time job in a nursing home, but she did not report the job to the social services department because she knew the small income would cut off her public assistance. The bureaucracy finally caught up with her, and the woman was charged with felony welfare fraud for taking payments over a 5 month period during which her part-time income totaled around \$2,200. Tax collectors had caught up with her wayward husband and snared his \$1,900 tax refund to make up for his unpaid child support payments.

But she still owed \$311 which she could not produce. The woman had no choice but to plead guilty to welfare fraud knowing that a conviction would jeopardize her nursing license. With the court in a quandary and the judge, looking for some other alternative than do declare her guilty, Richmond lawyer David Whaley, sitting in the back of the courtroom waiting for another case to be called, stood up and said, "Judge, I'll pay it" as he came forward to write a check for the amount owed.

There is One that steps up to pay the price of our redemption, who ransoms us from the consequences of our guilt and sin, who takes our place. His name is Jesus. In return, he simply asks us to love God and love one another, all others. We are ransomed from the burden of our rebellion so that we can live as expressions of Christ's compassion, mercy, and grace. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another" (John 13:34). Amen.