

The Message for Sunday, May 2, 2010

Title: “Is This Car Stolen?”

Scripture: John 13:31-35

I. Stolen?... A police officer pulls a driver over to the side of the road and asks for his license and registration.

The driver asks, “What’s wrong, officer? I didn’t go through the red light, and I certainly wasn’t speeding.”

The officer says, “No, you didn’t run the light, and I didn’t clock you exceeding the limit. It was just that I saw you make an questionable gesture as you swerved around the slow moving car in the left lane. And then, I saw you roll down your window and shout something ‘kinda’ nasty at the student who cut you off. Finally, I saw how you reacted at being stuck in the backup on Clark Boulevard when the students were headed out of town. You banged your head on the steering wheel, and looked pretty upset to me.”

The driver said, “That’s not a crime, is it?”

The officer said, “No; but when I saw your bumper sticker that read, ‘Follow me to church this Sunday,’ I figured this car had to be stolen.” (adapted from a number of sources, including “Fear and Driving in L.A.,” 5/9/2004, www.homileticsonline.com)

In John 13, Jesus said that everyone would know we are His disciples by the way we show love to one another (John 13:35). It is no wonder that the world sometimes fails to recognize us.

Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) was a conservative theologian and pastor who was active in the mid-to-late Twentieth Century. In his book, *The Mark of the Christian*, (Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, first published in 1970) he argues that if we don’t have love for one another, the world has every right to conclude that we are not Christians, not disciples, and that we do not know anything about God. (Quoted in “Face Blindness,” 5/6/2007, www.homileticsonline.com)

That might not be necessarily true, but the rest of the world would certainly be justified in thinking that. Maybe a refresher course on love is in order.

II. Admonishment and accountability... Jesus said that we were to love one another just like He loves us. And that raises the question, “How does Jesus show us love?”

The first way Jesus shows us love is when He admonishes us and holds us accountable. You know, when I was growing up, I was convinced that there were times my parents had no idea what fun was. I was certain their main job was simply to keep me from doing most of the things I wanted to do.

Today, a car is almost an entitlement. But in 1963 when I turned sixteen, we only had one car. My parents made it very clear that it was a *family* car; and, they made it equally clear that I could not use it without special permission.

At that time, there was a movie theatre in my home town and in neighboring Sheffield. But, the best movies were always in Florence. To get to Florence involved a

trip across the Tennessee River Bridge. My mother thought the bridge posed a massive threat to the safety of teenagers. Also across that bridge was the only fast food, hamburger place in the entire, two-county area. Getting the keys to the car for a weekend date was difficult. Getting permission to travel across that bridge was totally out of the question.

I thought my parents would never consider letting me take a date to a movie in Florence. In addition to that, they were very particular about the people I ran around with. And, when they did let me out with other friends, they had to know exactly where I was going. No matter where I was going, or with whom, they expected to hear my footsteps on the front porch by 10:00 pm. The only exception was on prom night my junior and senior years. Then, my curfew was extended one whole hour.

Seriously, I deeply resented their intrusion into my so-called private life. What I did not completely understand was that they were simply showing their love for me. Their admonitions and their holding me accountable were just a few of the ways they were trying to protect me—not only from others but also from myself.

I received a phone call just this past week from the United Methodist Foundation for Evangelism. They were interested in talking to me because of our continued growth in membership. They told me that only one out of six larger Methodist Churches was growing.

According to a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, every denomination is in decline: Protestants, Roman Catholic—it does not matter. (<http://pewforum.org/Religion-News/Big-churches-posting-small-membership-losses.aspx>)

There are a lot of reasons for the decline. They range from the infusion of other religions into regions once thought to be bastions of Christianity, to what some envision as the rising conflict between science and religion.

I do not have the hard data to back this up, but I believe that one of the biggest reasons for decline in the church is the confrontation between what people now think as moral versus the morality proclaimed in the New Testament. The reason I say this is because I do a lot of reading and research on the number one gauge of public sentiment: The internet.

It is very clear that there is a growing skepticism in contemporary culture concerning what they perceive as an antiquated morality in The Church. Many, many people resent being held accountable by a standard that admonishes them to keep themselves pure. As a culture, we have become enamored by a “consenting adults” morality. What is worse is that people who are not quite adults also want to be governed accordingly.

All Jesus wants to do is to love us. And, He does that by trying to protect us from others and from what we will do to ourselves if we are allowed to live in wild abandon. Jesus shows us love when he admonishes us and holds us accountable. We love one another by allowing Jesus to work within us so that we are in wholesome and accountable relationships with all others.

III. Example... The second way Jesus shows us love is by example. Do you know how children learn to speak? They do not learn how to speak because we talk to them.

If that were true, children would grow up “cooing” and speaking with great affectation. Instead, children learn to speak by watching two adults speak to one another.

Children learn by example. So do youth and adults. For example, statistics continue to indicate that if children grow up in a home where there is abuse, then those children are much more likely in adulthood to abuse a spouse or their own children. The same is true about church attendance. I recently read a study that if both parents attended church regularly, over seventy percent of their children will probably attend worship when they grow up. If only the father is regular in attendance, then the number drops to somewhere near fifty percent. If only the mother is regular in attendance, the percentage is much lower, somewhere near fifteen percent. The example of the parents is much more important than anything the church or Sunday School tries to impress. (Warren Mueller in *Homemade*, May, 1990, quoted in www.sermonillustrations.com)

When Jesus wanted to illustrate what he meant by loving a neighbor, he spoke about loving like the Samaritan loved. Samaritans lived in an area between Galilee and Judea. They were the descendants of the people who had intermarried with the Assyrians who had invaded Israel in the 8th Century, B. C. The two groups hated one another. It was shocking for people in Galilee and Judea to hear about a Samaritan who ministered to the needs of a Jewish robbery victim. But, it was radical love that Jesus intended to teach.

He also showed it by example. Jesus loved some of the most unlovable people in His culture; and He loved them without reservation. However, He did not just love them without *reason*. Jesus always loved people with the intention of changing their lives. For example, when He loved the woman caught in adultery, He loved her because He not only wanted to save her life from an angry mob. He loved her because he also wanted to save her from a life of sin.

The same was true of the tax collectors he sought out, people like Zacchaeus and Matthew. Jesus ate dinner with them and even invited one to be a Disciple. Jesus wanted these social pariahs to be transformed into people who would love in return instead of ruining life for the average person of his day. By example, Jesus taught us radical love. Modeled on the love of Christ, our love for the unlovable people of the world has the power to transform the world, literally.

IV. Sacrifice... The third way Jesus showed us love was through His sacrifice. Most of you know that my mother has Alzheimer’s and lives in a nursing home. We have found that the best time to visit her is during meal time. My mother sometimes does not remember enough to pick up a fork and feed herself. But, if we can get her started, she will sometimes feed herself.

We have also learned that, hands down, her favorite part of any meal is the sweet part. She loves dessert. We can not remember how many times Mom has taken her cookie, broken it into two pieces, and tried to give me one of those pieces. Here is a person who often can not remember how to feed herself, but who remembers how to sacrifice for someone else. Sacrificial love was so deeply ingrained in her, that it is still part of a mind that is lost to reason and memory.

Jesus once said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love no person has than this, than to lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:12-13)

V. The new commandment... This is the new commandment: That we love one another just as Jesus loves us. Jesus loves us by admonishing us and by making us accountable. Jesus loves us by the example of radical love for others. Jesus loves us by sacrificing all for our sake.

Will someone know you are a Disciple of Christ by the way you love? Amen.

The Rev. Michael D. O’Bannon, Pastor