

With Green Thumbs & Tender Hearts

John 15:9-17

May 10, 2009

(THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER /MOTHERS DAY)

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony ... Jesus said it like this: This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

I command you. I mean it!

Sound familiar? I want you to love! And if you know what's good for you ... And I mean it! I do! ✚ I tell you, it... it makes me think Jesus was in cahoots with my mother! Because she said the same thing. Every Sunday, I would sit with my mother in church. When I was little. And every Sunday she'd let me draw little pictures on the back of the bulletin, and chew Teaberry gum, or maybe take a little nap while the preacher was preaching.

And I'd sit there and listen as they sang songs from those big red books that didn't have any pictures. And I'd listen to the choir when they sang the anthem. And as they stood there in their dark green robes with the golden yokes and the big flowing sleeves that looked almost like wings, I thought they were something like angels.... And boy did I get my bubble burst! But then, in the old days, when I was a boy, they sounded like angels. And they still do, don't they?

And at our church in Wayne, a quartet would sing every once in a while. Or a trio. Or maybe someone would stand and sing a solo in church. My brother did that pretty often when he was a kid. He'd stand right up there, in front of all those people, and he'd sing! Which made my mom really proud, of course. But it left me traumatized, believe me. Because I was afraid she'd want me to do the same thing. And I couldn't. I wouldn't. I wasn't about to do anything of the kind. Because singing was something I did for Mitzi and nobody else. We'd go fishing down at Ferguson pond. Just Mitzi and me. And I would sing to her as we sat by the pond. And Mitzi would sit there on the little bridge and look up at me with those sweet brown eyes. And she'd kiss my cheek and wag her little tail. (Mitzi, of course, was a beagle. Didn't I tell you? It was like Tony Orlando and Dog, I suppose.) But that was it. I sang for Mitzi and nobody else.

But there was a woman -- an older woman -- there in our church who sang to her *plants* and *flowers*. And ... they liked it! They loved it! At least, that's what she said. It made them grow she told us. And I don't know, maybe it did. Something sure did. Because Miss Opal had the biggest tomatoes you've ever seen. They were the big, 4-H, blue-ribbon, county-fair sort of tomatoes. I mean, that woman could make almost *anything* grow. It's as if she was all thumbs and every one of them was green! Because her yard was just covered with pansies and daisies and roses and tulips. And the vines in the garden out back were all loaded with fruit. Big *juicy* tomatoes, and giant cucumbers, and onions and lettuce and half-runner beans. It was just bursting with life. And all because she sang to them, she said. And loved them.

And she loved all of us, too, [or *something*,] I guess. Because she decided to sing for us in church one Sunday. And ... I'll never forget it.

She stood up by the pulpit there in front of the choir. And she turned to the congregation and started to sing. And it was awful! It was like fingernails on a blackboard, Styrofoam on glass, or two old tomcats locked in battle underneath the front porch. It was the wreck of the old 97 right there by the pulpit. And it was awful, just awful. *But ...* we were in church, mind you, the house of the Lord. And *she* of course was one of God's children... So people sat there smiling. Trying to look *blessed*, I suppose, or *inspired*.

But I didn't feel blessed. I felt something, mind you, but it wasn't *blessed*. And I leaned over to my mom and I whispered in her ear. "Mom, Miss Opal can't sing very well, can she?" And my mother, who is a good Christian person, leaned over and whispered back. "She sings just fine," she said. "She sings from the heart and *that's* what counts." And I looked up at my mom, who really *is* a good person, and I smiled and said, "You sing from the heart, too, don't you mom?"

I'll never forget the look she gave me that Sunday. I still see it sometimes. Whenever I have an unkind thought, or a disparaging word, I see that face -- the face of my mother. And her lips aren't moving, but the words are loud and clear. ***Be good. Be kind. Be someone who loves. This is my commandment.*** And it was. It was. Though she didn't say it that way, it's what she wanted. It's what she expected, I think. And this is how she would say it, I think. ***Whatever you do, do from the heart. If you sing, then sing from the heart (with all your heart). And if you teach other people, then teach from your heart. Whatever you do, whatever you do, do it from the heart. Do it for others. Do it with love And I mean it!***

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony ... Jesus said it like this: **This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

So you see, somehow, I think, my mom was in cahoots with the Lord. Because he wants the same thing. It's right here ... in the *bible!* He wants his people, *his children*, to live from the heart. **Be good. Be kind. Be someone who cares. This I command you**, he said. **Love one another as I have loved you.** And it wasn't in church, mind you. But it was close. For when he said it, they were all there in the upper room breaking the bread, and blessing the cup, and singing and praying as if they were at church. Because this was the Passover. And Passover was big. Even bigger than Mother's Day if you were Jewish. It was a holy celebration, a sacred meal. And for Jesus and all the disciples that night, it was the Last Supper -- the last time they would see him before he was killed. And he knew that, I think. He knew.

The time had come for Jesus to move on and do what his Father had sent him to do. And you know what *that* was. **For God so loved the world**, says John, **that he gave his only begotten Son.** Or as Paul said in his letter to the Philippian church, **He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.** And the time had come for him to do that -- to lay down his life for all of his sheep, the little lambs that he loved. And so that night at the table, he looked at Peter and John and James and the others and said, **I'll be with you only a little while longer.**

And... that must have hurt. I'm sure it was hard for everyone there. Because they loved him so much -- like no other person they'd ever known. And he had been there for them in so many ways -- calming the storms, giving them strength and wisdom and courage and forgiveness. Oh Jesus gave them a second chance -- more than a second chance, really. He gave them life. A whole new life in his love. And now he was leaving, he said. And they didn't know why. They just knew he was leaving them. And for the first time since the day he had called them, they would be without him. Alone.

So that night in the upper room he did what most people do when they say goodbye to someone they love. He told them to keep in touch. **I am the Vine, you are the branches. Stay connected,**" he said. **Don't lose touch.** Because you know what happens when a branch loses touch with the source of its strength and the source of its life. It can't blossom or grow or bear any fruit. And neither can we. For he is the source of our life and our strength. **Stay in touch** he said. **For I am the Vine and you are the branches.** ✘

It's what we do every Sunday. Every time we gather to hear his word, and sing his praise, and open our hearts before him in prayer, we're keeping in touch. We're staying connected. For **Apart from him we can do nothing.** But **with** him we're like the plants and the vines in Miss Opal's back yard. And we blossom and grow and bear good fruit. ✘ Stay in touch, he said. And he meant it. He did.

But that wasn't all he told them to do. Because even a tree, if it has only one branch, can't be all that God wants it to be. Miss Opal would tell you that a good healthy tree has *plenty* of branches, and they all work together to bear plenty of fruit. But one branch by itself could never do that. So that night he told them stick together. **A new**

commandment I give you ... that you love one another as I have loved you.

And if it's a commandment, it *must* be *important*. It must be something we all really need. And it is. It is. It's something we need... for we all need each other. We need the care and support of this "family" in Christ. We need the prayers of our friends, the care of our family, and the strength and encouragement that come through the people around us. Because the truth that we sometimes forget is that being a Christian -- being the person God wants you to be -- isn't something you can do on your own. But you *have* to have help. God's help and others'.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony ...

That's why my mom said what she did when I was a boy. She said, **Whatever you do, do from the heart. If you sing, she said, sing from the heart (with all your heart). And if you teach, or build, or plant, or sow, or whatever you do, do it from the heart. Do it for others. Do it with love. And I mean it!** And she did. She did. Because she knew, I think, that we were all in it together -- all in the same boat. And we still are. We're all in this together. And we all need the Lord. And we all need each other.

I guess that's why I thought my mom and the Lord were somehow connected in all this. And they still are, in a way. Because they want the same thing. They just want what's best for their children. Which

is, of course, why they expect us to be people who love -- people who really do care about others. Because they know -- they know -- we need all the help we can get. All the love we can get. And all the love we can give. For when we do ... well, it's like one of those vines in Miss Opal's back yard -- the ones she sang to and loved and nurtured. We will blossom and grow and bear fruit -- the kind of fruit that makes a difference not just for us, but for every person with whom we are connected in love. And it will make a difference here, in South Charleston, and in the world. ✚

So many people in South Africa have learned that, I think. That being people who are determined to follow and live by Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us can make a difference in the world, so that white people and black people can live and work and worship together. And people in Northern Ireland are learning the same thing. They're learning to *live from the heart*.

Tony Campolo was visiting there in Northern Ireland at a place called Portadown. And it happened, he said, just a couple of nights before the **Orangemen** (the Protestant hardliners) were to march through the Catholic neighborhood. Which usually means trouble. But two nights before the march, there was a peace rally at the town hall. And they invited Tony to come along *with* them, he said.

And he said the place was a beat-up, dilapidated old building. And the windows were covered with plywood. Because the glass had been shattered by bombs. And Tony said that about a hundred people were there. And they were divided pretty evenly, he said, between Catholics and Protestants. And what he saw there was amazing, he said. During the next few hours, people from each side begged forgiveness from the other.

A Catholic man would tell of his wrong attitudes and even confess some mean and hurtful things he had done to Protestants in years past. And then the Protestants would call back to him (all of them, together) from the other side, **“We forgive you.”** Can you imagine? Can you imagine Israelis and Palestinians doing that? Or the people of India and Pakistan? Or so many other places in our world where there is hatred and war and death?

It went on and on, Tony said -- Catholics and Protestants openly confessing their sins and announcing forgiveness. And they prayed together and sang together. And in the end they embraced each other as sisters and brothers in Christ.

That’s what I call singing from the heart -- creating a wonderful hymn of praise to God. Oh, and can you imagine what their little gathering said to their neighbors and friends? It said, *“We are all God’s children -- protestant and catholic. We’re in this together. And together we are the body of Christ.*

It’s what happens when God’s children put their heart into it, I think. We are shaped and molded and filled with the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord ... and all our proud divisions cease. And *“the love that made us makes us one.”* ✠ If living from the heart -- if following Jesus, I mean following his commandments can bring healing and hope to the people in South Africa and Northern Ireland who were broken by hatred and fear and violence -- if loving one another can make such a difference there, just imagine what a difference it will make here in this place. Just imagine what a difference it will make in our lives.

Oh ... This is my commandment, says Jesus, **that you love one another as I have loved you.**

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony ...

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObLSB

