

Theme: Reflecting Jesus' love

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, Jesus came to give us an example of unconditional love and commanded us to love unconditionally; help us and inspire us to do this difficult task so we may transform the world in your love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Michelle Feldstein collects unwanted and out of place animals. She does this with her husband on 300 acres north of Yellowstone National Park. Deer Haven is the name of their ranch for unwanted animals. They have flightless ducks, clawless cats, homeless llamas, henpecked roosters, abused alpacas, among other misfits.

Michelle has had a less than usual career path before she felt called to be the Mother Teresa of the animal world. She was a race car driver and hospital administrator among other things. Her husband Al is, perhaps, a little more famous, especially if you are like me, a fan of MAD Magazine, which Al edited for many years.

It costs them about \$50,000 per year for feed and veterinary services for their over 200 animals. In addition, they need to heat barns in the winter and fill water troughs. They have a guest house to help pay for the expenses of Deer Haven.

Last February, they learned about a blind 16-year-old quarter horse, named Sissy, that was scheduled for euthanizing. They decided to take in the horse and made the preparations.



Nothing prepared them for what came with Sissy. Instead of four legs, they got 40 more legs. Sissy has five goats and five sheep that care of her. The seeing-eye goats and sheep are never far from Sissy. They guide Sissy to water and feed. They guide her into her stall, even in the snow or rain. When they lead Sissy to food they get out of her way when they get

there so she can eat. When Sissy gets near a fence, they stand in her way so she stops.

Michelle says, "There's a magic involved in sheep, goats and a horse becoming best friends. When you watch them, you have to wonder, why can't people do that?"

Why indeed. When this sermon is posted in our web site, it will include a picture of Sissy and one of goats. This picture of five goats and five sheep guiding a blind horse is the kind of picture that Jesus is conveying to the disciples in today's' gospel reading.

We pick up John's gospel where we left off last Sunday. Now I know all of you were here last week, but just in case you don't remember what that was, I'll briefly recap. Jesus gave his friends comfort during the Last Supper in that Jesus is preparing a place for them in heaven, that Jesus and the Father are the same, and that Jesus is the way to an intimate relationship with God.

Jesus is saying something that seems manipulative. If you love me, you'll do as I command. If this was said in a marriage, it could be construed as spousal abuse. Because what Jesus is also saying is that disobeying his command means that a disciple does not love Jesus.

Now I'm here to tell you that we are all in deep trouble. Because the command Jesus is talking about is to love others. I don't know of anyone who has not failed to love someone at some time. We sometimes treat people less than kindly. Our behavior implies that we don't love Jesus, according to what Jesus is saying.

Jesus next puts us even further behind the eight ball. There is another condition to loving Jesus. If we obey as Jesus commands, Jesus will also give us the Advocate. The Advocate will then be with us forever.

Who is the Advocate? Jesus calls the Advocate the Spirit of Truth in the next verse. The word translated advocate is the Greek word, Paraclete. A Paraclete is one who stands with someone, offering aid. It is one who is a mediator, intercessor, or helper. It is primarily someone who acts as an attorney for someone in court, pleading the client's cause. As Jews, Jesus'

hearers would understand this as one who would represent them in a Roman court.

Jesus describes this Spirit of Truth as being known by the disciples. The world, on the other hand, cannot see this Spirit, because they do not accept nor know this Spirit. This is the ever increasing situation in western civilization today. The percentage of people in our country who reject Christianity and religion in general, is the fastest growing segment of our society. They cannot accept this Spirit, because they neither know nor see this Spirit of Truth. Again, the hidden accusation is that those who reject the Spirit of Truth reject truth, in general. They live in a false view of creation.

Now Jesus is telling his friends that even though Jesus is leaving, he is not leaving them just to themselves. An advocate is a legal function, which may apply, but I don't find it helpful in describing the Holy Spirit. It is this helper, the Holy Spirit who is replacing Jesus after Jesus leaves and it is the Holy Spirit who will remain with us forever. The Holy Spirit will help us as we live our lives day by day. This is the Spirit of truth who leads us into all truth.

Jesus reassures his friends that they will not be left as orphans. Jesus will return. In a short time, those worldly people will not see Jesus. But his friends will see Jesus. Because Jesus lives, we will live also. It is then that they will know that Jesus is one in the Father and Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus.

This is the miracle of the incarnation. Jesus became human, as one of us. We then, also, are in Jesus. We have that spark. We have that inclination. We can be like Jesus. It is not impossible. We have Jesus in us and we have the Holy Spirit. We have God. Jesus reiterates, if we love Jesus and do what Jesus commands us to do, then we have God's love. And we will be shown what Jesus is like.

“Mother Teresa of Calcutta famously left her record of a lifetime of struggle – struggle with the darkness that plagued her because, for more than half her life, she did not feel the presence of Christ.¹ Nonetheless, among Christians

¹ Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York: Doubleday, 2007)

she has been generally accepted as a modern saint. Some consider her an even greater saint because in spite of the dark she continued to be faithful. Even though she had not been gifted with spiritual certainty, she steadfastly pursued the mission to which she believed she had been called, and the Christian community recognized and affirmed that mission.” (Linda Lee Clader)

Jesus presents us with a double paradox. The first is the tension between transcendence and imminence. In other words, God seems to be a long way from us and not too involved with us and God being with us and even in us. Christ is silent and distant on the one hand and present and comforting on the other. We experience God in both ways in our lives.

When I was in college, God was so distant that I perceived that there was no God. Then God found a way to penetrate my scientific façade and burst through into my life. In the midst of suffering we may feel God is distant and uncaring or we may find God as a present comforter.

The second issue with transcendence and imminence is Jesus’ ethical commands. Our understanding of God should lead us into good works. If God was present and active, then we would have no responsibility in the world. God would do it all. If God was completely absent, then we would be fully responsible for the world. God as Other and as Immanuel calls us to keep Christ’s commands, follow God’s will, and cooperate with the movement of the Holy Spirit in living out Christ’s love in the world.

This is why Jesus commands us to love. We do not have to be concerned with a long list of laws of what we should do or not do. If we love others, we will treat them right. It is so simple and yet so difficult. Once humanity learns to love everyone, then Jesus’ work is done here. And Jesus’ work can only be accomplished by us. Christians, as Jesus’ disciples, are responsible to accomplish this. We can only accomplish this by showing others how we love other people.

[Reuters contributed to this sermon.]

Text: **John 14:15–21** (NRSV)

¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep^f my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,^g to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in^h you.

¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”²

^f Other ancient authorities read *me, keep*

^g Or *Helper*

^h Or *among*

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 14:15–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.