

## If You Love Me

1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14: 15-27

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In the time it takes me to complete this sentence, the Earth will have traveled 120 miles. Our planet flies around the Sun at nearly 66,000 mph or one hundred times faster than a commercial jetliner. By the time I finish this sermon, we will have flown nearly 22,000 miles, which is more than three times the distance to Australia.

Gravity is an extraordinary force. Whether we see it or not, whether we believe it or not, whether we understand it or not, gravity keeps us moving and holds us in place at one and the same time. Gravity works without us. Gravity does not need us. Gravity could care less if we notice it. It's safe to say we can get along perfectly well and never once pay heed or homage to gravity. Gravity will go on being gravity whether we care or believe in it or not.

Is God anything like gravity? Is God always active, present, working, and doing what God does whether we believe or not, whether we love or not, whether we obey or not? Like gravity, does God keep on being God whether we notice or pay heed or thank or worship or love him? I know it's a crazy question. And I can hear Shirley Guthrie rolling over in his grave right now for even asking it: But does God need us?

I mention Shirley because we concluded his best known book this morning. Shirley first published *Christian Doctrine* in 1968. Some of you met Shirley when he gave our 1984 Memorial Lectures. Shirley was a great teacher and a wonderful human being. I had the pleasure of meeting him when deciding where I would attend seminary. During a visit to Columbia Seminary, about twenty-five of us sat in on one of Shirley's lectures. I don't remember everything he said that day except this one thing: "God doesn't need you. If you think God needs you, find another line of work."

As an aspiring preacher, I was shocked by that thought. "Why of course God *needs* me. Why else would he be calling me? Surely, Shirley, God *needs* me. Everybody in this room has so much to offer. We're all eager to serve God. Surely God needs me; needs us?" While I ultimately chose Louisville Seminary (and not because I didn't like Shirley, because I did), it wasn't long after I was ordained that I discovered that Shirley was right—God didn't need me. It didn't take long to learn that God was in charge and not me. The church was going to be church with or without me. And God was going to be God with or without me; which I take great comfort in, especially when things are falling apart. That said; I still wonder about God not "needing" us, not that God needs us to be God, but that God is God in a way different from the way gravity is gravity. Gravity doesn't care if we notice it, but I think God cares. Gravity will go on holding us in place and pulling us around the Sun whether we want it to or not—its force is inevitable; irresistible; unstoppable. God, on the other hand, invites us into a relationship. God may not need us, but clearly God wants us. God wants our love. God wants us to live in his love, to flourish by it, to love his world in ways that reflect God's love. God is steadfast. Like gravity, we can depend on God. God loves whether we notice or care or respond. That said, unlike gravity, God's love may be denied; spurned; rejected. God does not compel, coerce, or otherwise force us to love. Jesus put it sharply, "*If* you love me, you will keep my commandments." *If* does not mean we must love God. *If* means we may love; *if* means we have a choice. We may not have a choice about gravity, but we do have a choice about God's love.

"*If* you love me. . ."

This big "*if*" comes at a time when Jesus is saying goodbye to the disciples. They are at table when Jesus astounds them by washing their feet. His act was one of a slave. While washing the disciples'

feet, Jesus gave a command, which he called *new*: “Love one another.” While they are still eating Jesus tells his followers not to fear his leave-taking, “Let not your hearts be troubled,” he tells them, “believe (or you believe) in God, believe also in me.”

The word “troubled” appears in John’s story about the healing pool at Bethsaida. From time to time, the water at that pool was “troubled” or disturbed or agitated. Perhaps Bethsaida was a boiling spring. “Don’t let your hearts be *troubled*,” Jesus assured the disciples. “Don’t let your hearts boil up.” Ever had your heart “boil up?” Ever been riled; disturbed; agitated? What troubles your heart? Anything troubling your heart today?

Twice in his farewell address, Jesus tells the disciples not to let their hearts be “troubled.” Troubled hearts must be common among disciples, especially when we’re afraid of losing people or face conflicted relationships or an uncertain future. “Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Don’t let your hearts be distressed or agitated. Don’t get all boiled up,” Jesus says. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”

*Another* Advocate presumes a prior Advocate. John’s word *Advocate* means “one who is called along side.” An advocate has your back. An advocate is our counselor. An advocate is in our corner. An advocate is someone who fights for us; who doesn’t give up on us even when we’ve given up on ourselves.

The identity of the prior Advocate is not hidden. During his life, Jesus was the disciples’ Advocate. He was the One who fought for them. He will be the One who dies for them. And he will be with: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”

Jesus promises to give himself. He promises to be with his disciples to the end of time. Jesus is the other Advocate, the One we profess every week: “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” which is another way of saying, Jesus lives. Death did not conquer him. Christ lives in, through, and before us. Here’s the odd part I wonder about: why can’t the world see the Advocate? Why is the world unable to see the Spirit of Truth? Why is that? Why can’t the world see the Advocate? Why is it that only disciples see the Spirit?

In John’s gospel, “the world” is at once the object of God’s love and a realm hostile to God’s reign. “God so loved the world . . .” God does not love a foreign world; God loves the world he creates; and yet, (and this is the tragic irony) though God creates the world and gives life to the world, even the life of his only begotten “*the world* did not know him.” “The world” rejects the Son. Unlike gravity, it is not given that the world will know or experience or see the Advocate. Unlike gravity, seeing the Advocate, knowing the weight of the Spirit, depends on what we do, how we respond. Yes, the Spirit is given by God. Yes, the Spirit is with us forever and is forever in our corner. But the Spirit is not operative automatically as gravity is operative automatically. Not everyone in the world “receives” or “knows” or “sees” the Spirit. The Spirit is not obvious. There are conditions around and under and in which the Spirit is known and received and seen. Unlike gravity, knowing and seeing and receiving the Spirit are contingent. Seeing the Spirit depends on one thing: our response to God’s love, which brings us back to the big *If*, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And this is my command, that you love one another.”

Where there is love, the Spirit abides. Take away love, stop love, restrict love and the world neither “sees [the Spirit] nor knows him.” The Spirit is known and seen where we love one another. Where there is love, the Father and Jesus make their home. “If you love me. . . .” Without breath, we die. Without love, we’re just as dead. Stop loving and we die. The Spirit lives where there is love. Where there is love there is Spirit. Unlike gravity, love is not a given; which is not to imply that the Spirit is weak, inaccessible, unavailable, scarce, puny, hidden, or restricted; far from it. The Spirit abounds. The Spirit is everywhere—“The wind blows where it wills.” The Spirit is free, but seeing and receiving the Spirit is not inevitable. The Spirit

doesn't compel us "to love one another." God does not over-rule us. Just as God loves us freely and not out of necessity so we love freely or not at all.

*"If you love me."*

Love is a troubling. Love is dangerous. Love will make us do things we never thought we could do or would do or should do. Loving is different from liking. Loving and liking are related but dissimilar. It's natural to hang out with people we like. We like people we agree with or who agree with us. We like people who share our values, our interests. We may even like people we disagree with but who disagree with us agreeably. Some of our best friends may be people with whom we disagree. Here's the thing, we don't need love for people we like. We don't need love for people who like us; we need love for those who dislike us. We need love for those who may wish us harm or those who ignore or treat us with contempt. We need love for those we don't like.

Jesus doesn't command us to like one another. Jesus commands us to love one another. And when we love one another, there is Spirit. When we love, the Advocate is in us, among us, with us, for us, around us—driving us, empowering, and imploring us to love as God loves. Loving is different from liking. Liking is easy. Loving is difficult. Love is an act of new creation. To love, we need God. To love, we need the Spirit. To love, we need Jesus living by our side, the other Advocate who is with us forever.

I wish that love were like gravity—inevitable, undeniable, invincible, but it is not. Love is a choice. The one thing God wants from us, the one thing God needs from us, is the one thing God refuses to compel or force or extract from us. And that is love. God doesn't make us love. We love freely or not at all. "If you love me, you will keep my command. And this is my command. That you love one another." It's the greatest force on earth—our love for one another.

We have a choice. Will we love? Will we give our hearts to God? Will we give our hearts to our neighbors, to those who are different or difficult? Will we love? It's the greatest force on earth—the power of God's love unleashed when we love. It's the greatest *If* of all time which when answered by our obedience makes all things possible, even love of enemies, love for those unlike us, love for the world into which we are sent. "If you love me, you will keep my command. And this is my command. That you love one another." Love changes everything. It is the greatest force on earth. Amen.