

Sermon 03-15-2026
Commanded to love? – Rev. Markus Wegenast
1 John 2:7-11

⁷ Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸ Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because^[a] the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹ Whoever says, “I am in the light,” while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰ Whoever loves a brother or sister abides in the light, and in such a person^[b] there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹ But whoever hates a brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

1)
Sometimes scripture is unusually black and white. We are so used that often parts of the Bible are hard to understand and carry meaning on many different levels, but then you come across passages like the one we just heard, it is so clear:

**Whoever says, “I am in the light,” while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness –
1 John 2:9**

It also said: But whoever hates a brother or sister is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

I mean, that’s pretty black and white, isn’t it? In the NT, when you see the term ‘brother or sister’ (literally just brother) it typically refers to other members of the church, not your biological siblings. The 1st letter of John is very interested in how we treat each other *within* the church. When you read 1 John you’ll notice how uncompromisingly sharp and clear it is about our mandate to love each other in the church. It keeps talking about the *commandment* that as followers of Jesus we *have to* love each other.

That begs the question: Is that realistic?

Can you be commanded to love?

The easy answer is to just say yes, because obviously we have the commandment to love God and our neighbor in the Bible. Jesus himself said it that way in the Gospel of John:

“ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” – John 13:34

When Jesus was asked to comment on a hierarchy among all the rules and regulations he said that is is the “Greatest Commandment” to love God and your neighbor. He didn’t call it the greatest suggestion or the greatest encouragement, it’s the greatest commandment!

So don’t we wonder: How does that work? How can we be commanded to love? *Can* love be commanded? I have tried several times to break up an argument between two boys that live in my house by telling them: “Stop fighting, love one another, right now, do it!” I have to tell you, it doesn’t typically work!

...
We have been looking at our church's value statements for the last couple of weeks. Value statements are not commands. They are a description of the culture that defines us as a congregation.

When I look at our church's value statements, I hear in them a great encouragement for how I want to be. Is that what you hear when you take a look at today's value statement? Today we are exploring our 4th of 5 value statements which goes like this:

COS embodies love, grace and generosity.

This is the kind of church that I want to be a part of - a church that lives out love and grace and generosity. I fully understand that in order for this to happen, I myself have to contribute to being like that.

The church is people – far and foremost. It's more than a building, it's more than an organization, it's more than accumulation of assets and traditions – the church is a people. We can't do a capital campaign to make our church more loving, grace-filled and generous – that would be something!

Speaking of Capital Campaign. At our all church gathering our trustees have given us a heads up that we will need to replace our entire HVAC system. That will require a capital campaign. I was hoping I could get a few more years under my belt with you before I have to ask you to be generous for a major capital building improvement but our heating and cooling system is 30 years old and wants to be replaced much soon – it doesn't care for how comfortable the pastor feels about doing a capital campaign!

So when we do this later this year each of us will have an opportunity to think about our generosity when it comes to sharing some of our financial resources.

Generosity in our 4th value statement, though, is broader than just making a statement about our willingness to give financial resources. We can be generous in so many aspects of our lives.

2)

I wonder how you feel about our 4th value statement. Maybe you feel like it's a bit generic: Of course, a church wants to embody love – duh! Of course, there should be grace and yes, being generous on many levels is always good.

Yes, there is a bit of a generic tone to it – BUT: that is what being a church is like. We are not tasked to reinvent the wheel of what a church is all the time. There is a 2000-year consistency that is important to keep, maintain and strengthen.

The church when it came into being after Jesus' resurrection was built upon being loving and graceful and generous and we have the awesome privilege to stand in this long line and protect this ideal in our congregation. No need to reinvent!

I don't think you will be surprised when I tell you that love, grace and generosity are even older than the church itself. The church when it was first created in the year 33 AD inherited this great idea from the people of Israel.

Did you know that the commandment to love your neighbor is in the OT already? In the book of Leviticus of all the books we find it first, right among some of those laws and regulations that we sometimes find so typical OT we also find this: "...you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." – Leviticus 19:18b

To embody love is an old commandment, and so, we find that the Apostle John is absolutely right when he wrote in his letter:

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning – 1 John 2:7

Yes it's true, the commandment to embody love is old – it springs forth from the heart of God who created us with the idea and the desire for us to love each other – to do everything in our power to overcome hatred and mistrust that clings so easily to our soul.

If we hate a brother or sister, aka: if we hate another member of the church, we live in the dark, when we love each other we live in the light. It's an old command, and nevertheless John writes this also:

Yet I am writing you a new commandment...– 1 John 2:8a

These two statements are right next to each other. So, what is it now, is it an old commandment to embody love or is it new? The answer is yes!

To embody love, grace and generosity are as old as God's interaction with us people. AND it comes to us new in the revelation of God in his son Jesus Christ.

What's new is that in Jesus we are asked and encouraged to make love our new DNA and something we desire to keep growing in.

We *need* this inspiration from Jesus for it doesn't come naturally to us. 4000 years of recorded history are a sad proof for this. There is something in our human nature that keeps us from automatically developing a desire to embody love, grace & generosity.

- *Evtl. "From Cain and Able to civil war in Yugoslavia!" ...*

I think this is why the language of dark and light which 1 John is using is so fitting. This world, the way it is, is not just bright and automatically filled with love and grace. Without the newness of God's self-revelation in Jesus in each generation and station of life we just struggle to be light!

There is a darkness in this world that cannot be rationalized or overlooked, but here is another thing that is in this world and that is true:

The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. – 1 John 2:8b

Light typically always wins against the dark – even if the light is small, it has an immense power. When you love your brothers and sisters, when you love even people who are not like you and may not be that likable – you are light and you drive out a whole lot of darkness.

Please, please don't underestimate the light that you are already bringing into your world. Yes, sure, we aren't perfect and yes, sure sometimes we even *cause* darkness – but let's not give this the power to discourage us from claiming to be children of the light. Just because sometimes our actions are dark doesn't mean that's where we have to make our home.

I want to encourage you to see the light you reflect into your world through even seemingly small actions:

- Like when you serve on a community board
- When you help out in your kids' school or preschool
- When you extend grace to the sales clerk who accidentally overcharged you or was unfriendly
- When you pull it off to answer anger and outrage with kindness and patience

There are so many small ways that may seem like nothing but when combined and done consistently they bring real light into a dark world. And the best thing is, when small actions of bright kindness and love are done consistently they may change our spiritual DNA and become part of who we are.

- *Share story of **Oma & Opa** when they helped the man who dropped his cart full of oranges in the train station.*
- My grandparents were generous people. They were hard working blue collar German Methodists who always were generous in sharing their financial resources with others – but an even greater generosity came not from their wallet but from their heart. Embodying love has become part of their soul's DNA.
- They will not make it into history books, but I know that their legacy of embodying love is historic because it brought more light into a dark world.

We all can live like that. We all can live in a way that may not necessarily get us into the history books or libraries but into the story of how God's love rewrites dark world history into something brighter...

3)

COS embodies love, grace and generosity.

Don't you want to be part of that?

Can we step up a notch?

Have you ever heard of the term **Christian Perfection**? It's an expression that can easily make us cringe. Who would ever say they are perfect as Christians – isn't that boastful?

The term Christian Perfection has deep roots in the Methodist movement. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, encouraged all Methodists of his time to actively strive for perfection. He didn't make it up, he got it from the same Bible that you and I read.

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. – Matthew 5:48

It's not just something ancient that the early Methodists honored, it's something that is still very much alive in Methodist denominations. "Are you going on toward perfection?" is a question every Methodist minister is being asked at their ordination.

I remember how we struggled with this question when we met with the bishop prior to our ordination and it was so helpful when the bishop explained to us that we should see perfection not necessarily as a universal perfection but as being perfect in love. That's how also John Wesley understood it. And aspiring to be perfect in love, that I believe is something that anyone can – you don't need to be an ordained minister for that.

You may feel that perfection in love is out of reach for you right now. Believe me, I often feel that way – but I aspire it and look forward to it and that changes something already. Wanting something, desiring something, it's the first step... So let me just ask you:

What indication do you have in your life that you are growing in your love?

That's a question that can easily be perceived as intimidating. So let me replace it with something much more friendly and encouraging, ok?

Do you want to grow in your love? Do you want to grow in your grace? Do you want to grow in your generosity?

If you can answer this with a humble yes, you are on the right path and you already bring light into darkness.

May God bless you very much, as you strive for being more like Jesus and rewrite history into something beautiful. Amen.