

## Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018

### Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B: Acts 8:26–40; Psalm 66:1–8; 1 John 3:18–24; John 14:15–24\**

One of composer Thomas Tallis’s most popular anthems begins with the words, “If ye love me, keep my commandments”—wording from today’s gospel lesson taken from the Geneva Bible,<sup>1</sup> an English language Bible used by Shakespeare and others before there was a King James Version.<sup>2</sup>

The same wording with “keep my commandments” was used in the King James’—the Bible that I and many others in this room grew up with. But we heard something else from the Revised Standard Version—the RSV—that I hadn’t paid attention to before now. In the RSV the verse reads: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”<sup>3</sup>—not “keep my commandments,” but “if you love . . . you will keep my commandments”—a different thing entirely.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bibles-online.net/1557/NewTestament/4-John/>, (accessed 29 April 2018).

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Bible), (accessed 29 April 2018).

<sup>3</sup> John 14:15.

These words are, of course, from John’s narrative of the supper before the Passover—the longest single story episode in the New Testament.

It turns out, according to the translators of the RSV that, in the Greek texts that we have, there is “a considerable degree of doubt whether the [actual] text [of the Revised Standard Version or the footnote with the alternate reading] contains the superior” — correct—“reading.”<sup>4</sup>

While spending too much time on questions about the text, I found myself beginning to think about the relationship in John’s gospel among belief and love—and in John, the minor role of obedience. Because of the theology of the evangelist whom we know as John, I would argue for the RSV reading— if you love . . . you will keep my commandments”—love comes first. This reading is also found in the New Revised Standard Version, published in 1989, and the 2011 New American Bible Revised Edition of the Roman Catholic Church.

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<sup>4</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Corrected Ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), xxviii.

I confess that I haven't thought very much about a relationship between belief and love in John. The noun "belief" and the verb "to believe" occur too many times for me to count. John also uses the verb "to love" and the noun "love" far more than Matthew and Luke.

John the evangelist famously sets God's love for humankind as the reason for God's gift of life and God's response to human death: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."<sup>5</sup>

The theme of love is used by John to begin his account of the supper that matters most, "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John 3:16–17.

<sup>6</sup> John 13:1.

Yesterday morning on a train at Columbus circle, a mother got on with an infant in a stroller. Any parent here with a small child or grandchild can probably guess roughly how old she was by her behavior. As her mother moved her stroller onto the train, she began to be a little fussy—perhaps because her mother’s attention for a couple seconds was not focused on her. When she took her fussiness in my direction, she found a smile on my face. She fixed her eyes on my eyes, and she smiled. It reminded me, a non-parent, of how fundamental the automatic biological and emotional connection is not only between parents and children but also among human beings. Joy, love, and delight are inescapable elements of human life.

There are many things about God’s creation that are hard for me to understand, even to think about. I believe there is a God who created humankind, a God who has revealed God’s self to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I’m a Christian. I believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

In John, there is very little about commandments as “moral precepts”<sup>7</sup>—unlike much of the New Testament. Instead, Jesus’ commandments are about how believers, God’s children, are to be in relationship with each other. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”<sup>8</sup> And how will others know that you and I are people whom Jesus’ called students, friends, and brothers and sisters? He said, “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>9</sup>

It is not easy to know how to be in right relationship with others. The sayings of Jesus in John’s gospel reflect very much, it is thought, the difficult circumstances of John’s community when it was written. How oppressed John’s community was by Jewish leaders and people remains a matter of much debate—especially given the rhetoric of animosity between Christians and Jews. It’s worth noting that there surely were opportunities for history to have been different. While a priest in Antioch in the years

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Anchor Bible 29, 29A (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966, 1970), II:638.

<sup>8</sup> John 13:34.

<sup>9</sup> John 13:35 The Greek word here is “πάντες”—meaning “all,” not “all men.”

A.D. 386 and 387, before becoming bishop there and later of Constantinople, John Chrysostom preached against Christians celebrating Jewish festivals with Jewish people. I find myself wondering whether one factor in the inclusion of John in the Bible was the anti-Judaism of Chrysostom's time. It was the era in which the question of which books would be included.

I recently sent a fellow rector, whose weekly newsletter I read, a couple of pages from an article by Paul Bradshaw that included a discussion of the Kiss of Peace.<sup>10</sup> I didn't remember this observation from Father Bradshaw, "There is evidence that some Christians took [the custom of kissing only close relatives] so seriously that after their conversion they refused to exchange kisses with members of their biological family who were not baptized."<sup>11</sup> That's the kind of behavior I would expect from members of a cult, not from followers of God who made humankind male and female in God's image.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Relationship between Historical Research and Modern Liturgical Practice," in *A Living Tradition: On the Intersection of Liturgical History and Pastoral Practice*, ed. David Pitt and others (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 3–18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

I think I will always struggle with how rightly to be in relationship with God and with others—that's the journey God has given us to make. Even in the darkest and most cruel and evil moments of human history, God's plan for humankind to know him and enjoy him for ever continues to unfold. I hope that when we meet God when we die, when we arrive with God in the time before time, nothing will need to be said. We will all enjoy in full the peace which Jesus gave to his sisters and brothers on the day of resurrection.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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