

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
April 27, 2008
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: I Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Sermon Title: “Loving Obediently Empowered by the Holy Spirit”

Sermon Text: John 14:15: If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

On a recent trip out of town I was able to listen to a CD which one of my cousins in England had given me as a Christmas present when we were over there visiting at the end of last year. The CD is entitled “Spirit of the Century.” It is a recording of a program that was presented in Wales in 2004 as “A Musical Celebration of the Extraordinary Welsh Revival of 1904.” Certainly growing up in Wales I had heard people talk about this revival and the influence of a young Seminary student, Evan Roberts upon the life of Wales, and especially the Southern part of Wales, during that time around 1904. In this musical celebration I was interested to see the way in which they had included in the midst of some of our great Welsh hymns local newspaper reports of some of the events surrounding the services conducted in various parts of South Wales by Evan Roberts. These reports gave me an insight into his preaching of which I had never been aware previously even while growing up in Wales.

The first report from the *Western Mail* of Friday, November 11, 1904 stated, “There is nothing theatrical about the preaching of Mr. Evan Roberts. He does not seek to terrify his hearers, and eternal torment finds no place in his theology.” Following his service on Sunday, November 20, 1904 the same newspaper reported, “The only Gospel promulgated is a Gospel of Love.”

These comments on the preaching of Mr. Evan Roberts no doubt meant that his preaching stood in sharp contrast to the preaching of many evangelists, and many revival preachers both then and now. As we have heard the words of Jesus again this morning we can certainly see why Evan Roberts and so many other preachers down through the years, including today, have been concerned that the “only Gospel promulgated is a Gospel of Love.” Jesus after all does not say, “If you fear me, you will keep my commandments.” Jesus does not invite us to be obedient to him as do so many people, maybe on times even parents or teachers, and the national leaders of some countries of our world, would want to encourage our obedience, with threats of punishment for our lack of obedience. We are not told, “Obey me, or else.” We are not told, “Keep my commandments, or you had better watch out.” Jesus does not say, “If you know what is good for you, you will keep my commandments,” as a threat of what will be the consequence of our failure to obey him. Jesus rather invites us to obey his commandments as a way of showing our love for him. As we have listened to our anthem so we have heard him say again, “This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you.” The commandment to love one another comes after we have seen the love which he has for us. This is the love of which Peter reminded his readers as he invited them to think about all that Jesus in love had suffered for them. As the other words on the front of our bulletin and in our anthem have reminded us, “Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for his friends.” The Gospel of love is the good news of the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son

to suffer and to die for us the cruel death of the cross in order to show us how much he loves us. Our obedience to his commandment to love one another is always a response to this amazing love that has already been shown for us.

The comment on the Worship Service of Sunday, November 20, 1904 led by Mr. Evan Roberts not only said that the only Gospel promulgated was a Gospel of Love, but added something which I am sure that Larry Nelson, our choir director, and Stanley Littleton, our organist, and so many others know only too well from their own experience. It said, “the most effective sermon heard on Sunday at his service in Abercynon was the singing of a hymn, “Dyma gariad fel y moroedd, tosturiaethau fel y lli.” The English translation says,

“Here is love, vast as the ocean, loving kindness as the flood,
when the Prince of Life our ransom, shed for us his precious blood.

On the mount of crucifixion fountains opened deep and wide.
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy flowed a vast and gracious tide.

Grace and love, like mighty rivers, poured incessant from above;
and heaven’s peace and perfect justice kissed a guilty world in love.”

The words of this hymn may not be familiar to most of us, yet I am sure that most, if not all, of us could also list hymns or songs or anthems which have spoken to us as profoundly of God’s great love for us in Jesus Christ as many sermons. This is encouraging for those who preach to know that God can speak very meaningfully to people in the congregation not just through the sermon but also through the reading of the Scriptures or the hymns or the anthems. It is only as we come to know that vastness of God’s love for us that Jesus says to us, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” We seek to love one another as he commanded us not in order that God may love us, but in grateful response to the vastness of God’s love seen for us in Jesus Christ.

However overwhelmed and however appreciative we may be of the vastness of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, how easy do anyone of us find it to obey that commandment of Jesus of showing our love for one another, when that means loving other people? As Charlie Brown said, "I love humanity. It is people I cannot stand." Another newspaper quote from one of his sermons highlighted the fact that Evan Roberts also recognized that showing such love for other people is not an easy thing for most people to do. It said, "in the Rhondda on Monday, November 28, 1904, his address was buoyant and practical. – "if you are not prepared to forgive others, it is no use going on your knees tonight to ask God to forgive your transgressions. I don't say don't do it, please yourselves, of course, but one thing is absolutely certain, God will not listen to you. But if you have the love of Christ in your heart you will love everybody."

In that quote from his message Evan Roberts did not repeat the words of Jesus that we heard this morning, but what is very clear from these words of Jesus is that Jesus does not expect us to show our love for him by our obedience to his commandment to love one another on our own. His promise to his disciples on the night prior to his death is that even though he may leave them they will not feel abandoned or like orphans because through the Advocate or the Spirit of Truth or the Holy Spirit they will continue to know the love and the presence of Christ with them. He does not say, "I have taken three years to train you as my disciples, now you are on your own." Rather he assures them that through the Spirit of Truth, the Holy Spirit, he will abide with them and be in them. What he said to those first disciples he continues to promise to his followers down through the years. The Christian faith is not meant to be lived alone. The Christian religion is not a do-it-yourself enterprise. As his followers Jesus wants us to live in complete, daily dependence upon the love and presence of Jesus Christ with us through that Spirit of Truth.

As Evan Roberts reminded his congregations, “If you have the love of Christ in your heart you will love everybody.” The newspaper report on his preaching went on to say, “This simple truth is carrying considerable weight. On all hands I hear of friendships renewed, and family feuds ended by hearing his message.”

That experience of Revival there in my native Wales may have happened over a century ago. But the good news is that as men and women have claimed that promise of Jesus the lives of individuals and of families are still being transformed. His resurrection is our assurance that the Spirit of Truth that he promised to his first disciples is still his promise to all who seek to follow him and to obey his commandments. Those who are engaged in our study of the Acts of the Apostles have seen how as the promise of Jesus was fulfilled and the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus so their lives and the lives other people were changed in dramatic and powerful ways. Peter knew what it was to be strengthened by the presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit to suffer even for doing what was right. Out of his own experience he is able to write to encourage his readers to claim that same promise of Jesus to enable them to be able to suffer even for doing good.

As we hear the commandment of Jesus to love one another as he has loved us, and hear his invitation, “if you love me, you will keep my commandments,” we need also to hear and claim his promise. Jesus does not leave us alone like orphans or abandoned in the midst of the storms of life. Jesus does not expect us to be faithful to him and to his commandments on our own. He promises to us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to be our constant companion and guide, the presence with us of the Risen Jesus himself, to give us courage and strength and guidance to be more than anyone of us could possibly be on our own, and to enable us to do far more than we ever thought possible. Let us claim that promise of Jesus of that

Spirit of Truth in our own lives once again as we stand and share in the litany printed in the bulletin.

LITANY SEEKING THE PRESENCE AND POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Leader: Jesus promised that he would send the Spirit of Truth to abide in us,

Unison: Come, O Spirit of Truth, let us feel your presence and your power.

Leader: Let us pray that this Spirit of Truth may abide in the Church of Jesus Christ,

Unison: Come, O Spirit of Truth, guide the Church to glorify Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church.

Leader: Let us pray that the Spirit of Truth may enlighten and illumine the gray areas of our lives.

Unison: Come, O Spirit of Truth, give us light to see the way that keeps the commandments of Jesus Christ.

Leader: Let us pray that the Spirit of Truth may stretch and increase the love we have for Jesus Christ our Savior.

Unison: Come, O Spirit of Truth, help us to respond more fully to the great love we have come to know in Jesus Christ our Savior.

Leader: Let us pray that the Spirit of Truth may turn our loving words into loving deeds.

Unison: Come, O Spirit of Truth, and empower us to love not just in words, but also in deeds.

Leader: Let us pray that the Spirit of Truth may transform our lives as the followers of Jesus Christ.

Unison: Come, O Spirit of Truth, work in our lives that keeping the commandments of Jesus Christ our Lord may become a natural and unconscious way of living each and every day.

Leader: Spirit of Truth, come and abide with us this day and every day,

Unison: and enable us to live and to love more fully and faithfully as the followers of Jesus Christ, for we ask these things in his name and for his sake. Amen.

HYMN PRAYER OF DEDICATION No. 357

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“O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee”