

“Religion or Relationship?”—John 15:12-17

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “Religion or Relationship?”, is John 15:12-17. These are the words of Jesus: *This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Confirmation instruction—that period of time in many churches where students are supposed to be “indoctrinated” in all the basic articles of the Christian faith with the use of the Bible and Martin Luther’s “Small Catechism with Explanation.” Just think of the doctrines you learned in your confirmation instruction! You learned about the atonement of Jesus Christ; the propitiation;

justification; the incarnation, humiliation and exultation of Jesus; the active and passive obedience of Christ; sanctification; redemption; the moral, ceremonial, and political law; eschatology; forensic righteousness; conversion and regeneration; typology; prophetic proclamation; discipleship; sacramental union; concupiscence . . . to mention only a few of the Biblical doctrines which you learned. Right? This is the point at which you look right through me and scratch your head trying to figure out when you learned that stuff!

It is interesting how much stock we put in this tradition of confirmation. Is it the point in a Christian's life when he publicly makes a commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior? Is it the point in a Christian's life when she not only understands the doctrine of the Lord's Supper so that she doesn't take communion unworthily but also understands that it's the expression of a unity with the other Christians in all the articles of the faith with whom she is taking communion? Is it the point at which he is now considered a "mature" Christian and can make his own decisions about that faith, like whether or not to go to church? Do some people view the confirmation rite as the point at which she now personally takes on faith in Jesus which was confessed for her at her baptism? The confirmation rite not only deals with faith in Christ and commitment to Him but also defines denominational loyalties . . . **and all this at the mature age of 14!** We have certainly set our confirmation sights high!

Contrary to public opinion there is no religion in the Bible. Sure, there is a lot of teaching in Scripture. However, it's message is all about relationship—the relationship between you and God as well as you and others in relationship with Jesus! All the Bible knowledge, all the memorization, all the traditions connected with the rite of confirmation and all celebrations in the world mean nothing without a relationship of grace with God through faith in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

According to verse 12 of our text, Jesus says this relationship is displayed by love: *This is My commandment, that you love one another **as I have loved you***. Notice that your relationship with one another is based upon God's love for you in Jesus! As nice as all of this may sound it's not as simple as it looks. Relationships are filled with sinful strife, envy, resentments, dissension, malice, slander and any number of forms of hatred and abuse. And Jesus comes along telling us to love one another as He has loved us?!

The focus of His commandment is not primarily your love for one another. People constantly believe they are showing love to others and wonder why it seems to “backfire” so often. They focus on trying harder and harder to show love only to be disappointed that their hard work did not produce the desired results they wanted to experience. Actually, your love for one another is meant to be a fruit of God's love for you, which means He has to deal with your sin!

So here's how the relationship works: Adam and Eve disobeyed and ran away from the One Who loved them and He promised to deal with their sin through the Savior Who would crush the power of sin, death and the devil. Cain was so in love with himself that he killed his brother Abel, yet God protected him so no one would kill him even though justice could have permitted doing so. Abraham was so in love with his wife that he passed her off as his sister so the kings of other countries wouldn't kill him and take her as wife. Jacob's sons had such an affection for their brother Joseph that they sold him into slavery in Egypt and told dad that he had been killed by a fierce animal. King David, described as a man after God's own heart, committed adultery and murder, bringing trouble and conflict into the Old Testament Church. Nevertheless, Yahweh protected these people and eventually sent Jesus through the family line because of His steadfast love for sinners. How is it stated by Jesus in John 3:16? *For **God so loved the world**, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* **It's all about relationship based upon His gracious love for us sinners in Jesus!**

Notice the dynamics of relationship which Jesus describes in our text:

- A friendship based upon laying *down* one's *life for his friends*. Romans

5:6-8 says: *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

- *You are My friends if you do what I command you.* (Verse 14) We do not become Christ's friends through our obedience, but we obey Him because we cherish our relationship with Him.
- It's about Him sharing God the Father's heart and will with us. *No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.* (Verse 15) Sharing is an important characteristic of relationship.

It is the devil who strives to turn relationship into a system of religion. He wants you to look at the Bible as a book of facts from God to be debated, used as “ammunition” in “theological discussion” which usually degenerates into quarrels, arguments and division. He will do everything to keep your focus on this course because he knows that God's love relationship with you has dealt with your sin once and for all and **he hates being a defeated enemy!** 2 Peter 3:18 tells you to *grow in the **grace** and knowledge of our Lord and Savior*

*Jesus Christ.* Knowledge not governed by grace produces a relationship with a religious system within which the devil can lead people to hell. The *knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* must be accompanied by His gracious loving relationship in which His love for us sinners deals with our sin once and for all in His life, death and resurrection!

Jesus says in our text that we have been chosen by Him to bear lasting fruit of His love in a relationship with Him and one another. The relationship is so intimate that we can ask our heavenly father in the name of Jesus for anything. Religion hears that as simply tacking “in Jesus’ name” on to the end of a prayer much like a magical incantation to make the prayer valid or convince God to give us what we want. Relationship hears that as asking with complete trust in Jesus’ Person & Work for us, submitting to His will for our lives no matter how things turn out! How does the meaning of the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer state it in Luther’s Small Catechism? “With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father.” **It’s all about relationship based upon His gracious love for us sinners in Jesus!**

Thus, the Confirmation Rite doesn’t put the seal of approval on your learning of God’s Word. It is not goal of your instruction even if it appears that

way. It is not graduation into being a better Christian or more mature or adulthood or whatever. It is the public profession of your faith in Jesus as Your Lord and Savior with the desire to continue your confirmation instruction daily as you encounter that relationship into which He has chosen you through His Word, the Bible. Remember: You never quit learning until you meet the Author face to face! You never quit learning until you are confirmed in glory on the Last Day! Why? Because of God's steadfast love for you sealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins, eternal life and a new life relationship under the guidance of His Holy Spirit daily. Amen.

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk **in Him**,  
rooted and built up **in Him** and established in the faith,  
just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*

(Colossians 2:6-7)