

Sermon for May 1, 2016
John 14:23-29

There once was a time when you would agree to something and seal the deal with a handshake. Your word was your bond. Those days are few and far between in this day and age with most of us adhering to the words, “Believe nothing of what you hear and little of what you see.” We may think that keeping our word sounds like a simple thing to do, but there are so many ways that living in this world can complicate things. Sometimes keeping our word is relatively easy to do—we make a promise to do something and we do it.

But keeping our word goes beyond that. It means living a life of integrity—where how we live in private is the same way we live in public. That kind of keeping our word isn’t so easy or straightforward. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus gives us another characteristic that defines those who are his followers; they keep his words. In an earlier part of the chapter that we didn’t read today Jesus says it in a different way: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

That sounds almost contradictory to those of us who are used to the language of grace promising us freedom from the bondage of living by the rules. But in Jesus’ time, keeping the commandments was a perfectly normal way of showing a life of faithfulness to God. Keeping God’s word meant that the teachings of the Torah were so much a part of us that they informed every aspect of our daily life. It meant living with God’s truth and justice, with God’s mercy and love.

In today’s life we are often placed in situations where the correct answer isn’t clear. That’s when the true test of keeping God’s word comes out. If we’ve really

taken the central principals of Scripture to heart—doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God—then we can follow them as guideposts when we are uncertain.

One of the challenges this reading presents us with is that Jesus doesn't exactly say to "keep" God's commands, he says those who love him will keep his commands. We too often think that Jesus' commands are easier to keep than God's. We think that all we have to do is believe, love God, and love others and we'll be just fine. But a quick look at just a few of Jesus' teachings shows us that Jesus doesn't make it easier for us to obey God, he makes it harder. Take for example the commandment, "You shall not kill." Jesus said not only should you not kill another, you should also not give in to the hateful anger that devalues the life of others by the way we speak to them!

Time and again Jesus didn't make it easier to live a life of keeping God's word, he made it harder. Throughout the Scriptures we are called to love God with everything we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves. That's a whole lot harder to do than making a checklist of do's and don'ts that we can mark off. I think that I'm safe in saying that none of us has always loved our neighbors as ourselves and loved God with our whole being, myself included.

And yet, Jesus said that one of the marks of those who follow him, of those who love him is whether or not we keep his word. This doesn't mean that we've earned God's love by being obedient. Rather, it's like a relationship where two people love each other and want the best for each other—not because of some rules, but because of the love they have for each other.

Jesus said that if we love him, we'll follow his teachings and his way of life simply because the love we have for him compels us to do so. That's how we practice the kind of integrity where our private lives match up with our public ones. Jesus said that one of the ways we can show the new life of the resurrection is through the way we put his teachings into practice. When our love for God and Christ truly define who we are, then our lives will be a public display of what it means to keep God's word.

Fortunately it's not a do it yourself project. Jesus promised his disciples and us that the Father will send the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to teach us and to remind us of everything that Jesus has said to us. With the Spirit's help we can live a life of keeping God's ways, of living a life of keeping our promise to follow Jesus. When we keep our word in that way, then we can truly demonstrate a new and different way of living to the world around us.

Today we also celebrate Sam's affirming the promises that his parents, sponsors and the congregation made for him when he was baptized. At his baptism Sam was marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the promised Holy Spirit and today he will give his word to taking over those promises made for him. So now I will read to you Sam's words of faith.