

A DOGGED LOVE

John 14:15-21

The patient, whom we'll call Hazel, entered UCLA Medical Center for quadruple-bypass surgery. Since being moved into ICU, she had barely moved, or even opened her eyes. It had been days now, and volunteer Betty Walsh was getting concerned. The situation was getting desperate. She decided to call in a member of the canine candy-stripping corps.

The new staffer, a pet-partner, if you will, arrived moments later. Koyla, a 145-pound shaggy white Great Pyrenees, crawled right up on Hazel's hospital bed and snuggled in beside her. There she lay beside her patient, nuzzling her warm and furry body in next to Hazel, who hadn't twitched a muscle for days. Betty and the other nurses gathered around to watch tense and concerned. Then, they detected movement. Hazel's hand came alive. It wasn't long until her hand was inching toward the dog. She began to stroke its fur. Within minutes she was smiling and talking, calling the huge dog her friend. Betty stood close by and monitored her vital signs. The blood pressure monitor began to go down, down, down to normal levels.

Koyla is not the only dog in the corps. There's a poodle, a greyhound, a pug, eight golden retrievers, four black Labs, two German shepherds, several mutts - and a partridge in a pear tree.

What is it about dogs that evokes such a positive response? How are they able to provide such comfort and reassurance? Whatever it is, we know that dogs demonstrate loyalty and obedience, and offer comfort and a sense of well-being.

Our text this morning begins with somewhat of a loaded statement in verse 15 - "If you love me, you will keep my commandments". I have somewhat struggled with this statement in the past since it seemed to me to be somewhat conditional. I am reminded of a scene from early in my marriage - it was a playful conversation, but nonetheless, it borders on manipulation. Although I cannot remember the exact conversation, I believe it had something to do with helping Vern bring a fresh cow (a cow that had recently calved) into the barn. This was and is probably my most disliked farm chore and I know I had no intention of helping Vern...until he pulled out the ultimate persuasive statement, "If you really loved me...you would help me!" Sheesh!

This is not what Jesus is suggesting in this text, rather, Jesus likens our devotion to Him to be of such great depth that we will eagerly want to do all He asks of us. If you are a dog lover, and I recognize here that many people are not, there are qualities dogs exhibit that we humans could stand to imitate in our Christian walk. Think of the major characteristics of good dogs - they are loyal to a fault - no matter how much they are scolded for being bad, the minute we call to them in a certain tone of voice, they come running. They always greet with enthusiasm - there is nothing lukewarm about a dog's greeting. When they are happy, they wag their tale...some dogs wag their whole body!! You do not have to guess their moods - they are honest and unabashed in lavishing affection. Even on the worst of days, I could always count on Sawyer's exuberant greeting as if I am the most important person in the entire world...and to Sawyer I was.

This is the kind of devotion Jesus refers to, but that is not all in this passage, for Jesus clearly states that he will not abandon us - not ever. While this is particularly critical to us in times of crisis, we all need to know that we are important in the eyes of God – so important that God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is always by our side. The Trinity has a dogged love – the attitude of a person who wants to do or get something and will not stop trying; stubborn and determined and will not stop from dogging us with the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Sometimes experiencing this is somewhat elusive. In our heads we know this, but in our hearts sometimes it is hard for us to grasp – particularly in the tough times when we find ourselves asking, “God...where are you?!” This is where it is so important that we, as the body of Christ, become the hands and feet of Christ to one another and to the stranger. The kind of love Jesus wants his hearers to embrace is not an abstract concept, but a lived-out reality as seen in our relationships with one another and our Christ like actions. Jesus moved and lived among the people simply. He fed the hungry, touched lepers, healed the sick, spoke and acted towards women with care and regard. In Jesus’ life, love is seen as service and compassion; it is also seen in fierce protests against those who abuse others along lines of racial and ethnic distinction. With this kind of love shared among the body of Christ, a community of hope is born; imaginations are quickened so that people begin to wonder and dream just how far this love can carry them and be spread in the kingdom? The kind of love Jesus is talking about is life-giving and healing.

South African, Alan Paton tells a story that occurred during apartheid – laws which prevented black South Africans from mixing with whites. At the death of a white South African official who had worked within the system to humanize life for the oppressed, the blacks were turned away from his funeral despite the wishes of the family. It was a terrible insult. Isaiah Buti, a black pastor, visited the white chief justice, whom he believed to be a friend to the oppressed black South Africans. He asked the judge to participate in the Good Friday service where the congregation would observe Jesus’ practice of washing the disciple’s feet. He asked the justice to wash the feet of a congregant who had been a servant in the judge’s home and had cared for his children. The chief justice readily agreed though he asked the pastor that there be no prior announcement of his involvement.

When the time came for the judge to wash Martha Fortuin’s feet, the judge came forward and washed and dried her feet. Before he rose to return to his seat, he took her feet and gently kissed them both. It was a gesture that set healing in motion, because in that simple extra expression of care, he revealed the truthfulness and life-giving power of God’s love. The Pastor and Judge were dogged in their pursuit of a godly love for their fellow human beings.

Some time ago a newspaper in Tacoma, Washington, carried the story of Tattoo, the basset hound. Tattoo didn't intend to go for an evening run, but when his owner shut his leash in the car door and took off for a drive, Tattoo had no choice. A motorcycle officer noticed a passing vehicle with something that appeared to be dragging behind it. As he passed the vehicle, he saw Tattoo. Officer Filbert finally chased the car to a stop, and Tattoo was rescued -- but not before the dog reached a speed of 20 to 30 miles per hour and rolled over several times. He has not asked to go out for an evening walk for a long time.

Five years ago, I was feeling a bit like Tattoo. I had been bodily hit by a car in a parking lot in March of that year. The driver was not going very fast, but I did the classic landing on the hood of the car and when the driver slammed on the brakes was catapulted through the air landing on my feet. I sustained a fracture in my left foot that refused to heal, so was scheduled for surgery, including bone graft. I was looking at 7 weeks of non-weight bearing on that foot. While I was eager to get the surgery done and let the true healing begin...I moved toward this event with a good deal of kicking and screaming. I was in the position of almost literally being in need of daily foot washing at the hands of people I was much more accustomed to serving, and that I was not looking forward to it one bit. I was not used to being the patient needing comfort...my work is always to give comfort where and when it is needed. But God blessed me with two loving congregations who genuinely wanted to help. They responded in amazing ways, bringing meals, transporting me to and from Sunday Worship, taking me to doctor's appointments, running errands for me, and stopping by to help me pass the time. It was also very humbling for me as I had never had to be so dependent upon others for so long. There were times when I needed my congregations to be doggedly persistent with me – just as Jesus pursues us with a relentless and enduring love as our scripture this morning demonstrates.

In keeping with the canine theme of my sermon, I close with one more story of unbelievable devotion and loyalty. There is a picture and story floating around Facebook that some of you may have seen. It is the story of Capitán.

Capitán, a dog who has remained by his deceased owner's graveside for the last six years, proves an animal's love and loyalty transcend the boundaries of life and death. Although he still has a family to go back to, the canine simply refuses to leave his master's side. Capitán, a German shepherd from the Argentinian town of Villa Carlos Paz Cordoba, has chosen to remain close to his master, even though he died over six years ago. The man's wife told the local newspaper that Capitán disappeared from their home soon after her husband died, and after searching for him, she and her son believed he was either killed by a car or adopted by another family. But when they went to visit her husband at the cemetery, there was Capitán. They couldn't explain how he had managed to locate the right grave, but there he was, by his master's graveside. Each morning Capitán returns to the family home but precisely at 5:30 PM each day he bounds out of home and heads to the cemetery where the gates close for the night at 6 PM. The cemetery custodian waits for Capitán to trot through the gates each day. As soon as he is there, the cemetery gates swing shut. Capitán moves quickly toward the grave of his master where he spends the entire night keeping watch.

Friends, this is the kind of dogged love God has for us. Jesus does not leave us orphaned by provides the Holy Spirit to comfort us. Jesus also gives us the gift of each other. Let us become more dogged in both our pursuit of Christ and in our ministry to one another and the world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.