

Date: April 25, 2004

SUNDAY: Easter 3

SERMON: To Obey Is To Know

Text(s): John 21:1-19; Revelation 5:11-14

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My sister-in-law's dog recently died. Lizzie was a chocolate Lab, and like most Labs, very lovable. When she was still a youngster, Sharon, who had never had a dog before, decided to take Lizzie to dog obedience school. At the end of the course, Sharon won the award for "Most Improved Owner." After observing Lizzie's behavior over the years that followed, we decided that the course had taught Sharon to obey her dog.

In our culture, dog obedience school is one of the few instances where obedience is spoken of in a positive light. Obedience has come to connote something negative, something oppressive even, perhaps because we've seen too many examples of obedience wrongly understood and abusively compelled.

When someone with power compels a person with less power to act in certain ways, then the obedience is the obedience of a slave. And we don't have to look far to see any number of contemporary examples of that sort of oppressive obedience. Most of our institutions in society whether they are government or business, or even many churches, are organized along such hierarchical power dynamics. Someone gives the orders and someone else obeys them—or not as the case may be. It appears that Governor Baldacci is not inclined to obey the latest orders from the Vatican that all Catholic politicians must choose between remaining in communion with the church or voting against the right of women to have an abortion.

How often we have heard the defense at war crimes trials, "I was only following orders," and although that defense has consistently been rejected for certain categories of crimes, it is just as consistently offered by those who have obediently carried out the orders of superiors

whose power over them they feared more than they feared the moral consequences of the actions they were performing.

In the April 20th issue of *The Christian Century*, there is a fascinating and horrifying report of research done on the role of Christianity in the genocide in Rwanda a decade ago. The author of the article, David Gushee, who has studied the Nazi Holocaust and other examples of genocide extensively, turned his magnifying glass on the Hutu massacre of Tutsis in Rwanda, where 850,000 people or more were slaughtered within three months. Rwanda was the most Christianized of all African countries, with more than 90 percent of the people self-identifying as Christian. Yet this terrible fratricidal slaughter took place, and more people were killed in churches and parishes than anywhere else. How could this be?

In his investigations, Gushee pinpoints many reasons, some general and some specific, but one of the things he observes is the tendency of people to unquestioningly obey the ruling elites in their government, regardless of their religious affiliation. "To put it bluntly," he says, "politics usually matters more than religion does; or, politics co-opts religion and thus neutralizes it. To put it even more bluntly, people are sheep. Most will go along with what their elites tell them to think and do. Few have the intellectual, spiritual or moral capacity to resist either the genocidal thinking of elites or the genocide itself once it begins."

Small wonder that obedience is not a popular concept in our cultural vocabulary. Obedience compelled by superior power always creates a distance between the persons involved. We cannot really love someone who is compelling obedience from us, can we?

Yet, there is a kind of obedience that does not operate on the basis of power and compulsion, but which is a response to someone whose authority we gladly and freely accept. How many of us are motivated to obey the traffic signs on I-295 that say the speed limit is 65 miles

per hour? Perhaps only if we see a police car sitting on the shoulder with his radar on. But when our daughters were still at home, and one of them said to me, “Daddy, please don’t drive so fast. I’m frightened when you drive this fast,” I did slow down. I obeyed, not because she had authority with the power to compel my obedience through the threat of a ticket or a fine. I obeyed, because I loved her and didn’t want her to be frightened. I gladly recognized her authority to tell me to slow down, though she had no power, other than moral power, to compel my obedience. And this sort of obedience both arises from and produces a deeper intimacy. Both my knowledge of, and relationship to, my daughter are deepened in that encounter. Both her command and my free obedience to it arise from love, and deepen our commitment to one another. It is in that free and mutual submission to the other’s will that true intimacy, true knowledge of the other’s personhood is gained. It’s the sort of obedience that married couples or partners in committed relationships practice all the time, because they wish to deepen their intimate knowledge of one another.

It is that kind of obedience that is in focus in our gospel lesson today. It’s a fishing story and which of us here in coastal Maine, can’t relate to that?

As the story opens, the disciples are no longer in Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified. Some of them at least have gone back to Galilee and have resumed their old occupation— fishing on the Sea of Galilee, and as luck would have it, they’re not catching much. On this particular night, the disciples cast and hauled in their nets in vain. The fish were taking a vacation in some other part of the lake. Having done a fair bit of fishing in my time, and having come home empty-handed more often than not, I can appreciate how those disciples must have felt.

As dawn breaks, and they’re nearing shore, they see a man standing there, but they don’t recognize him. Well, why should they?

Jesus, their friend and master, had been crucified. They’re at sea in more ways than one. Going back to their boats is a way of getting in touch with reality again. I’d guess that’s why the disciples are there in their boats. Better to be at sea in familiar waters, than to be at sea in the mysterious and unfamiliar waters of whatever it was that happened to Jesus and to them in Jerusalem.

So perhaps it’s not surprising that they don’t recognize him. But then Jesus calls out to them. “Hey, you guys, you didn’t have any luck, did you? Didn’t catch anything, did you?”

“Nope,” they reply, probably wondering who this character is, and why he’s interested in their business.

“Well, you’re fishing off the wrong side of the boat,” he tells them. “Cast your nets over the other side, and you’ll find some.”

Can’t you imagine the disciples’ reaction to this? Imagine what your own would be if you were in the same boat, and some stranger standing on the shore called out to you that the fish were on the other side of the boat. What would you think?

But whatever they thought, and however foolish or irritated they may have felt, they obeyed. They were free not to obey. They were not “under orders,” of a superior with power to compel them. They could have given this stranger a rude gesture or answered him with a choice obscenity or two, but instead they obeyed. They threw their nets over the other side, and immediately they drew in so many fish, they couldn’t haul the nets back in.

And here is where we see the storyteller’s main points in this tale. The disciples’ reaction to this incredible stroke of luck is not to get all excited about the fish; their first response is one of recognition, of revelation of the identity of the one who stands on the shore commanding them to cast their nets on the other side. It’s important, I think, that we’re told it’s the disciple

that Jesus loved who is the first to recognize him: “It’s the Lord!” he exclaims. Obedience brings recognition, brings knowledge.

Meanwhile they drag the nets to shore, and discover that there are 153 large fish. This is not just one of those homey, factual details that the narrator throws in to make the story believable. That number, 153, is the number of the known nations of the world at that time. This is the storyteller’s way of saying that these burnt-out, disoriented disciples are going to be casting a different kind of net and catching a different kind of fish. Their vocation is not going to keep them on the Sea of Galilee. Theirs is a vocation that will take them into the whole world as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus.

But it is only through their obedience to Christ, an obedience freely offered, that this knowledge comes to them, both the knowledge of who the risen Christ is, and the knowledge of their own new identities and vocation in relationship to him. By obeying his command, the whole world will open up before them in a new way.

Jesus’ confrontation with Peter on the shore after they drag in the bursting nets points out clearly that this is a different sort of obedience. First, the risen Lord, the one who commands, himself acts as a servant and cooks breakfast for his disciples. This is not the act of one who compels obedience because of the power he wields; it is one who draws forth obedience as a response to the loving service he offers.

And then, he asks Peter a question, “*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*”

And Peter answers, “*Yes, Lord, you know I love you.*”

“*Then feed my sheep,*” Jesus commands him.

Three times, this exchange takes place. Three times, the question, “*Peter, do you love me?*” Can you imagine how deeply this probing question affects Peter. Here is the Lord he denied

three times, asking him, “*Peter, do you love me?*” The guilt must be paralyzing. All Peter can do is repeat his anguished reply, “*Yes, yes, I do love you.*” And all three times comes the command to Peter, “*Well, then, Peter, feed my sheep.*” Accepting the vocation to be a seeker of lost sheep, a shepherd of the flock of God in obedience to Christ’s command, is the key, both to Peter’s rehabilitation and to a deeper intimacy with Christ than he’s ever known before. It will be in obedience to that command, not a command from a superior to an inferior, but a command of love, a command of gracious forgiveness, a command that holds Peter accountable at the same time that it offers him a future in which he can start with a clean slate. Obedience to this command is not the obedience of a slave; it is the obedience that is freely given and draws Peter into a relationship of healing and new life and a new vocation.

But it is not a risk-free obedience. Love is always risky, isn’t it? Love is always costly. For Peter to obey the commands of love will cost him. Jesus tells him, after that third anguished affirmation of Peter’s love, “*Peter, when you were young, you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are older, someone else will fasten a belt around you and lead you where you do not wish to go.*”

And our storyteller puts in a little parenthetical aside, “*This was to show the manner of death Peter would die,*” meaning that at the time this story was written down, the full cost of Peter’s obedience was already known: like his Lord, he ended up on a cross, probably a victim of Nero’s attempt to pin the blame for the great fire in Rome on the Christians.

I suggest that the situation is no different for us than it was for Peter and those other disciples that day by the lakeside. Obedience to the command of Christ to love one another, to care for the flock of God is still the key to our personal knowledge of, and intimacy with, the risen Christ. We become witnesses to the truth of

the resurrection when we freely offer our obedience by accepting the risen Lord's call to feed his sheep, to gather up the strays, to bind up the wounded, to heal the broken-hearted and to protect the vulnerable from the predators. That's our calling. That's the test of our own obedience to Christ— are we willing to let him direct our lives? Are we willing to take up the task of fishing in the waters of human suffering, human pain, human despair so that others will have hope?

There is a surrender involved in the obedience of love. It is the surrender of our right to live our own life and follow our own goals independently of the will of the one who commands us, and the needs of those to whom he sends us. To give ourselves to another in obedience means that we now go where someone else leads. And yet, in that surrender comes the deepest oneness, the deepest intimacy, the deepest freedom. To obey is to know. To obey is to be set free for loving service to others.

Many people remember Albert Schweitzer as the medical doctor who for so many years served the poorest of the poor in his clinic in Lambarene, in what was known at the time, as French West Africa. We may also know that he was also one of Europe's greatest organists, and probably the leading authority of his time on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. But we may not be as familiar with his standing as a theologian and biblical scholar. He held a doctorate in theology, and wrote one of the classic books of the 20th century, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, that is still required reading in many seminaries. Yet this brilliant and accomplished superstar in both theology and music heard the call to feed the flock of God, and so he took another degree in medicine to go to Africa and spend his life healing the sick in that place where the needs were so great. Why did he do it? When asked that question, he replied, "I did it for Jesus." Now not all of us will be called, as Schweitzer was, to leave career and homeland

behind in order to obey Christ. Our obedience may be lived out in a much less dramatic way, and perhaps without ever leaving home. But the call comes to every follower of Christ, no less than it did to him, and our obedience or lack of it to that call will determine the depth of our knowledge of, and intimacy with, the risen Christ. If we want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, we have to obey him. "*You are my friends,*" he said, "*if you do what I command you.*"

Many years before he went off to Lambarene, in the concluding paragraph of his famous book about Jesus, Schweitzer gave a powerful description of what he had learned about the relationship between obedience and intimate knowledge of the risen Christ.

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands, and to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience, Who He is.