

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. God of our Eastertide minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

For me, this scripture contains one of the most human passages Jesus utters in all of the Gospel of John. Remember, this is the Gospel where Jesus is constantly reminding us of his divinity. But it is also one in which we know we will never, ever, again, be alone. Let's read that in verse 18: "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." We are never left alone in this world, to do the work of God. We are invited not just into that everlasting bond and relationship, but we are given the keys to how that living should happen just a few verses earlier, verse 15: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

This love of God's is unconditional. Just as we are saved by grace, we are sought out and given love by God just because that's what God wants to do: create humans in God's image, affirm them in that love through a gathering of folks who celebrate that promise, and for

that group, which today we know as the Church, to continually ask that God's Holy Spirit respond when we need to know that God is near and here.

All that future risen Christ requires is that we show our love in kind to those around us by keeping God's commandments. So God (because God, Christ and the Holy Spirit are one, remember...the Trinity? Ooooh, my confirmands surely know alllll about the Trinity...yeah?) is simply reminding us, the best way we can show our love is by not just blindly obeying, but keeping—taking into ourselves, knowing, loving, and living—the things that Jesus taught us. Now, the Jesus who appeared to us, the human Jesus, knows we are people of ADD. We just can't remember ten commandments, it's all too much. Jesus knows that we are people who are too distractable to have big lists of do's and don'ts even back then when they lived in an age where they could communicate with more than 140 characters in a tweet.

And so Jesus makes this incredibly easy in his discussion with the scribes over which commandments are greatest. What does he say to the scribe? (wait, and then affirm, all the commandments can be boiled down

into two “Love the Lord Your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and spirit; and Love your neighbor as yourself”). And in John’s Gospel he adds a new twist: “Love one another as I have Loved You.” So these three things: what are they? (wait and let the people respond). Good. OK.

This passage applies in many minds not just to what we do individually with, to, and for, one another, but what we do as a gathered community of God and a Church of Jesus Christ. The coronavirus pandemic will force changes on us, so that church will never be the same. Maybe that’s the kick in the butt we’ve needed. We have the opportunity to dynamically face our future, calling to welcome new people, embrace new challenges, do new things with purpose and passion that the Bible envisioned in amazing ways in the next 12 months.

How have we showed God’s love? Or if we want to wax a little more poetic a la Robert Browning, “How have we loved thee? Let us count the ways”:

- We continually Provide food, fuel, utility, and other assistance for God’s people and emergency

- food assistance through Deacon's Fund collections;
- We Provide Fellowship to God's People, along with the other churches in Town, so that on each Wednesday throughout the Church year families can come to one of our houses of worship for a free, nutritious meal a welcome smile;
 - We continue Focusing on knowing God's purpose for us with new Sunday School curriculums for our youngest kids and for study of God's Word with confirmation which will allow our Youth to break forth new light and life in their lives;
 - We continue Hearing God's words, lessons, and living water for our souls through new worship and music resources and education opportunities;
 - We continue Experiencing God's word through Sunday School and Youth engagement to foster life-long learning and love of God, teaching our kids that the world is a bridge, not a wall, and that Gods loving Grace is open to all;
 - We are Healing God's People and casting out demons through a partnership with Family

- Continuity for essential Mental Health Services provision to the people of Townsend;
- We have applied a Community Grants that will help us alleviate senior and elderly isolation, and partner with the Senior Center, TEO, and 119 Connections to bring us greater visibility and volunteers;
 - We are Embracing the Body of Christ and Jesus' hope that all God's creation might unite with one purpose as we pursue ecumenical partnerships with Townsend's Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, 7th Day Adventists;
 - We are Caring for God's littlest Children through Expansion of the VCCC with quality, affordable early childhood development opportunities and providing stable enrollment for families to know TCC can be their home for knowing God's love.

This is an incredible list of how we have embarked on what we promised we would do: once again be a vital church. One that doesn't need to be missional by sending folks to far-flung regions of the world as they did in the 1800s to prove our love for God, but that can do just as much vital work within our own Town's

borders to let people know God's love is here, near, and most importantly, NOW.

And we know that we're on the right track because we are whaaaaat? What does Jesus say we should do if we love him? (keep his commandments). Which are, in boiled down version, whaaaaat? (love the Lord God with all heart, mind, soul and spirit and Love our neighbors as ourselves). We should always know that the best churches practice faithful living and discipleship in Christ.

But we need visionary leadership. Leaders who make it known that all members are valuable, and that none are disposable or expendable. And yet, we continue to be haunted by our past and leaders from that past which seek to make us manipulate and mistrust each other. And yet, if we love Jesus, all will be well. What does Jesus tell the disciples when they're unsure?

Peace be with You. Be not Afraid. TCC can be that church which is no longer afraid, and which seeks God's peace for everyone here in this congregation, and for all in our little bit of the Kingdom of God we call Townsend. But only if we stand up for Christian living the way it should be done. And that means stopping the lies that

the membership too often believes about the least of our congregation. The last shall be first, says the Lord.

So I'll leave you with these final thoughts of what I am reminded a vital church should be from a woman whom I respect greatly, Enuma Okoro. God has chosen to be bound to us, and when we ask that ringing question, "Do You Love Me?", how is that real? Let us close our eyes. Listen with our Hearts.

If you love me, then find a way to show love and hospitality to those who are made in my image but may call me by another name, such as Elohim or Allah. If you love me, then speak out when you see people mistreated for being made in another variation of my image. But do it in a way that honors me, not in a way that honors the world. If you love me, then name the false gods you worship as false, the ones made of gold and silver, and put them behind you with the power of the Advocate I give to you. If you love me, love others as I have loved you: with a kind of love that expects and calls to be loved in return but that still, despite the conditions, will love anyway.

Let us make TCC the vital church in this Town that lives into its vision: putting love in action in the center of our lives and hearts at all times, in all things.

For that promise of vitality, thanks be to God, Amen.