

### JUST OBEYING ORDERS

John 15: 9 – 17 May 17, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

We know about obeying orders. Sometimes we have heard the phrase used to justify an action that is just wrong – morally, rationally, emotionally – however you try to look at it, it is wrong. The word came out about our military using torture on captured prisoners in Iraq. Say it isn't so! We want to believe that the moral fiber of our country is above that sort of action. The soldiers doing the torture used the phrase – “We were just following orders.” Forget about all your moral upbringing, forget about “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” Just obey orders.

The Nazi military in charge of the death camps that cremated over 5 million Jews – their only crime – they were Jews – used the same phrase, just following orders.

General Jessup is on the witness stand in the movie, A FEW GOOD MEN. He is testifying about orders given about the treatment of private Santiago. The lawyer asked him, “Is there any chance the men carrying out the order would ignore it. Any chance they would say in their own minds, “The old man has lost it. We won't do that.” The General responded to the lawyer in a sarcastic tone, “Son, have you ever put yourself in someone else's hands? Have you ever had to stand on the wall? We obey orders or men get killed.” The order in question about private Santiago was that he was not to be touched, but instead the order was a code red order which led to his death. The private was under orders to be transferred off the base. The lawyer addressed the General. “If you gave the order for Private Santiago to not be touched, why would he have to be transferred off the base? If the order was to not touch him, why was he in any danger? If orders are always obeyed, then why was private Santiago in grave danger?” Truth was, private Santiago was in grave danger and did die because the soldiers guarding him gave him the code red. At the end of the trial, the two soldiers on trial were convicted of conduct unbecoming of a marine. One of the soldiers asked the other, “Hal, what did we do wrong? We were just obeying orders.” Hal spoke up, “We were suppose to stand up for private Santiago.” Just obeying orders is not always the right thing – and to use it to justify behavior that is not morally right will not stand in the light of truth.

We parents, spend a lot of time trying to teach our children to obey orders. “Don't ride your big wheel in the street.” “Time to finish your home work.” “Brush your teeth.” “Put your toys on the shelf.” “Hang up your coat.” “Don't be late to school.”

Our teaching children to obey is one way that we create order. Sometimes we are not as thoughtful about that as we ought to be. Along with teaching children the value of obeying, we want them to have the freedom to learn decision making. Sometimes failure is the best teacher. Consequences are a part of how we live together.

We send our children to school. They learn letters, numbers, words, math and science. They learn grammar

# PILGRIM

CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

and math functions. They also learn to line up for the water fountain or in the lunch room. They learn to be quiet in the hall out of respect for those inside the class rooms. Just obeying orders is a part of us – all of our lives.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Can you command someone to love? I mean, it is a difficult task to teach a child to say “I’m sorry.” At that moment, don’t even bring up the prospect of loving each other.

A part of our problem is what we mean by love. There is a saying, “I love my mother, apple pie and baseball.” And not necessarily in that order! To talk about love in reference to mother and base ball just doesn’t go together. In our English language, we have the word “love.” The Greeks actually had three words **for love**. **There was philia – meaning love like you love a brother. Filia – love Adelfos – brother. Put those** Greek words together and you have filia adelfos – Philadelphia – city of brotherly love.

Eros was physical love – sexual context of love. This word for love is remarkable in its absence in biblical literature. It is like our sexual nature is not a good part of our creation as creatures.

The other Greek word is Agape – referring to love as self giving - love that is given even if the person receiving it does not deserve it.

In the Old Testament, the word for this self giving love is aheb. Another word for love in the old testament is raham – “to have pity, compassion. Hased is used 245 times in the old testament – “unfailing, constant, faithful.

I think it is interesting that there is no reference to love in the exodus narrative. Deuteronomy does make the point “God chose you because God loved you. And Isaiah 7:13 states that God’s love is unwavering.

In the New Testament, love is expressed in terms of God’s presence in Jesus. Love is not in the fullness of the law, love is in Jesus. There is a truly universalist tendency in the NT making God’s love free, widely known, and including all. Indeed the best statement of love in the NT is “God is Love.” The point of the stories of the lost coin, lost sheep and lost sons in Luke 15 are not told to comfort the lost – though that is important. The point of those stories grouped together in Luke 15 is for Jesus to say to the religious leaders of the day, the scribes and Pharisees – that just as the elder son is wrong to speak back to his father without using a title of respect, they are wrong to assume they know who God loves and who God doesn’t love. They have no right to draw a circle around God’s love and exclude those not like themselves.

Just following orders. What would our world be like if those of us who call ourselves Christian obeyed this self-giving love? Could we ever discriminate against another because of the color of their skin? Could we ever make as second class citizens those who are gay and not heterosexual? Could we ever not demand equal opportunity in education for those who are poor? Could we rest while unjust laws – like tax on food – take

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

part of what little the poor have? Could we condemn those of other religions because they do not read the same scriptures that we do? If we could obey the order to love as God loves us, that would be a very good thing.

The psalm says, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?” The answer given in that Psalm is “Those who have clean hands and a pure heart.” I don’t know a lot of people with clean hands and pure hearts. But I believe when we follow orders to love those about us as God loves us, we are those people. We may not be the best, nor the most obedient, but God calls our names. And God calls us to obey. Just follow the order to love as we are loved. It will be acceptable in the sight of God – and our world will be more like the creation God intended.