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## If You Love Me, You Will Keep My Commandments

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### **Text: John 15:9-17**

(B - Easter 6)

I've been thinking a lot about mothers, lately.

Maybe it's because it is two weeks after Mother's Day, or maybe it's because I had anticipated being surrounded by Mother Nature today, or maybe it's because my mother is coming to visit me later this week. Whatever the reason, I have been thinking a lot about mothers, lately.

And so I want to begin by asking you a question about mothers. The question is this: What did your mother do to make you do what she wanted you to do? I've asked a few people this question this past week and have found a wide variety of answers.

I have discovered that some mothers use bribery to make their children do what they want them to do: "If you clean up your room you can go to McDonald's or get a new CD (or whatever)."

Some mothers use the opposite of bribery, namely, instead of promised treats there are promised negative consequences. Some call this threats. It's the "Do what I want or else" variety of behaviour modification.

Some mothers go so far as to use punishment to get what they want their child to do. Usually it is too late for this particular episode — the wrong thing has already been done — but the theory is that next time the offending child will think twice. I talked with a few people who had received an encounter or many encounters with the wrong end of a hairbrush or a wooden spoon.

Some mothers appeal to a higher power. Sometimes it is God: "God will eventually punish you even if I can't right now." But more often it is a real heavy, namely, Dad. "Just wait till your father gets home!"

My own mother did not have to resort to any such delayed action. She had what we children referred to as an evil eye that could wither

you and stop you in your tracks if you were even just thinking of not doing what she wanted.

And, of course, finally there is the ever popular behaviour modification by guilt. “If you loved me, you would be a good girl.” “If you only knew how much I went through bringing you into this world, you wouldn’t cause me so much heartache.” “I only wish you could be a good girl like your cousin Beth.” Behaviour modification by guilt takes a lot of different forms, but it makes you cringe inside the same way.

The reason I talk about this is not because I want to get a few laughs at the expense of mothers, but rather because I think many people think that God operates in one or many of these ways — that God uses bribery, threats, punishments, or guilt to get us to do what God wants us to do. So God bribes us with the promise of eternal life; God threatens us with eternal damnation; God punishes us when we are bad by sending all manner of hardship into our lives; and God fills us with guilt by saying, “If you loved me, you’d do what I want you to do.”

So when we hear today’s Gospel, *If you love me, you will keep my commandments*, we think, “There goes God with the guilt again!” But I think if we hear the text in this way, we end up totally misunderstanding what Jesus is trying to say.

First of all, we end up misunderstanding what a commandment is all about. You see, we tend to think of commandments as being rules and laws that prescribe good behaviour which will keep us on God’s good side, and that doing the opposite will get us into big trouble with God. Instead, the commandments that God gave — both the ten in the Old Testament and the “new commandment” to love God and neighbour that Jesus gave — were given as guidelines by which people could make good decisions. The commandments were given as a way to help people relate to a God of steadfast love, and to provide boundaries to help us stay in loving relationships with God and with one another.

But even worse, if we think of this verse as showing us a God who somehow manipulates us into good behaviour, then we also misunderstand the very nature of God. Our God is a God of love, and the commandments are one way that God has given us to show God’s love for us. The commandments are not about guilt or bribery or threats or punishment; they are about love.

Now that doesn't mean that they are easy to do. Living out God's commands to love both God and neighbour is actually very difficult. They go against our human nature which wants to put ourselves first, and they certainly go against what the world around us holds up and celebrates and encourages. Bringing the same selfless, caring, non-judgmental love to others that we receive from God is indeed a very difficult task. What we are being asked to do is hard.

But there is help! The Gospel reminds us of that promised help in the words of Jesus: "I will not leave you orphaned." The same God who showers us with love, the same God who challenges us to live out and share that love with the world around us — that God does not abandon us but stays with us as we try to express our love by living out the commandments.

Partly because I was a little hard on mothers earlier, I want to read you a paraphrase of Psalm 23 by Ralph Milton. It uses the image of a mother to show us this ongoing and ever-present care of God in our lives.

My Mommy holds my hand; I'm not afraid. She takes me to school in the mornings; she sets me free in playgrounds and parks; she helps me feel good. She shows me how to cross the streets, because she loves me. Even when we walk downtown, among the crowds and the cars, I will not be afraid; if I can reach out for her hand or her coat, I know she's with me, and I'm alright. And sometimes when I've fallen down and I'm all covered with mud and I come home crying, she picks me up in her arms, she wipes my hands and dries my tears, and I just hafta cry again, 'cause she loves me so much. How can anything go wrong, when I have that kind of Mommy? I want to live all the rest of my life with Mommy in my Mommy's house for ever'n'ever.<sup>1</sup>

We have been given a wonderful model of love-in-action in the life and death of Jesus. Jesus did not just talk about loving people, he loved them, he cared about them he acted out his love concretely, feeding and healing and forgiving, and even challenging the authorities for the sake of those he loved. And he acted out his love

for us by giving his life for us; by suffering the pain and humiliation of the cross, ultimately defeating sin and death and giving us the gift of eternal life.

But God's daily presence in our lives and Jesus' model for us are not the only ways God strengthens us for our task. God calls us into community. We are called to come together and to take strength and support from one another; to encourage each other; to accept each other; to comfort each other; to love one another. We are called into community where we can find out together and then remind each other when we forget, that God loves us. And secure in that love, we can begin together to reach out and share that love with God, with each other, and with the community.

Each time we celebrate Holy Communion we remember and we again experience that Jesus loves us and continues to act out that love concretely when he comes to us in the bread and wine and says, "This is my body, my blood, given for you." Our Lord Jesus calls us to come to his table to be fed with his life-giving food so that we may again be strengthened and enabled to leave this safe refuge to venture out again into the world as bearers of God's love.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." These are not words of law. Not words of bribery, threat, punishment, or guilt. They are a gracious invitation for us to participate in living out and working to bring in God's world, God's reign of love. Let us help and encourage each other to accept that invitation, to live out God's love in our world.

## Notes

- 1 I found this paraphrase years ago in a free sample for a homily service published by Wood Lake Press.