

**THE NEW COMMUNITY: TEACH TO OBEY RATHER THAN TO KNOW**  
**JOHN 14:15-21**  
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We are in week four of a sermon series, “The New Community.” We are talking in these weeks of resurrection of breaking the mold of the old community, the traditional church, and considering a new paradigm for church – the missional church.

Missional churches are comprised of authentic, not pious people; they have high expectations for membership; and last week we said they propel, they send people into mission which is the meaning of the word apostle – to send out.

Today I’d like to consider faith not just as possessing knowledge but as practicing Jesus’ commandments.

When I was growing up in Pittsburgh, we had an infamous local landmark. It was called the “Bridge to Nowhere.” Pittsburgh with three rivers is a city of bridges linked to the far shores of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers.

The “Bridge to Nowhere” was a political boondoggle. Half built, stretching out over the Ohio River, it stopped and remained unfinished for years for lack of funding while politicians blamed each other.

Johnny Carson commented on it, more than one inebriated driver drove off the bridge into the river – anyone could get onto the bridge, go to the edge and dangle your legs over the water. It was embarrassing and dangerous.

What I’d like to suggest is that the traditional church has constructed a “bridge to nowhere.” It is the bridge of faith that stops over the river of life half constructed out of knowledge about God but lacking the other half of the bridge, a God-led life of practice.

I am not saying that folks in traditional churches are not living out their faith.

That’s not exactly what I mean. There are many Christians who go to church, affirm their beliefs, their knowledge of God, and go about living good lives.

What I am saying is that the traditional church is so focused on a cognitive understanding of and relationship to God that just knowing about God has become misinterpreted to mean practicing one’s faith. But knowing about God, and living a good and decent life is only the first step. The next step is deploying my life in God’s service wherever that may lead.

I remember talking once to a college student. He was a gifted young man. He understood much about a lot – sports, academic life, even professional callings.

But he fooled himself into thinking that because he intellectually grasped what those things were about that he was something of an expert in them as well. He elevated his thinking about life to the doing of life.

That is what the traditional church has done. It has misinterpreted thinking about faith with doing faith. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “woe to you scribes and Pharisees for you tithe mint and dill and cumin but ignore the weightier matters of the law.” Jesus abhorred faith as empty ritual or form and encouraged faith as a life lived for God’s purposes.

Yet, a church that thinks great thoughts but does not accomplish great deeds is a church whose days are numbered.

The Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus' life, is followed quickly by the Book of Acts, written by the same person. It is called the Book of Acts not the Book of Facts. It is the daily diary of the first church in action.

Today's lesson, Jesus meeting with his followers at the Last Supper to guide them for life after he is gone, is the spiritual DNA, the processing micro-chip of faith leading to action. "Those who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and to those who love me the Father will give the Spirit of Truth; and my Father and I will abide with them and love them and I will reveal myself to them."

This is a very different kind of relationship between the members of the organization to its founder than say the members of a service club to its vision statement or, as we said last week, the good citizen to the principles of good citizenship.

Jesus' followers are called to be faithful to him and to his commandments because they are his personal representatives in the world after he is gone. Their purpose is to carry out his mission in the world. Not the mission of the greatest good for the greatest number – or any other ethical system. Not the mission of any political party or service group. Not the mission of democracy.

The followers of Jesus are to carry out his mission in the world: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, strength and your neighbor as yourself. To give up your life to gain it. To listen for the voice of the true shepherd. To feed his sheep. To welcome the poor, the outcast, the widow. To heal the sick, visit the imprisoned. In doing these things his followers may also be good citizens, ethically just, and advocates of democracy but their primary mission is to put his mission into practice.

When this happens, says John, our relationship with God is activated. When we keep his commandments Jesus abides with us, is revealed to us and teaches us what he commanded. I had to activate a credit card the other day. I had to call an 800 number. I was asked a few questions, SS number, stuff like that. When this was done, my credit was available. There it was waiting for me. I merely had to activate it.

We activate God's power in our lives when we keep Jesus' commandments. And in the keeping of those commandments he comes to us in the Holy Spirit, reveals himself to us, teaches us what he meant when he said "welcome the poor," or "love your neighbor" not in theory but precisely how his commandments apply to our specific situation, the circumstances in which we try to obey him.

If Jesus tried to tell his disciples that night in the upper room everything they would need to keep his commandments for the rest of their lives they couldn't contain it all. It would be like telling your child before he goes off to college everything he or she would need to navigate the shoals of new freedoms, academic pressures, choices of career and mate. Their 18 year old brains and hearts couldn't contain it. What Jesus says is his Spirit will be with us in those moments teaching us afresh in the circumstances we face what we need to live out his commandments.

Isn't that a beautiful promise! I think of Jesus teaching Dietrich Bonhoeffer how to be patient and kind in a Nazi prison; Jesus teaching Martin Luther King, Jr. how to be non-violent when police dogs and fire hoses and angry crowds lashed out at him; Jesus teaching my classmate Barbara Brown Taylor one of the greatest preachers of our time how to choose the right words and images to announce his good news.

How would you like to have Jesus coaching you through a dark place in your life; advise your parenting, your marriage, your career? How would we like to have Jesus guiding our big audacious goal for mission? Our role in this beleaguered city? Our voice amidst the current political guerrilla warfare in our nation?

We are talking today about the traditional church vs. the new community. We have said that the traditional church has built only the cognitive half of the bridge of faith – that faith in many traditional churches today is defined and stops at what we think or know.

But faith to be complete has to be lived out. Lived out according to Jesus' specific commandments and applied, with his help, to the circumstances we face today.

My concern is that the traditional church isn't close to equipping, sending, supporting and holding accountable its members to live in this way.

Somewhere in the past forty years the liberal progressive church which used to be the church of social action and outreach became a passive church. And the conservative church which used to be a church focused solely on other worldly matters started relating to the world.

The two have flip-flopped. Today, the trend goes something like this: conservative churches are deeply engaged in local, national and worldwide ministries sending members into what they discern is God's purpose for their congregation; while traditionally progressive churches have adopted the very secular notion that religion is a private matter and we are not to interfere in one another's lives and beliefs. Consequently such churches have become impotent.

What would a church look like that equipped members to practice and keep Jesus' commandments? Westminster's answer to that question will be different than the way other congregations might respond.

But whatever the specifics are my hunch is that we would have more small groups – groups that would balance support and accountability for their participants while we follow Jesus in daily living. We would regard bible study and other practices of the faith as paramount to our living, to our transformation into new people and a new community. We would spend more time training and equipping and less time administrating.

If what I am describing sounds like it raises the stakes of membership, and makes members more vulnerable to one another – you have discerned exactly what the missional church is and does. A community where members reveal themselves and their struggles to one another, pray together, grow together. Far from interfering in one another's lives we are called to support one another as together we obey Christ's commandments and finish building some bridges. Amen.