

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 May 9, 2010 (Easter 6 - C)
 John 14:23-29; "Great Expectations"
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

One year my mother's day gift to my mom was a needlepoint sampler – it said something like, one gift we give our children is roots, another wings. I've come to realize the truth of that statement of what a gift roots and wings are - a real treasure my mother gave to me – one that I really didn't recognize until these years have gone by – I'm so glad I could share that sentiment with her.

This is the time of year for sendoffs – the sendoffs of roots and wings - activities are wrapping up for the school year, graduations loom large on the horizon for our young people. And Confirmation Sunday, Pentecost, is just two weeks away - we're in the midst of exams, interviews, making stoles – these young people are about to move on to the next station on their discipleship journey. We all hope they have the tools they need – and when our high school students graduate, take a huge step on their life journey, we imagine them leaving the nest and going away to college in the very near future, we can't help but wonder if they're ready. Well, the truth is that teachers both in the schools and in our Sunday School, parents, this church as community, have given them everything that we know how to give them. Now it's up to them as we send them out into the world to sort out how those gifts will guide and nurture them in the unknown places God is sending each of them. Roots and wings – and lots of prayers will go with them all.

In our gospel story the disciples find themselves in a similar situation – they're about to be sent out on their own journey, away from their teacher who is leaving them. But Jesus is not as open-ended with them as most of us are with our confirmands or graduating seniors. There are no words of unconditional acceptance "we love you just the way you are." No words of self-development: "go discover who you are in the world." No words of intellectual self-realization: "seek truth and pursue it." Not from Jesus.

"If you love me," he says, "you will keep my commandments." And "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love that person, and we will come to that person and make our dwelling with that person." Jesus takes it one step further – "whoever does not love me does not keep my words."

The disciples aren't given a list of choices. They are commanded to keep the word of Jesus, to show their love by obedience to Jesus' command even after he's gone. I guess I'd rather have the invitational Jesus – the come and see Jesus – the softer Jesus - the Jesus who sits at table with everyone; the Jesus who resists harsh and unforgiving politics from state or religion. This is the Jesus we've come to know in our community – this is the Jesus we have tried to give our children as they grow into adulthood. And that's certainly an important part of who Jesus is. But now here he is – with his expectations as clear as they can be, being very straight forward telling his disciples that if they really love him, then they will keep his word.

We in the church could choose to pile this expectation on top of all the other expectations that we are asked to endure in the world. Most of Jesus' followers could handle it. We've all been schooled in the expectations game since an early age – figure out what your parents want and give it to them; figure out what the teacher wants and give it to her; figure out what the college wants and give it to them; figure out what your friends want and give it to them; figure out what your boss, your company wants and do it; figure out what it is your children want and then give it to them. The church could pile yet another expectation on its followers and we'd figure out how to handle it – we've learned well how to play the expectations game.

But Jesus doesn't give his disciples this commandment so they, we, can please him with our conformity. What Jesus wants from his disciples is harder than completing a project, more difficult than getting into college, more difficult than pleasing your family, friends, even your boss. What Jesus wants from his disciples is not something that will make them, us, feel smarter or more gifted or more special. It will not make them, us, more successful or safe. And they or we will not win any awards for keeping his word.

Jesus wants them, wants us to love because he knows there may not be any other way to live a life of peace in this unsafe world. There may not be any other way to live in this world with a heart free from constant trouble. There may not be any other way to live free from fear in a world that feeds off of fear. Jesus gives them this expectation, this command, because he loves them and he wants them to know the peace they seek – the peace God has promised – promised to those early disciples and us.

And so we live with the same dangerous expectations. It's the expectation that we teach to our children as we send them into a broken world. It's a dangerous expectation because loving in our world may not be the easiest or even the safest way to live. Loving in a post-9/11 world of threats and enemies is may well not be the most advisable way to live. The rest of the world already knows this to be true. And so do we.

Haven't you felt anxious this week? From the stock market free fall? From two incidents of closing Times Square because of suspicious activity? One that continues to unfold as we learn more about the man allegedly responsible? In our church community there are families this week who have received difficult diagnoses – other families who are facing the death of a loved one – it's been a tough week. An anxious week. Don't we yearn for the peace that Jesus promises us.

And furthermore, even the church sometimes changes its message of love to apply only to certain people – changes its message to command us to love only when it's safe – to serve each other only when it's convenient. The church is not immune to any of this anxiety, distortion, either. We are so influenced by the prevailing culture too.

Well – let's consider this: Jesus doesn't give this command when his world is going well. This is the night of the Last Supper when Judas is ready to turn on him. Peter is about to deny him. Some in the crowd are about to call for his death. And still Jesus commands them to love. When his world is most unsafe, he gives them, us, this commandment. He gives us this command while he's on his knees washing his disciples' feet. Go and love just as I have loved. Those who love me keep my commandments.

And fortunately for the disciples and for us, Jesus does not send his young followers out alone. He promises the Holy Spirit – God's presence to support them in their vocation – to love in a world desperately in need of it. He promises the Spirit of

God who will continue to teach them everything and remind them of all of his dangerous expectations for loving in a fearful world that resists love as a viable way to live.

So go and love in a world too afraid to share. Go and love in a world too afraid of pain to risk itself for hope. Go and keep God's word to love, not because the church expects you to, not because your family wants you to, not because you have been trained in how to please the authorities that will continue to compete for your allegiance and your life. Go and love because that may be the only way to find peace in this troubled world. Go and love, because as much as we long to keep safe those we love, we yearn, deeper still, for each child of God to realize his or her deepest dreams: dreams that God plants in every life. Go and love because God loves you and envisions a world where that love is shared.

Dangerous expectation? Maybe? Great expectations – absolutely. God is with us and we need fear nothing. God is with us, leading us in the way to peace in this broken world. What a wonderful comfort that promise is – believe it and live it! Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious God, you command us to follow your teachings and we don't know what to make of your call. We are used to buying what we want, choosing what we need, deciding what we desire. Command is not a word in our vocabulary. Yet you teach of the power of committed love to redeem us and our world amid the powers of evil, the powers of death. We thank you that you have already demonstrated the security that comes from following your commands. You have already fought fear with love and tasted victory for all of us. And we praise you for your Spirit, who strengthens us to live as you lived, to love as you loved, and to follow where you lead. And now send us out into the world to love as you love, to weep as you weep, to give and receive your vision of abundance in a world in need of your peace that passes all understanding.

In Jesus' name, Amen.