

# “A New Commandment: Love One Another” by Peter Bankson

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## Fifth Sunday of Easter

### INTRODUCTION

Our theme this Easter season has been “Transforming Faith.” The ambiguity was intentional. Often, as we are on the Way with Christ, we are transformed by faith: we trust what is beyond “proof” and find our way to some deeper understanding. But there are times when, as a small part of the Body of Christ, we discover that love changes the faith that guides us and those around us. This growth is often challenging and uncomfortable, requiring some deep letting go. Most of us have examples of love changing or enlarging our faith, examples that come quickly to mind – our efforts to be creative and inclusive ... racial reconciliation ... peacemaking.

But when we can let change happen, love and faith can work wonders on each other. Think about the power of New Story Leadership to bring change to the Middle East: or restoring voting rights for over 200,000 ex-offenders in Virginia this past week.

This week's lessons focusing on the transforming power of love hold up for me a vibrant example of this dichotomy: love transforms faith even as faith transforms love. Part of the secret is that through the interplay of love and faith we can find new standpoints that let us see Creation from different perspectives, standpoints that help us learn to be loving in new, more caring ways. As Pat's song reminds us every Sunday as the children leave for their classes:

Jesus loves us as we grow,  
meets us on the paths we go,  
keeps us safe and keeps us free,  
helps us learn who we should be.

### **How Jesus loved his disciples**

In our Gospel lesson for this week, Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." But the stories of Jesus' love don't all sound warm and fuzzy: The love of Jesus for his followers included calling them to leave their homes and families and become an itinerant band, living off the hospitality of others, teaching and healing in strange, sometimes inhospitable places.

There is that story in Mark where he told one rich young man who wanted eternal life to "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Mark 10:21)

Here are some other examples of how Jesus loved the disciples:

- • He called them by name;
- • He invited them into the close container of community;
- • He exposed them to a wide variety of people, well beyond their comfort zones;
- • He sent them out in pairs to work together, but honored their individuality;

- • He corrected them when they strayed but kept them in community;
- • He forgave them and nurtured their healing; and
- • By his death, he set them loose to keep on growing.

One core element of Jesus' love for his disciples is accountability: He built relationships where trust and accountability were key elements. He heard what they asked for, but in many cases, Jesus gave the disciples not what they asked for but what they needed.

For us as a community, there are times when we realize that our commitment to helping others requires us to discern the differences between what they ask for and what we believe they need, acknowledging what we can give ... freely and joyfully. That kind of love transforms us in the process. Those of you who are members of a 12-step community know the importance of compassionate tough love – and the challenges.

Being on the Way with Jesus is often like some kind of “tough love.” Although that phrase gets a bad rap every now and then, it shows the kind of deep caring that supports inner healing even it isn't comfortable for either the beloved ... or the lover. The phrase “Tough Love” was coined in the late 60's by Bill Milliken and is part of the DNA of Communities in Schools, where I supported Bill for 14 years. He and I used to talk frequently about the model of Jesus as a stern AND caring guide who stands ready to lead us through painful places if that's where our path to a better future takes us.

Tough love describes the ways that a committed relationship with a caring adult can help a troubled teen navigate puberty and find a path too productive adulthood.

When I began my service at CIS, Bill Milliken was using a focused statement of “Five Basics” as a description of “what every child needs and deserves:”

1. 1. A one-to-one relationship with a caring adult;

2. 2. A safe place to learn and grow;
3. 3. A healthy start for a healthy future;
4. 4. A marketable skill to use upon graduation; and
5. 5. A chance to give back to peers and community.

These “basics” that guide the CIS model look a lot like the basic dimensions of Jesus’ guidance to his followers. Following the model of the CIS basics, here’s a glimpse of what I’m calling “Love One Another Basics:”

1. 1. Be accountable to another caring adult for your journey.
2. 2. Help nurture a safe place for all of us to live and learn.
3. 3. Support a healthy, healing life for yourself and your neighbors.
4. 4. Cultivate your experience and abilities as gifts for the greater good.
5. 5. Say “Yes” to God’s call on your life.

I’ll wait to see how much help they are to Seekers as we commit to becoming more consciously welcoming, inclusive and working for peace and justice.

The more we can put these basics of loving one another into practice, the more it will deepen our faith and transform our lives.

### **Faith transforms love**

The story of Peter’s epiphany in Joppa is a model for how a new story can change us. Peter believed that the vision and the voice was the Holy Spirit giving him radical new guidance: “What God has made clean you must not call profane.” That belief freed him to change his understanding of his relationship with his Gentile hosts. He shifted from rejection to inclusion. And hearing the story about his conversion convinced the disciples in Jerusalem to open their faith in a new, more inclusive way. As the writer of Acts portrays it:

“If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

“When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, ‘Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.’”

The story of the disciples in Jerusalem being persuaded by the example of Peter’s faith in the voice from heaven was an encouragement to Gentiles in many lands, offering hope that those already on the Way with Christ really could be welcoming, inclusive and working for peace and justice ... for new believers who were from different cultures.

Since the book of Acts was probably written for new followers of Jesus in Asia Minor, this story of a change of heart among the faithful in Jerusalem might well have been included to help strengthen the faith of the newcomers, faith that other members of other communities who were on the Way with Christ would be able to accept them, even if they were “different.”

It seems to me that Peter’s dream in Joppa holds up a lens for understanding our own approach to “faith.” In Seeker Church the authority of the Holy Spirit, the Bible and God’s call on our lives are God-given and subject to constant fresh understanding. Our commitment to welcoming inclusion and our experience living in deepening, diverse relationships bring us to frequent opportunities to see things differently, and understand God’s guidance in new, more loving and inclusive ways.

### **Personal growth starts with surrender**

Jesus says, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. But that raises an important question: What must I surrender to allow the love of God to transform my faith, and my faith in God to transform my love?”

This kind of conscious love, at once humble and tough, seems pretty unusual, particularly as I look out the window toward downtown Washington DC, or open the daily paper to see where some new blister of hatred has burst overnight, spraying its puss out, hunting for someplace else to infect. Will they know that we are Christians by our love?

In Pat Conover's current class on "Thinking and Feeling Theologically" in our School of Christian Living one pervasive theme is to identify "what matters," and "what matters most," and to examine these values from different perspectives, different standpoints. Pat is pushing us to consider how our standpoints, our "standpoint dependencies" affect the way we see reality, and understand faith and love.

For me, my standpoint dependency has been shaped by more than half a life of seeking to be one whose life is shaped by duty to God and country, and helping bring Good News – or nurture the common good – for those my actions could touch. Since renewing my commitment as a Steward of Seekers Church in 1980, my sense of God's call on my life has been to support and nurture the life of Seekers Church, and help us grow into God's emerging vision for us as one small part of the Body of Christ.

As my sense of self has been changed by my experience, my standpoint has shifted. I've had to let go of illusions – or delusions – of grandeur, that I could bring peace in our time, or make the world safe for democracy. My place, my purpose, my call has been transforming all along. I'm reminded of Sam Keen's reflections in *Learning to Fly*, where his mid-life experience with trapeze taught him in a deeply physical way how necessary it is, if you want to move ahead, to let go of where you are.

Pat's class in the School of Christian Living led me to the book [What Matters Most](#) by James Hollis, a psychotherapist and prolific author from Texas. Hollis is clear that the path to continued growth and creativity passes through many changes. He

sees these transitions as a kind of ego death. Some of us who come from the standpoint of call and commitment see these epiphanies as parts of a lifelong spiral of call.

This passage in [What Matters Most](#) speaks to me:

The “creative process is found in all of us, and also asks much of us. It ... always asks a death of some old attitude, which is why we resist our own growth and development so often ...”

Hollis, pg 125.

For me, what Hollis refers to as a death describes a surrender to God’s Call. It stands on some threshold between where I see myself, feeling deep satisfaction I feel when I can be helpful, and some new place where my deep gladness meets some deep need. I know that every day, if I am to be responsive to God’s call on me, I must honor some combination of personal history and opportunity. And. I’ve also learned that given the reality of where I find myself in history something, some old attitude or understanding, will need to cease, to die, for me to step onto the path that leads deeper into the future.

**God calls us to something new: Love One Another!**

If faith AND love both matter to us, we will be ushered into places where the choices are challenging, where God’s love sometimes shows up as tough love. But this kind of love, shared within the Body of Christ and beyond, can point the way to what matters for each of us, and open the way for our growth.

So here’s what I get from all this wandering through transforming love and faith, through life cycles and spirals of call, through love remaking faith and faith remaking love:

- • If we’re on the Way with Jesus we can expect to have our “faith,” our understanding of rules for righteousness, opened and refocused by love.

- • The love of Jesus is tough and tender at the same time, and it is bigger than we can ever imagine. But God loves us anyway.
- • God calls us to love our enemies ... and our friends ... and our families ... and even other Seekers, with a love that will not let go of them, a love that fills us all with the water of life.
- • God's love is powerful and pervasive enough to find its way into every hating heart and open the door to forgiveness and restoration.

As we let our faith transform the love that empowers us, and let that love transform the faith that guides us, may we find the courage to let go of who we have been and step into God's emerging call on us, as individuals and as a family of faith.

It won't always be easy. On Wednesday I was beginning to see this dynamic relationship between love and faith, this transformation that we know as adult growth from a fresh standpoint. I could see that this kind of growth requires letting go of something that has been in order to make room for what is to become. Suddenly I remembered a line from Rumi: "There is a necessary dying..." Here's the poem, one of my Rumi favorites:

"Joseph is back. ■

And if you don't feel in yourself

The freshness of Joseph,

Be Jacob.

Weep and then smile.

Do not pretend to know something

You have not experienced.

There is a necessary dying,

Then Jesus is breathing again.

Very little grows on jagged rock.



Be ground. Be crumbled.  
So wild flowers will come up  
Where you are.

You have been stony for too many years.  
Try something different. Surrender.”

As I look down the road, surrender still isn't the first option I see, but as I watch the love of God flow in us and around us and through us, I think it's possible. And if I'm going to grow I need to let go of something. Love transforms faith. Faith transforms love. And we are transformed in the process.

“Love isn't Love until you give it away.” Amen.

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