

## “A Command Performance”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

based on the theme, “THE JESUS YOU MEET TODAY”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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### John 15:9-17 (NRSV)

<sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup>“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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**T**he Jesus you meet today is the same one that told his first disciples, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” It is a command performance, so to speak. And he is still commanding us to love one another. That’s what Jesus said, according to John. But just whom does Jesus think he’s kidding? I mean really, first off how do you legislate love? How do you command love? That has proven about as successful as legislating morality. Ask any parent who has told a child to love his or her sibling! How well did that work out?

Commanding his disciples to love one another sounds good in theory, but it has been problematic, to say the least, ever since these words were first put to

paper. Christians have a hard time loving each other, let alone non-Christians. Christian on Christian hate has been legendary throughout history. It all starts when one Christian says to another Christian, “You’re wrong.” And the other Christian says, “No! You’re wrong!” Then it’s off to the races.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I’m all for loving one another. I would guess there are at least two problems with the application. One is that loving others doesn’t seem to be a natural talent for me, and while I don’t want to sound judgmental, it doesn’t seem to come too natural for many others either. Oh, I’ve met a few, but they just seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule. The second problem is that most of us don’t seem willing to train too hard or work

very diligently at overcoming our lack of natural talent.

I do think that most children that I have known certainly seem to be more natural at loving others than us adults. But I also have to admit they have their moments when they are pretty unloving too. Just take one of the toys from them that they want to play with. Still, there does seem to be the potential for being loving inside us from the beginning.

So why is it we don't train at it better? Some have suggested that learning to love one another is actually the whole purpose of this life. If you were to ask them the meaning of life they would tell you that it is summed up in learning to love others. But still the training is so non-linear. The lessons are often difficult to figure out and the teacher pretty much leaves us out there without much more than the Scriptures and a prayer, if not a wing and a prayer. It was all probably summed up best by that wag who said, "It is easy to love all humanity in general, it is loving a particular human being I find so difficult."

But Jesus promises to love us the way God loved him and he wants us to love each other the same way. Let's look at that deal. I have to tell you, when you look at what God's love got Jesus it doesn't sound especially desirable. God booted Jesus out of heaven to come to earth as a human, he had to hang around with a bunch of smelly fishermen, suspect tax collectors, and other conniving friends, for what? He went around telling everyone about

how great God's love is, and how much he loved them, too. Then he ended up beaten and crucified for his trouble. I'm not sure being loved by Jesus the way God loved Jesus is such a great offer anyway!

But you know what? From his point of view we are probably no great catch either. I mean, look around at us. I remember as a kid when we would play games in our neighborhood – football, baseball, whatever – we would always use the same method to pick teams. You probably did too. The two best or biggest or oldest got to be captains and they would start choosing alternately. Most of the time I remember being one of the last if not the last one chosen. After all, I was slow, fat, and not particularly athletic. Well, okay, I wasn't athletic at all. But I wished I was. They would choose me, and sometimes one of my friends would pick me earlier than last, out of pity I suppose. But knowing that it might surprise you to know that there is an athletic award in my name at Harvard. Some of you have heard the story. It is an award for softball prowess.

Now I have to confess I virtually never played softball as a kid. There was a group that started having pick-up games near the end of my last year in the Divinity School. So I started playing. I had never played Little League as a kid, really had probably not played five games of baseball in any way shape or form in my life, but there I was. I don't remember if we picked the teams the usual way or not. I volunteered for right

field. I knew it was where people with my skill level usually went.

Some years later while I was doing my doctoral studies, one of the professors was Stephen Patterson. Stephen had been a student Harvard Divinity School when I was there. He had participated in some of those softball games. Maybe he was even one of the organizers, I really don't remember. But he did organize a few during some of the sessions we had in the doctoral program. In fact, the weekend we went up to St. Louis for graduation we were going to have a softball game – impromptu, pick-up whatever you want to call it. I had brought my glove and clothes to wear and all for the big game. I don't really remember the outcome of that game, but I believe it was that night we were having a post-game, pre-graduation celebration. In the midst of that and all the fun and teasing and story-telling, Stephen Patterson announced to everyone that few people knew it but there was a Bruce Havens memorial softball award still passed out at the end of the year every year at Harvard. Well, I can't tell you but my ears perked up and I thought, wow, finally gonna get some recognition for my previously unrecognized athletic talent. My bubble burst a moment later when he said, "Yeah, it is presented each year to the player who puts out the most effort with the least result!"

Ouch! Okay so maybe I wasn't the most valuable teammate, and maybe I wasn't ever chosen first. But I sure tried hard, I put out a lot of effort, that part is true, I want you to know! I did

get on base a few times. I did make contact every now and then and I always ran hard to first base. I think I got to second or third a few times. I can't really remember if anyone ever batted me in to actually score a run or not, but it must have happened, right? And I know I might have missed a few catches out there in right field. But I think I made a few, didn't I? And I was always panicked about where to throw it to when I did get my hands on the ball, but slowly I taught myself where to go for the cut-off throw. I had a weak arm too by the way. God was not generous with me when it came to natural athletic ability. Sigh.... But I did try, hard! – in fact, I kind of think I want that on my epitaph: he tried, hard. And I always went down swinging. I never forgot, especially in softball, you've got to swing the bat! You can't just let them strike you out. At least swing the bat. Who knows, you might make contact.

I learned something about playing out in the field too. I learned that if you are afraid the ball might come your way, it will make you worse. You'll freeze up and then you'll be too tight to make the catch. So I learned to say out loud, to myself out there in the outfield, "hit the ball here, hit it to me, I want it, hit it here!" I would psyche myself up and it would make me get on my toes and be ready to go whatever way the ball might fly instead of sitting back and being paralyzed with fear that I might have to catch the ball.

John says we didn't choose Christ, he chose us. Just like he chose that first bunch of losers who could have all

qualified for the Havens' award if you ask me. Just like them – he chose us. He chose us and calls us friends and says, I love you like the Father loves me. The Prince of Peace and the Lord of Lords chose me - and you. The Savior, the one they call the Everlasting Son chose me – and you. Do I really have the gall to complain about the privilege of having the Son of God call me friend and love me the same way his father loves him? Do I really have the credentials, the qualifications, the resume to question that at all, or do anything but fall on my face in gratitude and thanksgiving for the privilege of being chosen as one of his?

Simply, the answer is no. Thankfully, the choice wasn't dependent on my ability, or even necessarily my willingness. I certainly haven't lived up to the role in any award-winning way. Oh, I have tried hard at loving others the way Christ loves me - at times. I have swung that bat, but I have to confess there are times I just watched that ball go by. I saw the opportunity to be loving and I failed. Didn't even swing. I have failed to get on base a lot of times when I did swing. It is startling to me to realize how poor I am at loving others.

Have you ever really done a self-evaluation of your love capacity or your love performance when it comes to loving others. I tell you if we get judged on performance, I don't know about you, but I would fail. My batting average as a Christian commanded to go and love others is hideous. I do however, keep swinging the bat.

Here's what happens. I keep coming up to bat. A lot of times I get distracted. The pitcher's windup is confusing or the catcher says something smart-alecky to me or the outfielders or the guys doing the wave in the bleachers or a cloud floating by gets my attention and I miss. But I hope to keep swinging the bat. I hope to get some more chances to get up to bat. I hope I can at least take a few more turns out in the field. I may not ever hit a home run. I may not ever turn a triple play. But I'll promise, coach, I'll try – I'll try hard, even if it doesn't always seem like being on your team is the easiest thing in the world. Love one another, huh? Okay, I'll try, hard! Amen.