

Love can't do nothing...

¹⁵ Moses turned and went down the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. ¹⁶ The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.

¹⁷ When Joshua heard the noise of the people shouting, he said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp."

¹⁸ Moses replied:

"It is not the sound of victory,
it is not the sound of defeat;
it is the sound of singing that I hear."

¹⁹ When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.

²¹ He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

²² "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. ²³ They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' ²⁴ So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

²⁵ Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies. ²⁶ So he stood at the entrance to the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And all the Levites rallied to him.

²⁷ Then he said to them, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'" ²⁸ The Levites did as Moses commanded, and that day about three thousand of the people died. ²⁹ Then Moses said, "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."

What an ugly scene. Can you picture it? The Levites returning to Moses. Their hands, clothes, and swords drenched in blood. And not just anyone's blood: The blood of their fellow Israelites, their neighbors, their friends, their brothers. What an ugly scene. And maybe what seems ugliest about it is: Who commanded it? God. **This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth through the camp from one end to the other, each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'**

Of course, it wasn't the only ugly thing that happened at the foot of that mountain. Start with that golden calf. Two months ago Israel had seen how much God loved them as he sent ten plagues, parted the Red Sea, to save them out of Egypt. A month later, they saw God descend on Mt. Sinai in fire and smoke. Heard him say, "I'm your God, you're my people." Heard his own voice say: "Here's the first and most important way you can show that: You shall have no other gods." And a month later, they say to Aaron: "Yeah, make us other gods. Moses has been up on Sinai for a month, he's probably dead."

And Aaron did. His actions are another ugly thing that happened at the foot of that mountain. Not just making the idol for them. The pitiful excuses he gives when Moses comes back. "Aaron...how did this happen?" And Aaron says, "It's their fault. You know how evil they are. They asked for it, so I collected their gold jewelry, and threw it in to the fire – and this calf popped out!"

Lots of ugliness to go around at the foot of that mountain. But what seems worst of all is this: **This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Each man strap a sword to his side. Go back and forth...each killing his brother and friend and neighbor.'**" How could God command something like that?

Well, stop and think about this for a second: What if God had reacted differently? What if God had done...well...nothing? Moses came down smiling? God looked the other way, pretended nothing was wrong? There would have been peace that day – no swords. But at what cost? The Israelites worshipping that calf would keep doing it and find out in hell that an image of gold couldn't save them. Israelites who *weren't* worshipping that false god might start to think it's not so bad – God doesn't seem to mind. Do you see? As ugly as what God commanded was, it was love that led him to do it. Love that took drastic but necessary measures to save his people. It was painful for God and Israel, but God loved them too much to do *nothing*.

It must have been painful for those Levites, too. Put yourselves in their sandals. Kill your neighbors, friends, brothers – maybe even the people they loved most in this world? But as painful as it was, they loved their God more. They loved God too much to do nothing.

Are you starting to see what this has to do with the gospel lesson? Jesus said, "Anyone who loves father and mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." Those are hard words to hear, aren't they? Because these are the people we love most in this world. We say things like, "Family first," and, "My kids are my everything," and "I can't live without her." And Jesus says, "No, I come first. I am your everything. I am your life. Love your loved ones, but you must love me more."

And that will sometimes hurt. Jesus says it'll mean a **sword**. No, for us it won't ever mean literal swords like the Levites were swinging that day. Jesus is talking about division between people who believe in him and people who don't; confrontation between those who put him first and those who don't. And when we experience that, especially with the people we love most, it hurts.

It's the hurt of parents rebuking their wayward teenage child, only to have the child slam a door in their face for it. Or the hurt of parents watching their child grow up only to grow further and further from Jesus, and agonizing over what to say that won't ruin their relationship. The grief of coming to church without your husband or your wife, and facing their anger every time you bring up the topic. It's the hurt of seeing family members living sinful lifestyles, knowing that if you say something they might never speak with you again.

No, God doesn't call us to love him by pulling out a sword on our loved ones when they're sinning. But he does call us to love him by disciplining...rebuking...correcting...speaking the truth to friends and family, even if they don't want to hear it...and that can hurt. It might even mean losing our relationships with people because of it.

So the temptation for us is to avoid this sword, isn't it? To keep the peace. It's really easy to do. You just do...nothing. Don't bring up uncomfortable topics. Don't confront them with the truth. Don't rebuke them for their sin. Smile and act as if nothing is wrong. Not too unlike Aaron, right? To avoid confrontation, he just smiled and went along with it. And we can even do that in the name of "love," right? "I love them too much to lose them." "I love them too much to hurt them or see them angry."

But do you see the problem there? When we do that, we're not loving God most. We're valuing this relationship more than this one. And here's the thing: We're not really loving our loved ones, either, are we? We're preserving this relationship...but at what cost? The cost of *their* relationship with God. We're keeping the peace with them...but at what cost? Their eternal peace with God. Not really loving them...ourselves when we avoid pain and do nothing.

Friends, these are uncomfortable scripture lessons this morning. They show that Israel isn't the only one with idols. They point out the idols in our hearts. And I suppose that God could have just done... nothing. I suppose that God could have just overlooked our problem, smiled in heaven as if nothing were wrong...and let us die forever for our sin.

But he didn't. He loved us enough to do something. He loved us enough to take drastic but necessary measures to save us. Talk about an ugly scene. I'm not talking about the one at the foot of Mt. Sinai – on the top of Mt. Calvary. As God the Father placed your sins and mine on Jesus and let the sword of his punishment fall on him for our sins. Think about it. The Father turning against the Son he loved before time began. How painful that must have been for the Father to give up the Son he cherished! How painful for the Son to have his Father abandon him.

But in that ugliest of scenes, you see it, don't you? The beauty of God's love for you. Because it was all for you. The Father gave up the Son he cherished because he cherished you and wanted you as his son, or daughter. The Son let the Father he loved abandon him because he loved you – so that God could be your Father, too. There was nothing in this world that was more important to God than your relationship with him...so at a cost all to himself, he took away the sins that stood between you and him and won you peace with God, now and forever. God loved you and he did something – he did everything – necessary to save you.

Love can't just do nothing. Friends, the more you realize just how much God cherishes you, the more you'll cherish him. The more you realize how valuable your relationship with him is to him, the more valuable it will be to you. The more you appreciate God's love that didn't just do nothing, the love that saved you, the more your love will be like his.

A love that can't just do nothing. Yes, it will sometimes be ugly. It will be painful – saying what needs to be said...but you see God's love behind calling you to do it, don't you? Love that doesn't want anyone to perish, but everyone to be saved. Even if what Jesus says happens in your life, even if your faith divides you from brother or sister or father or mother, all is not lost. Because when heaven is before your eyes, your greatest goal is to get your family there; when peace in heaven means more than peace on earth; then you'll realize you may have to sacrifice peace with them now in order to enjoy peace with them later. Maybe speaking the truth about Jesus will cause some division now, but doing that might very well mean that you'll be united with them forever in heaven.

God give us more of this love – for him and for our loved ones – love that can't just do nothing. Amen.