

May 21, Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 14:15-21

by [Enuma Okoro](#) in the [April 26, 2017](#) issue

Years ago when I worked as a youth minister, the popular Christian kitsch was items bearing the slogan, “What Would Jesus Do?” WWJD was emblazoned on jewelry, clothes, hats, notebooks, and bumper stickers. It was supposed to be a daily reminder to be Christlike, to engage daily situations by asking how Jesus would handle it. The problem with this mode of “just add water” discernment is that we are not Jesus. If we see a hungry crowd, we can feed one or two people. But we can’t miraculously make a bakery out of one baguette or a seafood restaurant out of a piece of salmon. According to the Bible, that’s probably what Jesus would do.

I think a more fitting alternative might be IYLM, “If You Love Me.” It’s the phrase that begins this week’s text from John’s Gospel. It’s echoed several chapters later in the heart-searing question the resurrected Christ poses to Simon Peter: “Do you love me?” (If so, “feed my sheep.”) IYLM might not roll off the tongue the same way WWJD does. But it could make us stop and ask what’s really at stake with our next move in whatever situation we find ourselves.

I try to imagine myself in a situation made possible by current events. What if I am protesting at an anti-immigration rally and am suddenly faced with opponents spewing hateful remarks at me? What could be my next move if, somewhere in the depths of my being, I hear Jesus say, “If you love me . . .”?

In this week’s reading, the second half of the sentence is “you will keep my commandments.” But “If you love me . . .” is also an open-ended phrase that invites us to think about how our lives of faith intersect with a world that doesn’t always recognize God. How do we keep God’s commandments when we are faced with people and policies that promote injustice and inequality? Is our duty to all people, regardless of whether they value the tenets of kingdom living or honor the ways of God? “If you love me . . .” invites us to draw on the Advocate whom Christ has given us for strength, instruction, and power. It is the Spirit of truth who continuously

reveals to us God and God's ways.

John 14:15–21 is a command in itself. It's a call from God to duty and obedience, to keep our end of the relationship we want to benefit from. Yet reading it, even in Jesus' authoritative voice, I am floored with emotion. It reads like an intimate letter to one's beloved. And it starts with that most familiar statement and implied question, which most of us have been at the receiving end of at one time or another: "If you love me . . ." You can imagine all sorts of ways that sentence might end if it were coming from someone you cherish, someone you want to please at all costs, even if perhaps you haven't fully counted the costs. Jesus is using a familiar formula that's about give and take, two to tango, both parties needing to put in the effort. If you love me, do this, and then I in return will do that.

But where this gospel relationship differs is that it's not between equals. Here again, we cannot do what Jesus does: ask the Father to give us another Advocate, the Spirit of truth. It is not in our power, without Christ as our intermediary, to ask God to give of God's self to be with us forever. Nor can we love with the urgent, almost recklessly self-sacrificial love that Christ shows us—not without the power of that Spirit of truth.

We all come to the Bible with our personal histories, our unique understandings of love, and our complicated human experiences. These shape how we read the scriptures and how we imagine God. I read these verses and hear a powerful but pleading Jesus who just really wants us to do what's best for us—that is, to adhere to the life he calls us to. But this gracious and merciful God is not one to force us to do things. Jesus expects obedience and mutual love, but he offers himself through invitation, inciting us to do what we must to receive him.

If you love me, all I'm asking is that you keep my commandments. All I'm asking is that above all else you try to love one another, if for no other reason than because you love me. And I love you, and I am in the Father and you are in me, so I am in you.

It almost sounds as though Jesus himself is overcome by all the intricate ways God has chosen to be bound to us, the beloved. At the center of these riddle-like proclamations, Jesus is asking us that ringing question: "Do you love me?"

If you love me, then find a way to show love and hospitality to those who are made in my image but may call me by another name. If you love me, then speak out when

you see people mistreated for being made in another variation of my image. But do it in a way that honors me, not in a way that honors the world.

If you love me, then name the false gods you worship as false, the ones made of gold and silver, and put them behind you with the power of the Advocate I give to you. If you love me, love others as I have loved you: with a kind of love that expects and calls to be loved in return but that still, despite the conditions, will love anyway.