

“Love One Another, As I Have Loved You”

I. “Abide in my love.”

A. We are moving through the season of Easter up to the Feast of Pentecost and our lessons highlight the broad spectrum of traditions from the first century church of what it means to be in a relationship with the risen Christ.

1. The gospel today is a continuation of the gospel reading from last Sunday where Jesus said to his disciples,
 - a. *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”*
2. Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure, saying to them that they must remain close to him.
 - a. He gives a picture of the spiritual life that is alive and bearing fruit by being united to him, the true vine.
 - b. Apart from the true vine, the branches cannot bear fruit; they wither and are cut off.
3. How do we remain close to the one who laid down his life?
 - a. Today we hear Jesus’ core teaching of what it means to abide in him.

B. Jesus repeats the new commandment that he gave to the disciples earlier.

1. *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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.”* (John 15:9)
2. On several recent Sundays we have been reminded that this is the absolutely primary command.
 - a. We need to note that Jesus does not say that we are to abide in love but, rather, *“in my love.”*
 - b. We ourselves, whose capacity for love is limited, are not the source of the deepest and strongest love.
 - c. To love faithfully and strongly we have to be aware of the source of love beyond our own.

II. Love that leads to Obedience & Obedience that leads to Love

A. When Jesus gives us a command to love it strikes us right away as quite paradoxical:

1. *“You will abide in my love / if you keep my commandments...”*
(John 15:10)
2. *“You are my friends / if you do what I command you.”*
(John 15:14)

B. This hardly sounds like a very tender notion of love as we usually think of it.

1. In order to stay in his friendship, one has to do what one is told!
 - a. ‘Follow my commands and everything will be all right!’
 - b. It probably seems a bit different than our notion of friendship as a relation of equals.
2. Jesus explains, however, why this notion of love isn’t cold and exacting as it may appear.
 - a. A taskmaster shouts to a servant, *“Do what you’re told and you’ll be ok.”*
 - b. But Jesus tells his disciples,
 - (1. *“I no longer speak to you as slaves, \for a slave does not know what his master is about. \ Instead, I call you friends, \ since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father.”* (John 15:15)
 - c. Slaves do not know the reason for a command, and that’s what servitude means.
 - (1. A servant never has the opportunity to judge whether or not a command is wise and loving,
 - (2. They are just to obey.
 - (3. Friends know the heart and mind of the one commanding.
 - d. But it goes deeper when our relationship with the risen Christ is one of *“abiding in him”*... then we are of one heart and mind with God.
 - (1. Jesus has revealed to his friends everything he has received from God.
 - (2. He has laid open his innermost self, his deepest convictions.
 - (3. Their relationship has become a mutual giving and receiving in love.
 - (4. To be sure, this relationship will be tested severely but in the end it will hold firm.

C. Another way to picture how friendship is related to love is to see how each can grow. It doesn't always begin with one the same as the other.

1. One of the classical treatments of friendship still stands today as a standard.
 - a. It comes from Aristotle's Ethics where he says that one of the best ways to train oneself in a particular virtue is to emulate those who already demonstrate it.
 - b. This is most likely to be successful when we have become friends with those whose lives we seek to emulate.
 - c. Friends form each other in the moral life, taking on each other's characteristics – both good and bad.
 - d. We are very likely to become the company we keep. ----
 - e. A true friend who loves as God loves will, in time, teach us how to love as God loves.
2. So, when Jesus says, "*You are my friends if you do what I command you,*"
 - a. he is not simply offering a useful or pleasurable friendship to those who have done his bidding.
 - b. He is describing the deep and best kind of friendship that is formative.
 - c. We are called into this kind of relationship with Jesus, and thereby, with God.
3. Thomas Aquinas offered a Christian synthesis of Aristotle's Ethics taking up this idea explicitly.
 - a. He said that part of the goal of the Christian life was to become friends with God.
 - b. Through this friendship, we hope to take on God's characteristics as our own –
 - (1. and to love one another as God loves us.
 - (2. So all of this is a process or goal of faithful living, being attentive in all of our lives to the example Jesus has given.

D. Finally, Jesus tells his disciples, "*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...*"

1. Our response to this may be as the Psalmist who says,
 - a. "*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me... I cannot attain to it.*"
2. Jesus is speaking here of the infinite generosity of God's grace.

3. In our usual notions of ‘commandment’ we think of having to model our life after him under our own power and resources.
4. But Jesus’ love for us is more than just a model to emulate.
 - a. It is also a power that enables, because it invites us into the underlying reality of God and creation in which we “*live, and move, and have our being.*”
 - b. God’s love for us empowers us to fulfill the command to love because it is rooted in the very first reality, “*God is love.*”
(1. Jesus lived this reality and he shows us the way to also.)
 - c. As we read in 1 John 4:19, (the Epistle last Sunday)
(1. “*We love because [God] first loved us.*”
5. In the Christian life there is always this tension between commandment and grace.
 - a. The Christian life on the one hand requires obedience to the task of overcoming the very human temptation to love only oneself.
 - b. And on the other, the Christian life is enabled by grace.
 - c. St. Augustine put it this way,
(1. “*God gives what [God] commands when [God] helps one to obey those commands.*”
 - d. St. Paul put it this way,
(1. “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,*” [something we do]; “*for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Phil. 2:12-13) [something God does.]

III. “That your Joy may be complete”

- A. So, we remember today Jesus’ command that we “*love one another as I have loved you.*”
 1. What a simple commandment,\ yet it carries such power,
 - a. -- power to heal minds, souls and bodies,
 - b. -- power to lift us to new planes of accomplishment.
 2. This kind of love is here with us,\ for the God of love is in our midst.
 3. Jesus went to great lengths also to identify “*sister and brother*” as everyone, including those most unlike us,
 - a. those who do not fit, those who upset us and make us uncomfortable.

- B. To make the point one more time, the Christian life is not a helpful means of getting what we want out of life.
1. The Christian life is one of transformation, a giving up of self, where it becomes possible to love as God has loved us.
 2. And with this obedience, Jesus tells us we will come into his own joy, we live with a hope and confidence that in this God is bringing forth the fruit that God intends,
 - a. always to draw the whole creation ever more into the love of God, the new creation.
 3. In this Easter season we see how this teaching is so prolific in the early days of the church.
 - a. It is what is meant to characterize who we are.
 - b. May the Spirit empower us and may people again say, *“Look...how those Christians love one another.”*