

Love One Another

Psalm 98 and John 15

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John 15:9-17

[Jesus said:] "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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."



This is the heart of the Christian story. The love of God understood by Jesus and shared with his disciples whom he called his friends.

We who have encountered the story, who have encountered the Spirit, each have our own understandings, our own take on what it means and how it plays out for ourselves and for our common life. But we also have a shared experience, places where our individual stories meet, similar language to use when we talk about this Christian adventure.

As I read this passage from John's Gospel, I am drawn to this common language. I am drawn to the word love and its different presentations: "*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,*" "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*" "*I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*"

I also recognize that we need to talk about what love means and what it means for us to love one another. One image that works well for me is seeing Jesus as totally open to God's love for all creation, so much so that we, the Church, understand him as God incarnate. Then, rather than keeping that God-understanding to himself, he turns to his disciples and passes it on, passes on the vision of God for all to see, for all to experience, for all to receive, and for all to pass along. Think of this passing like the

candle that we light on Christmas Eve and then we pass that light on to our neighbor. The light is conveyed to another and it does not diminish our own light.

This holy sharing of love to others is unbridled by hierarchy. There is no greater than, wiser than, holier than thou involved in the act of loving others. The loving of others does not diminish the love we have from those who love us. It only adds to the love in the world.

Jesus calls us friends. It is hard to describe what this means. One story that comes to my mind is from a movie about the Second World War. In this movie there was a platoon where one soldier was often getting teased or made fun of. The other soldiers would take great delight in practical jokes at this soldier's expense. In this one scene, one of the practical jokers takes an unarmed hand grenade and tosses it into the foxhole where this particular soldier is stationed, along with a few other soldiers who are in on the joke. They expect the fellow to run, at which point the others will all have a good laugh. But the soldier doesn't run, and instead throws his body on top of the grenade while yelling for the others to escape to safety. The unarmed grenade does go off, obviously. And then we have the embarrassing moment when the soldiers realize that this man whom the others had ridiculed and harassed was willing to give up his life for his comrades.

Jesus calls us friends and, in doing so, we are giving a new status in the world. We are freed to love as equals, out of a sense of thanksgiving rather than obligation. Even though we hear the words "command" and "commandment," we understand this language not so much as an order as directions. I like to think of these words as pointing us in the way of life and away from the ways of violence and destruction. Imagine you are in a burning house, with smoke blinding your eyes. The command to "love one another" is the same as the firefighter coming to meet you and directing you to safety and escape from the burning structure. The command is a way out of bondage or suffering to a life of service, healing, and hope. Jesus is saying, "This is the way."

Jesus says: You did not choose me, but I chose you. This is not meant to diminish our acceptance our walking on the Jesus Path, but to acknowledge that God has loved us first, thus giving us the power to love others.

The power of being chosen, of being called, cannot be overstated. I am reminded of when I was the advisor for the New Hampshire Youth Council years ago. I was meeting with the 12 high school youth at a retreat and was talking to them about how God calls people, how God invites people to see ways their gifts are meant for service and how God will provide the strength and the courage to live into their call. Unbeknownst to me, one of the youth understood this invitation in a very special way. I was only to find out about this some months later when I encountered his parents at a church meeting. They told me that their son had taken these words to heart and was changed by this new understanding. His life was turned around and headed in a direction that was full of promise. They thanked me with tears in their eyes. I acknowledged their thanks with tears of my own. Give God the glory.

Love one another. To take seriously Jesus' commandment to love provides a clear framework for forming values in every age and every situation, no matter how different our cultures, our technologies, our sophistication. We ask ourselves about every decision and choice and plan and vision: Is this rooted in love? Does this bear fruit for the kingdom of God? That's the true test. Sometimes we will fail the test. Sometimes we will know that we have not loved others. This will hurt, if we are honest and caring. But that hurt can lead to the opportunity to heal, to make amends, to offer forgiveness to ourselves and to others. Failing is not such a bad thing, it is a time of decision. Will our failure to love be an occasion for us to justify our failure or learn from it and move back onto the path of loving?

Sometimes our failure to love is harder to see. It may be deeply embedded in our role in culture.

In his book, *Call to Conversion*, Jim Wallis, writes, "I remember a conference in New York City. The topic was social justice. Assembled for the meeting were theologians, pastors, priests, nuns and lay church leaders. At one point a Native American stood up, looked out over the mostly white audience, and said, 'Regardless of what the New Testament says, most Christians are individualists with no real experience of community.' He paused for a moment and then continued: 'Let's pretend that you were all Christians. If you were Christians, you would no longer accumulate. You would share everything you had. You would actually love one another. And you would treat each other as if you were family.' His eyes were piercing as he asked, 'Why don't you do that? Why don't you live that way?'" This story forces us to deal with the reality of our culture as seen through the eyes of our faith. What would our culture look like if those of us who are Christians acted like it? How would it be different than the way we live today?

Last of all, loving one another is not a solo sport. We love one another in community. After all, we are a community called to worship God, be servants with Christ, grow in faith, love, and Spirit. As a community, our love will show the variety of who we are, and the power of our combined love. We will continue to discern how to express our love as a community. But we each have the comfort and the strength of the Spirit to sustain us in this ministry.

We are called. We are chosen. We are gifted. We are loved. Therefore we call others. We affirm the gifts of others. Friends of Christ, love one another.

Amen.