

Sermon for 5-5-24
Text: John 15:9-17

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Before our reading for this morning from John chapter 15, Jesus knelt and washed their feet, all while knowing the devil had already put into the heart of Judas to betray him. After Jesus finished washing their feet, Judas flees into the night, and Jesus gives his final discourse—his final words to his disciples before his crucifixion.

He promises them the Holy Spirit, after which (as we read last Sunday) Jesus gives them a metaphor to help them as they face a future without him: he says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.”

This morning we continue this metaphor into the next few verses of John chapter 15. Jesus deepens the metaphor and assures the disciples of his love. The vine and branches abide together, not to be separated—and Jesus’ love for his disciples is as steadfast as a branch clinging to a vine.

The disciples need all the love they can get in this moment. They are terrified of Jesus’ prediction that he will suffer and die. They know someone close to them will betray him soon. Not only that, but in the future, they will face deadly consequences when they continue to share Jesus’ love with the world after he ascends to heaven. They will experience rejection and be killed. Jesus’ love is the only thing that will sustain them and keep them moving forward.

Yet it’s not just Jesus’ love that will carry them forward; **it’s also their love for each other. We hear Jesus’ well-known words in our reading this morning: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.**

They will be the ones to show God’s love to the world through their caring, healing, advocating and transforming acts to one another and for the world.

Doesn’t this feel impossible, to love the people around us with the love of Christ? Of course, it is. It’s only through Jesus’ love for us that we

can even try to lay our lives down for our friends. We fail again and again, yet we keep trying, because we can't help but share the love that has been given to us by God.

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Notice Jesus doesn't command his disciples to like each other. He doesn't command them to agree with one another.

He commands them to love each other with the same self-sacrificing love Jesus shows to the world. They needed the assurance of Jesus' abiding love in order to contemplate loving others in the same way.

I just finished a book called "Anxious People" by Frederik Backman. I can't tell you the plot without giving away spoilers, but I will say that throughout the novel Backman is sharply observant of human interaction and relationships. I read it slowly because I had to think about each sentence! One of his characters, a man who has been married to his wife for 40 years, is asked by a newly engaged young woman how he and his wife have stayed married so long.

He says, "You love each other until you can't live without each other. And even if you stop loving each other for a little while, you can't...you can't live without each other."

I don't know if this is great marriage advice.

But it might be true when it comes to Jesus' love. **We can't live without it.** We may struggle at times to abide in Jesus' love and show this love to others, but we keep returning to it because we can't live without it. Without Jesus' love, we wither on the vine.

We too need to be reminded again and again that Jesus loves us, and commands us to abide in his love.

But there's an important distinction: abiding in Jesus is not the same as being Jesus. Jesus is our source, not just our role model. Jesus's love nourishes us and never ends. We're grafted to Christ like a branch to a vine, so that we can't tell where Jesus ends and we begin. We bear fruit from the abundant love that Jesus sustains us with.

As the disciples struggle to hear Jesus' promises as they anticipate his suffering on the cross, Jesus tells them something even more astonishing — not only with they know Jesus' love, but when they abide in Jesus' love their joy will be complete.

How can Jesus talk about joy at a time like this? It doesn't make sense when we equate joy with a feeling of happiness or contentment.

However, the Greek words for "grace" and "joy" share the same root. Dr. Karoline Lewis writes that "joy may very well be a feeling of grace, the emotion of grace, even the response to grace. Joy is that indescribable sense when you find yourself experiencing abundant grace."

God's grace is God's unconditional love for us. And when we know this, we know joy. And no one can take that source of joy from us, knowing we are loved by God.

This is not sentimental love, a love that depends on liking or getting along or agreeing.

God's love is a love we can count on throughout our lives, an identity we can always claim, a joy we can always know, a source we go to for nourishment, knowing God's grace is for us and for the world, and we are a part of sharing that love and joy. Thanks be to God!

Amen.