

Sixth Sunday of Easter

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Introduction

The imagery of the Vine and the Branches is continued in this week's reading. It is set in the period between Jesus foretelling his betrayal by one of his disciples and his own arrest. It is a passage that on the surface speaks of love, joy and friendship – the intertwining of the vine and its branches. Yet this is a passage that has deep meaning, is at times confusing, and can seem contradictory to our understanding of love and friendship. The passage comes full circle with the comment that resonates with our reading last week, 'I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last'.

Text

John 15:9–17

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.

Comment

Once again we see the writer of John's gospel telling events that prepare and equip the disciples for the time after Jesus' death and resurrection. The dialogue begins with the request, 'Abide in my love'. We are told that Jesus loves his disciples as the Father has loved him. Jesus felt this love and now invites us to be in his love. The commandment Jesus speaks about in this passage is that the disciples 'love one another'. It comes across as an order rather than an invitation. A directive that is reinforced by Jesus saying, 'You are my friends *if* [*my emphasis*] you do what I command you'. Jesus isn't seeking out what his disciples think about friendship.

Friendship is conditional on doing what Jesus says – to love one another, and to do what someone says in order to be in someone’s love seems a little contradictory of the Gospel. For Jesus to seemingly put a condition on friendship rather than a two way process of love and acceptance is difficult to grasp.

Jesus tells the disciples that in the past he called them ‘servants’, or in the Greek ‘slaves’, and the release from slavery usually came at a cost.

Jesus isn’t trying to keep everyone happy in this passage. He doesn’t say that everyone will be his friend. The implication is that only those who obey his commandment to love one another will abide in his love and move from being a servant to a friend. At a time when the disciples might feel afraid, unsure and confused Jesus is encouraging them to love each other. At a time when anger and resentment might take hold, Jesus is advocating a way of love – for this is at the heart of true friendship, and at the heart of a relationship with God.

He is fully aware that he will be giving his own life as an atonement for many. Yet Jesus chooses to discuss love and friendship with his disciples, not wrath and retaliation. This is the context in which Jesus speaks of friendship.

What is remarkable is that this act of giving dipped bread to another was reserved for deep friendship. We see Jesus acting out what he is now speaking about – to love one another, and it came at great cost to Jesus. For Jesus this was in the midst of great turmoil and anguish – when his spirit was troubled amidst the knowledge of his impending death – yet he was able to offer Judas love and friendship. We see throughout the Gospel of John the invitation to journey through the dark until the light breaks through. The act of love does just this – it is the light shining in the darkness.

And finally we come to the purpose of these words that Jesus speaks – that we might go and produce fruit. It is interesting to note that Jesus is now speaking of a journey – to go. The purpose of remaining in his love, of being the branch that bears much fruit – is to go and make an impact in the world. The fruit is not for our benefit so much as for others – to go and get our hands dirty, to walk with those who need us, to be with the fallen, those in despair, the hungry, the poor. This passage is ultimately about the life the disciples were being called to lead after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus knew it wouldn’t be easy, that there would be a cost, but he also led by example that his disciples might learn from him. In this passage Jesus gives us the key to mission, the key to evangelism, the key to being his witness in the world – that of abiding in his love by keeping the commandment ‘love one another’. And, as we saw in John 12:20–36 this is not just for one nation, but for all. The invitation is this – to journey through the dark until the light breaks through. The act of love does just this – it is the light shining in the darkness.

Response

What are the areas in your life where you struggle to love?

Reflect for a moment on the impact of where love shines from you, and where love is difficult.

What is your understanding of love – is this about accepting all behaviours? How is it possible to love at all times, especially where deep trauma has occurred?

To abide in the love of Jesus is to love one another. It is a way of peace. It is a way of life. Thank God for the people around you who show you love. Pray for those you find difficult to love.

Prayer

When we journey through the darkness
let us travel in Your love
God of Love
Let us love our friends
God of Light
Let us love the strangers we meet
God of Peace
Let us love those who do us harm
And when the light breaks through the darkness
let us rejoice in the wonder of love
that has sustained us in our darkest hours. Amen