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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 6, Series B
Saturday, May 5th, 2018
Sunday, May 6th, 2018

Sermon: No Greater Love¹

Text: John 15:9-17

Focus: Jesus loves us as the Father loves him.

Function: That they would love one another as Christ loves them.

Structure: Verse-by-Verse

Locus: "I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me... that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom..." (SC, 2nd Article).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Today's Gospel reading is a continuation of Jesus' teaching of the Vine and the Branches from last week (15:1-8). The keyword in that passage was "abide" (Greek: *menein*), which means to "remain" or "dwell." When we abide in Jesus, we find our life in his life, his Word, and his Sacrament (15:4, 7; 6:56). Today Jesus expounds even further on that theme and tells us to abide in his *love*.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love" (John 15:9, ESV).² Jesus loves us *in the exact same way* that God loves him: perfectly, fully, and unconditionally, without reservation or expectation. Who can comprehend the mystery of the divine love shared between the three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? I cannot wrap my mind around it. And yet we experience that love through the loving self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. When we abide, or remain, in Jesus' love, his forgiveness fills our hearts and overflows into the lives of the people around us.

¹ The elders at Epiphany had to read this sermon for me because I lost my voice.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

“If you keep my commandments,” Jesus continues, *“you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love”* (John 15:10). Jesus tells us to keep his commandments. Which commandments are these? The Ten Commandments? Almost certainly. The Sermon on the Mount? No doubt! Yet the Commandment that Jesus spoke in the Upper Room in his Farewell Sermon was this: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another” (John 13:34). We prove our love for Jesus by keeping his commandments.

How does a man prove that he loves his wife? By doing the things she asks of him. How do children prove their love for their parents? By obeying their will. So also Jesus proved his love for the Father—and for us—“by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). And so we show our love for God by doing the things he asks to us to do in his Holy Word, even if they are strange or difficult. As John writes in his first epistle, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18).

Jesus says, *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full”* (John 15:11). Jesus wants you to have joy in your life! Joy is different than happiness, which is a fleeting feeling. We pursue happiness, but joy is a gift. Even in the midst of great sorrow or suffering, God gives us joy, which is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Joy comes from unshakeable confidence and trust in God’s grace and mercy. And joy comes from living in right relationship with God—obeying his commandments and loving the people he puts in our lives, even if they don’t love us back. Jesus had joy even in the face of the cross’s shame because he knew that his obedience would bring life to all who believe. And Jesus gives that joy *to you*.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

Now Jesus makes it explicit again, repeating his earlier command: “Love one another, as I have loved you.” That little word *as* is loaded with meaning. It means “just as,” “in the same way,” and “to the same degree” (Greek: *kathōs*). Jesus wants us to love one another in the exact same way that he loves us: perfectly, fully, and unconditionally, without reservation or expectation. We will often fudge on this and say things like, “I have to love him, but I don’t have to *like* him.” We treat our enemies with disregard or disgust. People that aren’t useful to us don’t make it high on our priorities. But that’s not how Jesus loves. So he continues...

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). The ultimate act of love is to give up your life for someone else. This is what Jesus calls us to do. And this is what Jesus *did* do when he died on the cross for our sins. “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person,” writes St. Paul in Romans 5, “though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:7-8). While we were still sinners, enemies (Rom. 5:10), and weak, (Rom. 5:6), Christ died for us. Christ died for not only his friends, but even his enemies: the Jewish priests who wrongly condemned him, the Roman soldiers who tortured him, the criminals who mocked him, and his own disciples, who betrayed, denied, and abandoned him. From the cross he even *prayed* for them, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Neither do we, and yet Christ died *for you!*

“You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:14-15). Jesus now tells his disciples (and us) that we are his friends. No longer does he call us servants—the Greek word

literally means “slave” or “bond-servant” (Greek: *doulos*). Is there anything wrong with being God’s slave? Not at all! I would rather be a slave to Christ than a slave to sin! In the Psalms, David calls himself the Lord’s servant and slave (Ps. 116:16). With a good master like Jesus, we gladly do what he commands. Remember: it is our *joy!* But while a slave may carry out his master’s will, he does not know his master’s *mind*. But we are Jesus’ *friends*. He draws us into his intimate counsel and shares his deepest purpose with us.

Among the Romans, certain men were granted the noble title Friend of Caesar, which gave them special access to the emperor. A so-called Friend of Caesar could visit the emperor at all hours unannounced without fear of punishment. The emperor trusted him as his own self.

We have a better title than Friend of Caesar. We are friends of Jesus Christ, the Son of God! By our justification we have been made right with God and granted access to God’s presence (Rom. 5:1-2). We can go to Jesus at any time for any reason. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

All of this depends on grace. Jesus says, “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you*” (John 15:16). We have a missionary God who “came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). He leaves the 99 sheep on the hillside in order to go in search of the one lost sheep. He did not wait for us to get our act together or come to our senses. We did not choose him. He chose us. We do not “make a decision for Christ” or “ask Jesus to come into our hearts.” He chose us. We did not find Jesus. He found us. And *his* finding—*his* choosing—changes us so that we become like him and do the things that he does.

Now Jesus returns to the image of the vine and branches (John 15:1-8). “You should go and bear fruit,” Jesus says, “and... your fruit should abide...” The fruit of the branch is the fruit of the vine. It is Jesus the True Vine who gives us life and allows us to bear fruit. “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:8). Our fruit gives glory to God. It doesn’t earn us God’s favor; we already have it. Our fruit also points other people *to* God. When they see our good works, they do not praise us, but they praise the vine and the vinedresser (15:1) who made them. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Our good works are always for the benefit of our neighbor, so they may see God’s goodness and believe.

Jesus tells us to *go* and bear fruit. Going is always part of the Christian life. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” (Matt. 28:19a). Our God is a missionary God, and we are a missionary people. We go because Jesus chose us. We go because Jesus loves us. And we go because we love the people not yet grafted into the vine.

Later in John, chapter 20, Jesus will tell his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). The sentence structure reminds me of an earlier statement: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9). You could literally lift out one verb and drop it in the other sentence. The Father loves Jesus, and Jesus loves us. The Father sent Jesus, and Jesus sends us. Loving leads to sending. Branches produce more than just grapes. They also produce new branches. So in a wonderful oxymoron, Jesus tells us both to abide and to *go* in order that we may bear fruit. How amazing and exciting the Christian life can be when we abide in Jesus and his love!

And now, one last time, in case you missed it, Jesus says once again: “These things I command you, so that you will love one another” (John 15:17). The Father loves Jesus. Jesus loves us. We love one another. And we love the lost. There is a lot of love to go around!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*