

B Easter 6 5.5.24

John 15:9-17; Acts 10:44-48

Focus Statement: Jesus loves us

Last week Jesus talked about viticulture, this week he leans further into the vine metaphor, unpacking what is at the heart of it. Love. Love is such a big word, isn't it? It can be used to describe relationships that are both as deep and as vastly different as how one feels towards their child, parent, sibling, friend, or romantic partner. It can also be used in relation to one's feelings about tacos or a particular sports franchise. I mean think about it. As freestanding sentences, I love Travis, I love my niece, and I love cheez-its all make sense, even though my feelings for those things are vastly different.

So Jesus takes this giant concept of love and tells the disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." What kind of love are we talking about here? Spousal love? Family love? Cheez-it love? What does it mean to abide in Christ's love? The word "abide" here is a big one in John's Gospel in general, but especially here in chapter fifteen, where it shows up no less than ten times. The word translated as abide is the Greek word *menow*. It's the same word the writer of the Gospel used in the Prologue, where it reads, "And the Word became flesh and lived" dwelled, remained, abided, *menowed* "among us." To abide in the Gospel of John is to dwell with, to remain with, to be present with, even to be held and kept by. There is a sense of deep, rooted, connection and relationship in the use of this word. To abide is to nestle yourself within, to be nestled within. There is an intimacy as well as a stickiness, a staying power, implied in this word.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide” dwell, remain, stay, “in my love.”

Sounds like good wisdom, but how do we do that. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments.” Now wait a minute, you might be saying, what do we do with the “if” in that sentence? “If you keep my commandments”? Is Jesus’ love conditional? Let’s unpack that a bit, because I think the broadness of the English word “love” gives us trouble here. We tend to think of love as a feeling. We talk about “falling in love” or “love at first sight.” Which is, to continue an overused word, a lovely concept. But if you’ve heard me preach a wedding sermon, you know there’s something I work into every one. I remind the couple that, for all the fluffy, romantic ways our culture likes to talk about it, love is not a feeling, it’s an action. If you’ve ever been in a relationship of any kind, romantic, friend, parent/child, even pet, for any length of time, you’ve experienced this. You do not always love your loved ones. But we act in loving ways, because that is the commitment we made when entering into a loving relationship. I feed the cat, even when she has woken me up three times in the night tearing around the room and across the bed like a black fluffy demon. I do not like the cat at three in the morning, but I still act in love towards the cat. I still do responsible cat owner activities for the cat. Because love is not about feelings, it is about our actions.

Jesus’ love for us is not a feeling towards us, it is an action. An action Jesus referenced in verse thirteen when he told the disciples, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Friends, as a bit of an aside/fun Greek fact, is the word *phileo*. A word John’s Gospel uses interchangeably with *agapeo*, both translated into English as love. When Jesus calls the disciples “friends,” what he’s really saying is “ones who are loved.” “No

one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for the ones who are loved." And then, not twenty-four hours later, Jesus went out and did that very thing. Laid down his life for us, for his friends, for the ones whom he loves.

Jesus' love for us is an action. One that cannot be taken away, because it's already happened. The "if" isn't conditional, it's just the reality of how love works. Remember verse sixteen, where Jesus reminded the disciples, "you did not choose me but I chose you." We've been chosen, we've been appointed to "bear fruit that will last. And the commandment we are supposed to keep to abide in Christ's love? The "fruit that will last"? It's as simple, and as complicated, as this: we are to "love one another as [Jesus has] loved [us]." Dear people of God, I love this passage because I think it describes for us what church looks like at its best. A place where love isn't felt so much as it is acted out. We may feel love towards one another as siblings in Christ, and that's great. But feelings aren't what matters in love. Actions are. Love is cutting down the tree that knocked over Tish's mailbox. Celebrating the bishop's wife's birthday. Responding calmly when someone is mad because you took down their planter box, even though the box was rotten and there was nothing in it. Truly valuing and enjoying the distraction that is Levi. These are acts of love, they are ways we abide in Christ as Christ abides in us. And, what's more, because, like we talked about earlier, because the love action of Jesus is done and cannot be taken away, because we are fully loved by Jesus, these love actions aren't about earning Jesus' love, we've got that already. Jesus wants us to live in love with each other "so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." This call to love is about living a life of

joy. We are a communal species, dear people of God, our brains are wired to love one another as the Father loved Jesus, because we have been created in God's own image.

And, and yes, friends, there's more. And look at the Acts passage. Because with all this talk about what it means to live in love as a community of believers, this passage could cause us to turn inward to our own little community. But the joy Jesus wants for us, has for us, is bigger even than that. In this Acts passage, Peter had been called by God to meet with a gentile named Cornelius. First century Rome was a very class-based society, so there are all sorts of strict social and cultural reasons why Peter should not follow this call. But he did, and while he was there, God opened Peter's eyes, just like we saw with the Ethiopian eunuch last week, to the expansiveness of what God meant by all people. And in our reading this morning, we see that it wasn't just Peter's eyes that were opened, but a whole bunch of other people's eyes as well. "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers—the insiders—were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles... Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?'" And just like that, this whole crowd of people was recognized as fully welcome in the kingdom of God.

The challenge in this passage, dear people of God, is it forces us to look beyond our normal expectations of what it means to be part of the community of the faithful. Circumcision and food purity laws aren't the thing anymore, but what is? Coming to worship? Participating in particular activities? Supporting the church in a certain way? Here's where twenty years

of sharing space with Co-op has given us a leg up on other congregations, we already know what it looks like, what it feels like, to love people who don't sit with us on a Sunday morning. To share in fellowship, friendship, love, with people who don't meet the, weirdly actually legal definition of what it takes to be a member of Trinity Lutheran Church. Which, yes friends, believe it or not, as an incorporated organization under the State of Michigan, there are legal requirements that have to be met for "membership." They are, in case you're interested, total aside, receiving communion and making a "contribution of record" once a year. If you want to be a member of Trinity, per our Constitution and the State of Michigan, that's what's required. But that's like the worst indication of being part of the community. Think of all the people who don't make that standard and who are much more ingrained members of our community than someone who shows up once a year to have communion and leave five dollars in an envelope to check the box of member. With the exception of Teresa, none of the Co-op staff are "members," but what richness, life, and love they bring to our community. None of the AA group who meet here on Wednesdays come to worship, but if you come on a Wednesday, you will be offered coffee. Since, per our Gospel reading, the action of love is the path to joy, what joy we have in our community, with such a strong and expansive group to love. A joy that will only grow stronger as we bring more people into it. On Sundays, yes, hopefully, because it is a unique and important gift we share when we come together in worship. But also throughout the week, as we give and receive love, being Christ's loving presence in the building and in the wider community.

Dear people of God, the takeaway of these passages is as simple as this. Jesus loves us. Jesus loves us, and because Jesus loves us, we can, we get to, love each other. And in loving, we find joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.