

Love Between Friends

John 15:9-17

They are in the garden. Jesus has spoken in terms of agriculture making a comparison between the relationship of farmer, vine and branch and that of Father, Son and disciples. He has given particular attention to the objective of fruitfulness and to the conditions required for the accomplishment of this goal which included the activity of the Father who prunes the branches, the vitality of the vine which nourishes the branches and the persistence of the branches in remaining connected to the vine. As Jesus continues, He gets away from the metaphor in applying it to His present company. But, while doing so, He still uses the language of the metaphor employing the heavy weight words abide and remain and working with the intersecting relationship of Father, Son and disciple.

Jesus orders love as beginning with the Father, being perpetuated by Himself, and then the great dramatic moment approaches. Will this love be continued through the lives of the disciples?

The means of continuing this love is the keeping of the commandments. Jesus set the example by following the commands of the Father. The disciples must pick this up by abiding in Jesus' love as they keep His commandments.

This is not the kind of commandment keeping that had been practiced by the Pharisees. They had the rituals and the formalities down but their hearts were as distant from God as could possibly be imagined. They gave alms and prayed and fasted but only for the approval of men and not to be close to God. They really had no concept of direct relationship with God, their focus was entirely upon the temple, the offerings and the procedures and the politics. The temple had been the vehicle for the worship of God but it was most often a stumbling block. The Jews saw it as a representation of their special status as the chosen people but were only too soon detached from their purpose as God's special people. The temple became a substitute for God's presence rather than a means to that end. It was like the temple had replaced the God for which it stood. As the

worshippers enter the temple grounds, God reaches down to tap them on the shoulder and the worshippers respond, don't bother me, I'm in the holy place. This is the kind of commandment keeping the culture expected. Follow the Sabbath rules and the rules for washing your food and the rules for giving alms and for public prayers. Doing these things made you a righteous person. But the experts and leaders and teachers of these things did not know God and did not recognize their own Messiah when He was the purpose for their existence.

But Jesus had not taught them this kind of obedience. First, He had challenged the assumptions of the religious elite. "God did not make man for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for man." "Is it right to save life or to destroy life on the Sabbath?" "It is not what enters the mouth that corrupts but what comes out of the heart." "Don't forgive just seven times but seventy times seven." These statements go to the heart of the matter. What was God's intention in His creation? His commandments should be interpreted by those intentions. The love of God and His compassion for the helpless and the needy must be windows through which we learn to look in seeking His will. The disciples had been trained to think in these ways. They had been with Jesus and observed that this was the way He thought and lived. Jesus blessed the children when even the disciples thought this was a waste of time. He received the gifts and worship of women who were known to be sinners. He was delayed for three days in the Samaritan town of Sychar as a result of His conversation with the woman by the well, a woman the disciples passed by but never saw. He was acutely aware of the personhood of the blind man when His disciples and everyone else had no respect for him at all. And when these lessons were forgotten, blind Bartimaeus and his ilk were always welcome to come by and to teach them again. Even the disciples themselves were examples of the spirit and priorities of Christ, tax collectors and fishermen and Galileans, they had no creds but they were chosen, singled out by Jesus to be trained and trusted with the message that would change the world.

To these, Jesus offered His own joy. They had experienced His joy on so many occasions. Think of what it would have been like to hear Jesus laugh. Do you think His laugh would have been infectious? Imagine the disciples with Jesus around the campfire, laughing together over an event of the day, over victories

won and over people healed and saved from their sins. Jesus had a capacity for joy that was rooted in His ability to know and love people. His capacity for empathy for suffering was matched by His eagerness to participate in triumphs and victories of heart and soul. Jesus celebrated the faith of a centurion. He lifted up the humility of the tax collector. He walked with pride to the home of a bruised and desperate Zachaeus. Each of these were occasions of joy. And there were so many more. "These things have I spoken to you that My joy might remain in you and that your joy may be full." Can you have Christ's joy without Christ's life? Look forward if you would to the 1st post-resurrection healing. Peter and John (no longer rivals but partners) go up to the temple at the hour of prayer and as Jesus did so often, they saw a man that was most often unseen. This man was lame from birth and was carried in everyday to beg at the gate of the temple that was called the Beautiful Gate. The lame man caught their eye and asked for alms. Peter said, "Look at us." So, he looked up at them thinking that he was going to get something and Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you, In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." Peter then took his hand and lifted him up and immediately his feet and ankles responded to the healing power of God and he leaped and stood and walked and continued walking and leaping and praising God. Now that was joy! They had replicated the ministry of Jesus. It was just like Jesus to notice a man who was hopelessly crippled and to reach out to him with healing power. Peter and John knew it. They knew that they had done for Jesus something that Jesus would have done Himself. And picture the man in the temple walking and leaping and praising God. Imagine the disciples reliving the moment later when the crisis was past. Did they laugh? Did they remember the laughter of Jesus?

Jesus continued, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. This would have seemed impossible. Jesus had drawn them all together. They would not for the most part have even known each other if not for Christ. Now, love each other as I have loved you. This takes confidence. It takes the conviction that I have and that I am supposed to share. It means that I presume that God has gifted me to meet the needs of others. It means that these things that I know, He means for others to get to know. It means that I accept the

role of being a conduit of God's love to others. As such, I know that I will be largely invisible. It is God's love and not my own. It is for His glory and not for my own reputation.

Then Jesus added, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." Of course, this is what Jesus was about to do in a way that would still be a shock to His followers. Laying down your life for your friend, for each other as the disciples of Christ. What does this look like? It might be the carrying of burdens to God in prayer. It might be a gracious kindness often taken for granted. It might be the keeping of a promise or the fulfilling of another's deepest wishes. Nearly everyone will caution you against the laying down of your life for another but Jesus said that if you abide in Me, this is what you will do. It is when you join Jesus in this act of the greatest love that you become His partner in ministry. Jesus confides in His partners. He trusts His partners. He shares with His partners. He assures and rewards His partners. Everything is possible for the disciple who takes seriously Jesus' command to love one another.