

May 17, 2009/Sixth Sunday after Easter/David L. Edwards

## Friends of Jesus

John 15:9-17 *You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

Our reading from John's gospel is a portion of the long final teaching given by Jesus to his disciples (Chs. 14-17). Jesus has just spoken of himself as the vine, his disciples as the branches. As long as they "abide" in him, they will bear "much fruit". The branches draw nourishment and produce fruit because of their attachment to the vine. Vine, branches and fruit--it is all one organic relationship. Jesus dwells in God and God dwells in him. As his community, we are part of that life-giving interrelationship of love flowing into the world.

Jesus now speaks in a different way about the same reality. As God has loved him, so he has loved his disciples. "Abide in my love," he says. Stay grounded in my love, which is also God's love. This is a beautiful way to think about our lives as people of faith. The first thing is for us to stay grounded in God's love for us in Jesus. That is how the life of the vine flows into the branches. This is a superb image for what we call the inward journey. It is the attention we give daily and the spiritual work we do to abide in love. It is not about obsessing over our imperfections or shortcomings. It is not about "spiritual achievement," so that we become filled with stress and anxiousness. It is about letting our lives become rooted in love and letting that love transform us little by little. Then it is about bearing fruit, the outward journey of our relationships with others and the things we feel called to do for the sake of the world out of that rootedness in God's love.

How do we keep ourselves rooted in this way? Jesus now says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in God's love." At first that may sound like, "I will love you IF you do what I tell you to do!" That would be **CONDITIONAL LOVE**, when you give or receive affirmation or approval based on how you act or what you achieve. That's not what Jesus means. Keep in mind the vine and branches image. Jesus is saying that when we are hearing and doing his teachings, endeavoring in the life of loving, then we keep the flow of God's love in our lives open. It's like canoing a stream. Going with the flow of the current makes it easy. Going against it can be so difficult that you can't get anywhere. The current of life is the love of God and living in and out of that love. Compassion, understanding, forgiveness, self-giving, discerning and following the calls God puts in our hearts--these are the ways we stay in the current of God's love. Jesus is saying the same thing in all of these teachings: The love of God and the commandment of love are inseparable. God's love enables and empowers us in a life that is loving. Endeavoring in a life of love keeps us connected with God's love.

What does Jesus mean by this love? Two things, I think. First, it is love as action, how we relate to one another and the world. It is what we do, how we think, the ways that we respond. This saves the kind of love Jesus is talking about--*agape*--from being confused with the sentimental and heavily emotional kind of love that predominates in our culture. It is love that is willing to risk, to suffer, to struggle for the sake of others and the world, as well as for our own spiritual growth.

Second, I think there IS room to speak of this kind of love as, for lack of a better term, spiritual affection. There is a deep and profound affection that is part of God's love for us. It is the love of the Creator for the creature. We hear it in the words of the prophets of Israel, as God longs for the people, the children of God's love, to return to right living. We see it in Jesus as he looks compassionately on the needs of people, both physical and spiritual. On our part, it is the response in the center of our being to God's love for us--joy, thankfulness, and an unshakable sense of peace and belonging. It is also the basic way we regard others and the world. It is seeing one another in the light of God's love for us all. This is different from the superficial liking and disliking so ingrained in us. It means letting go of preferential love--we "love" those who please us, agree with us, are like us, and we don't "love" those who are different from us, who challenge us, who may be hostile toward us. Loving with the love of God is honoring and respecting the life of one who, like me, is created and loved by God.

All of this leads to a life of joy, for now Jesus says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Just a little before this Jesus gave his disciples his peace (14:27) Now he is giving them his joy. It is the joy of his relationship with God. He wants his followers to have that same joy. And they will, provided they continue abiding in God's love and striving in the life of love. It is complete joy because it comes from being who God made us to be and living the way God made us to live.

Jesus now returns to the same theme, with another dimension: My commandment is that you love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends. And you are my friends if you do what I command you. Jesus is speaking about his own life. He has been and will be laying down his life for the sake of his disciples and the world. This is also to be the nature of his followers' lives. Jesus teaches this throughout the gospels--living our lives for the sake of others and the world. It is not clinging to our lives in a possessive way so that we can discover what life is really about. It is not so much about one heroic action that saves another's life as it is about a continual way of living that benefits others and the world.

Jesus is talking about living with a concern for the well being of the world as God's creation and all of God's creatures. Elaine Marie Prevallet of the Sisters of Loretto Community puts it this way: We live by giving in the service of life. That is the basic principle of life. We see it throughout the natural world, the creation. It is the most fulfilling way of life because it conforms to the reality that we are not separate, isolated selves, but woven into the whole fabric of life. When we understand our lives in this way and then discern what it is that we are uniquely given to offer for the sake of others and the world, that opens for us the life of joy.

As we endeavor in this kind of life--rooted in God's love in Jesus and striving in love--we are "friends of Jesus." I no longer call you "servants," says Jesus. You are now my friends because you know what I know and what I am about. We share Jesus' vision and relationship with God. We are devoting ourselves to the kind of life he lived and taught. Jesus is not interested in rote obedience to moral laws or ethical principles. He is interested in a community of those whose hearts and minds are filled with the love of God, and whose outward living becomes an expression of that love. This kind of friendship happens among those committing themselves to a common purpose or ministry, and to one another. It is what a mission group is about. The group comes together around a ministry or mission to which all feel called. Keeping the vision and work of that mission in the center of the group's awareness is important. Of equal importance is the group inward journey. Sharing our lives with one another, growing in mutual understanding and respect, praying for and with each other--this is the inward work that creates the kind of friendship Jesus is talking about.

To be, as a community and as individuals, the friends of Jesus is to be working with all that he has been talking about and showing in his own life. Grounding our lives and our life together in God's love. Then being on the journey of letting our lives and our living be shaped by that love. For us here in the Church of the Covenant, this is what the inward and outward journeys of the life of faith are about.

Finally, Jesus tells the disciples that they did not choose him. He chose them and appointed them to go and bear fruit. And as they do that, they can ask God for whatever it is they need for that life and work. We did not choose Jesus. He chose us. We may have come into the community thinking we were choosing Jesus, choosing the life of faith. Soon, however, we discover this deeper spiritual dimension of "having been chosen." Our lives then become the way that we respond to that call. We begin to know ourselves as chosen, called, and sent. Life takes on a completely different meaning and direction. Life is no longer just a matter of muddling through, doing the best we can, or simply going through the motions of what someone else decided we should be or do. It becomes an adventure of knowing ourselves as chosen and sent, and then discerning through our inward journey the shape and direction of that call and the gifts we have been given to bring to it. We are here on this earth, not by accident, but with a purpose--to live as those created and called by God, to abide in God's love and to live out that love through the uniqueness of our lives and our life as a community.

If we are doing that, the fruit that we bear will last. What is it that continues in this life? What is it that endures? Not the "great achievements" that arise from self-centeredness, greed, violence, the exercise of power and domination. What endures is every thought, word, or action arising out of love and for the purposes of love. When we are giving our lives in that way, says Jesus, whatever we ask God for, whatever we need for that journey, will be provided. Jesus is not talking about living this kind of life so that we will get whatever we want. It is not a promise of an easy, affluent, or successful life, in the world's definition of success. It is the promise that when we are giving ourselves to each other and the world in the life of love, God will provide what we need for that way of living.

Jesus ends where he began: I am giving you these commands, these teachings, so that you may love one another. He keeps coming back to the same foundation, the center of it all. Abiding, staying grounded in God's love, and living out that love in the concrete, real world of our life together. When we are doing that, everything else will flow from it.