

May 13, 2012 / Eastertide / 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 (Chapters 14-17). Jesus has just spoken of himself as the vine, his disciples, his community, as the branches. That is the over-arching symbol for everything he is talking about in this section. As we "abide" in him, we bear "much fruit". The branches draw nourishment and produce fruit because of their connection to the vine. As Jesus' community, as we dwell in Jesus, we dwell in God and God in us. This inter-dwelling is at the heart of who Jesus is in John's gospel, and it has the nature, the energy, the activity of love.

As God has loved him, so Jesus has loved his disciples. "Abide in my love," he says. Stay grounded in my love, which is also God's love. That is how the life of the vine flows into the branches and how the fruitfulness of our lives happens. This is the activity of what we call the inward journey, the practices that help us remain, abide, or dwell in God's love. It is the attention we give daily to our relationship with God. The spiritual life is not about obsessing over our imperfections or shortcomings. It is not about "spiritual achievement" through anxious "spiritual work". It is about letting our lives open to and become rooted in love, and letting that love heal, transform, and fill us little by little. Put another way, the inward journey is how we let God love us, how we practice the gift of God's love. Then it can become the bearing of fruit, the outward journey of the ways we relate to others and the things we feel called and gifted to do for the world.

"If you keep my commandments," says Jesus, "you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in God's love." We might hear this as, "I will love you IF you do what I tell you to do!" That would be **CONDITIONAL LOVE**, love that depends on how we act, whether we are "good" or not. Most of us have had enough of that kind of love, which is contingent upon whether we meet someone's expectations or approval. 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 open to the flow of God's love into our

lives and through us into the world. It's like canoeing a stream. Staying with the flow of the current makes it easy. Going against it can be so difficult that you can't get anywhere. The word "keep" (*tereo*) means paying attention to, or setting one's heart on something. 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. Giving attention to love, taking to heart the call to love keeps us open to 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. It is not the sentimental and heavily emotional kind of love that saturates 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. It is love that is always asking, "What does it mean to love in THIS situation?" It is loving that seeks the well-being, strength, health, and freedom of the other, not to make others dependent upon us or conform to our ideas of what they should be or do. It is loving that seeks to make able, not to enable.

Second, I think this kind of love does, and needs to, include, for lack of a better term, deep spiritual affection. Early in John's gospel we read that God loved the world so much that God gave the Son (3:16). There is a profound affection that is part of God's love for us. It is the love of the Creator for the creation. We see it in Jesus as he looks compassionately on the needs of people, both physical and spiritual, and as Jesus looks at the creation around us and the lessons it teaches us (Matt. 6:25-34). It is to be the basic way we regard others and the world, loving the world with God's own love. This means seeing one another in the light of God's love for us all. Loving the world with the love of God is honoring and respecting all of life, which, like me, is created and loved by God.

Endeavoring in this way of life leads to 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 the joy of his own 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. It is not a joy that depends on getting something out of it or having things go, in our view, the right way. It is the joy of discovering, growing

in, and living the life of love for its own sake, its own reward.

Jesus now returns to the same theme, with a new 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, or giving, his life for the sake of his disciples and the world. This is also to be the pattern of his followers' lives. Jesus teaches this throughout the gospels--living our lives for the sake of others and the world. It means not clinging to our lives in a possessive way, but opening our lives to a wider belonging. It is not so much about taking great heroic actions as it is about a continual way of living that benefits others and the world.

I think for us today this means 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 is in harmony with the reality that we are not separate, isolated selves, but are 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—our *niche*, as it were--that opens for us the life of joy. This is laying down or giving our lives for others.

As we endeavor in this kind of life--rooted in God's love in Jesus and striving in love--we are "friends (*philo*) 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 a creative 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 prior 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. And it is this friendship in and with Jesus that keeps us abiding in God's love as the source of our lives and our missions.

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 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 take the shape of responding to that call. 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 endures will be every thought, word, or action arising out of love in the service of life. 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, and to the things we feel God has called us to do, 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.