

**John 15:9–17 “As the Father loves....”**

<sup>9</sup> *As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.* <sup>10</sup> *If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.* <sup>11</sup> *“I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.* <sup>12</sup> *This is my commandment: love one another as I love you.* <sup>13</sup> *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.* <sup>14</sup> *You are my friends if you do what I command you.* <sup>15</sup> *I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.* <sup>16</sup> *It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.* <sup>17</sup> *This I command you: love one another.*

**Context**

This gospel continues the pericope begun last week (John 15:1-8) that begins “*I am the true vine...*” The gospel is part of the larger “Farewell Discourse” that occurs during the evening when Jesus gathered with his apostles for the “Last Supper” before his passion and death. Some point from last week’s notes are:

- When Jesus speaks of himself as the vine, then, his words are not only self-revelatory, but are revelatory of the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and the community in the life of faith as well. All three elements—gardener, vine, and branches—are essential to the production of fruit.
- The disciples are cautioned to always remain in Jesus (v.4) where the vine grower can prune (purify, cleanse) so that the branch may bear more fruit.
- The “tools of the trade” for cutting and pruning are “*the words that I spoke to you*” (v.3)
- The emphasis is on the bearing of fruit. That is the only reason for growing a vine; as Ezekiel pointed out long before, a vine does not yield timber (Ezek. 15). In a vineyard fruitfulness is not simply desirable; it is imperative; that is the whole point of the vineyard; it is what the vineyard is for. Pruning is resorted to [in order to] ensure that this takes place. Left to itself a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth.
- Those who so remain in Christ and have Christ remaining in them keep on bearing fruit in quantity. Verse 5 concludes with an emphatic declaration of human helplessness apart from Christ. In isolation from him no spiritual achievement is possible.
- In the v.8 Jesus makes it clear that “*By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*” *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – For the greater glory of God

There are many commentators who do not divide the reading (John 15:1-7) in the way the Lectionary does for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Sundays of Easter. Gail O’Day sees a strong linguistic connections that should stay together and proposes these verses always be kept together

<sup>7</sup> *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you.*

<sup>8</sup> *By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.* <sup>9</sup> *As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.*

It is the linguistic continuity provided by the words “remain” (*meno*), “bear much fruit” (*karpos polys*) both leading to “love” (*agapē*). All of this points to a connection between the branch and the vines, between believers and Jesus, Jesus’ word, and Jesus’ love.

On a final language note, throughout these verses, the “you” is plural –always referring to the community of believers.

## Commentary

*As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love.* From the obligations placed upon his disciples (vv.1-8) Jesus turns to his love for them. He first tells them that his love for them is like the Father's love for him. Then he commands them to continue in his love, suggesting that it is possible for people to live without being mindful of Christ's love for them and so break the closeness of the fellowship. Jesus commands them not to do this.

The words *agapao/ agapē* (love), did not appear in vv. 1-8, but are found 9 times in vv.9-17. These words are prominent throughout the Farewell Discourse (John 13-17) with the verbal form occurring 24 times in those chapters (contrasted with 13 times in the rest of the book) and the noun form occurring 6 times in those chapters (and only once in the remainder of the book).

This verb in our text refer to:

- God's love for Jesus (v. 9, see also 17:23, 24, 26)
- Jesus' love for his followers (vv. 9, 12, see also 13:34)
- The disciples' love for one another (vv. 12, 17, see also 13:34-35)

The noun refers to:

- Jesus' love (v. 9, 10)
- The Father's love (v. 10)
- Human (Jesus') love that lays down one's life for another (v. 13)

And it is not just these words. Closely related to *agapao/ agape* in John are *phileo/philos* (vv. 13, 14, 15). In other words, in these few verses there is a lot of emphasis on "love." While there are some who want to point to a difference between *agapē* and *philos*, Gail O'Day [758] writes:

The Fourth Gospel uses the two Greek verbs for "love" (*agapao and phileo*) interchangeably (cf., eg., 13:2 and 20:2; 5:20 and 10:17), so when Jesus speaks of friends [*philos*] here, he is really saying "those who are loved" (cf. the description of Lazarus at 11:3, 11)... A comparison of 14:15 and 21 with 15:14 suggests that to be Jesus' friend and to love Jesus are synonymous, because both are defined as keeping Jesus' commandments.

But have you noticed the nature of "love" that is the focus? What is absent in these verses are any words about the disciples loving Jesus or God. (Although such images are found in 8:42; 14:15, 21, 28; 16:27). This is not to say that is not important – clearly one of the great commandments is to love God. But here in the Farewell Discourse, on the eve of Jesus' departure from their lives in the manner in which they are accustomed, the emphasis in our text is on God's love for the (us) and their (our) love for one another.

Stoffregen cites Philip Yancy (*What's So Amazing about Grace?* 68-69) writing about this:

Not long ago I received in the mail a postcard from a friend that had on it only six words, "I am the one Jesus loves." I smiled when I saw the return address, for my strange friend excels at these pious slogans. When I called him, though, he told me the slogan came from the author and speaker Brennan Manning. At a seminar, Manning referred to Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, identified in the Gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'" "

What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as "the one Jesus loves"? How differently would I view myself at the end of a day?

Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, etc.) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?

To quote O'Day [759] again: "Jesus reminds the disciples (including the readers) that their place with him is the result of his initiative, not theirs; relationship with Jesus is ultimately a result of God's grace (cf. 6:37-39, 44)." This a reminder that in the reality of the post-Resurrection world, when secular concerns and challenges brings them to edge of the strength and perseverance, they are loved.

### **Keep My Commandments.**

There is something very practical here: *If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love.* Many suggest that this is the practical answer of how one remains in Christ and in his Word, bears fruit, and remains in the love of Jesus. These things are not some mystical experience. It is simple obedience. It is when we keep Christ's commandments that we abide in his love. Once again appeal is made to Christ's own example. He kept the Father's commandments and thus abides continually in the Father's love. And it is not a blind following of the commands, it to "listen through" to the deeper love that resides within and throughout the commandments.

What commandment from the Father did Jesus keep? His Father's commandments seems to specifically refer to Jesus' death; the laying down of his life, so that the world may know that he loves the Father (see 14:31 and 10:18). More generally, the Father's commands control everything that Jesus says (see 12:49-50). We are to keep Jesus' commandment which is to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Just as Jesus' obedience to his Father's command is his witness to the world about his love for his Father, so our obedience to Jesus' command is our witness to the world about our love for Jesus.

The "commands" of v.10 are reduced to one, the command to love one another as Christ has loved them. This is the "new commandment" of 13:34. If we love, in the sense in which Jesus uses the term, we need no other rule.

The word translated "keep" (*tereo*, v. 10) carries more the sense of "holding dear" than simple (blind) obedience. In a love relationship, one should want to do what the other asks. Such obedience isn't a burden, but a free and joyful response of love. But to what end?

The next verse (v.11) seems to answer this implied question: *"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."* This idea of "completeness" (*plērōthē*) has appeared all along the way of the broader Farewell Discourse. The word comes from the Greek *plēroō* "fill completely, fulfill, bring to completion, realize." Jesus' words about joy complement his words to the disciples about their joy in 14:28. *"You heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I will come back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I."*

The unity and mutuality that love makes possible, symbolized by the unity of vine and branches, leads to full joy (cf. 3:29-30; 16:24; 17:13).

### **The Greatest Love**

In v.13 we come to the greatest love. Morris [598-9] comments succinctly and beautifully: "There is no love greater than that of one who lays down his life for others. Anything else must be less. This is the supreme test of love. In the context this must refer primarily to the love of Jesus shown on the cross. There he laid down his life on behalf of his friends. Some have raised the question whether the love that dies for enemies is not greater than that which is concerned for friends, but that is not before us here. In this passage Jesus is not comparing the love that sacrifices for enemies with that which sacrifices for friends. He is in the midst of friends and is speaking only of friends. With respect to them he is saying that

one cannot have greater love than to die for them. When it is a question of enemies Jesus did in fact die for them (Rom. 5:10). And as Loyd says, ‘in truth love has sunk below its proper level if it begins to ask who is my friend and who my enemy. Love gives, and gives everything, for all men.’ That is the thought of this verse. Jesus gives everything, even life itself, for others. There is no greater proof of love.

### **Friends, No Longer Servants**

Here in John 15:15 we hear “*I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father.*”

He has not actually used this term of them previously, though it is certainly implied. As pointed out last week in the outline of this section of this gospel, Jesus is speaking to the disciples in the shadow of the Last Supper. Recall a key moment from the account of John 13:

*<sup>12</sup> So when he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, “Do you realize what I have done for you? <sup>13</sup> You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. <sup>14</sup> If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet.*

The characteristic of the slave that Jesus picks out is that he does not know his master’s business. The slave is no more than an instrument. It is not for him to enter judiciously into the purposes of his owner. His task is simply to do what he is told. But this is not the pattern of relationship between Jesus and his disciples. He has called them “*friends.*” He has kept nothing back from them. He has revealed to them all that the Father has made known to him. This is not a contradiction of 16:12: “*I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now.*” Jesus has taken them into his confidence, but their understanding is not as yet exhaustive. They still have much to learn, and Jesus will disclose it in due time through the Spirit.

### **The Commission as Friends**

The language of friendship is immediately contextualized by language of election in v.16: *It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.*” As Fr. Raymond Brown points out [683], this language of election does not speak of the election of the Twelve because there is no indication anywhere in the Farewell Discourse of the number and composition of the circle that is present with Jesus on this last evening. Rather, Jesus reminds the disciples (including the readers) that their place with him is the result of his initiative, not theirs; relationship with Jesus is ultimately a result of God’s grace.

Jesus follows this reminder of election with a reminder of commission and vocation (v. 16b). “Appointed” translates the Greek verb *tithēmi*, the verb used in v.13 to speak of laying down one’s life. This verb thus depicts the disciples’ commission as grounded in Jesus’ gift of his life. The description of the disciples’ commission returns to the agricultural imagery with which John 15 began (“bear fruit”).

“*I appointed you to go...*” bespeaks of a missionary idea. The disciples are commissioned by Jesus to go and do works of love (cf. 17:18; 20:21). Jesus describes the disciples’ works as “*fruit that will remain*” (*menō*), suggesting that their works, too, will attest to the abiding presence of and union with God and Jesus. Brown holds that this verse may also contain an allusion to the lasting character of the church as evidence of Jesus’ continuing presence.

As a final guarantee of the community’s union with God and Jesus, Jesus repeats his promise of answered prayer: “*whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.*” Jesus prays to God with full confidence that he is heard and will be answered and he promises the disciples that they can pray with that same confidence. They thus share fully in Jesus’ relationship with God, further evidence that they are Jesus’ “friends.”

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## Scripture

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