

April 28, 2024
John 15: 1-8

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Some of my early memories were hot summers, visiting my grandparents in Texas. In that hot Texas climate, and my brother and I enjoyed putting on our swimsuits and playing in the sprinkler. At age four, I had one of those navy -blue, one-piece swimsuits with a white skirt. I could make the stiff little skirt stick out, like petals of a flower. It inspired me to create a poem/choreography. I remember showing my grandma: “I am a little daisy, Petals opened wide. If someone comes and picks me, I will die, inside.” Somehow, as a preschooler, but I understood that we have to be kind to one another, and connected with empathy, or we die inside.

This little ditty is relevant to today’s scripture pointing to our grounding in God and connection to one another in the image of life in the vine of Christ. There is life in connection. Plucked from that connection, we die. Ultimately, though the world often suggests otherwise, the greatest power is not in wealth or security. It’s through relationship, love. Mr. (Fred) Rogers said that “Love is at the root of everything: all learning, all parenting, all relationships. Love, or the lack of it.”

Our scripture readings in this Eastertide emphasize Love: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” For the original hearers of John’s Gospel, there were deep divisions within and around the early church. As much as has changed in the world from that time, some things seem to be similar, and that is the fear and isolation that happens when we see ourselves as separate and apart from one another, and God. The late, Rev. William Sloane Coffin expressed it like this:

“ . . . I’m convinced that the manifestation of our present evils, political corruption, ecological devastation, hating each other based on religion, race, or sexual orientation-- are all symptoms of the greatest disease facing humanity: our profound and painful sense of disconnection. . . . There are no smaller packages in the world than people wrapped up in themselves. If the US has lost a sense of community, it’s because millions of us don’t love very well.”

Friends, the good news for today is that part of why we gather as a congregation, is precisely because we are not small , packages, wrapped up in ourselves. We have “life in the Vine”: expansive, generous, abundant life, centered in God.

We are called to witness to God’s love in broken world, and we can live boldly. We can risk of love, because of the love that God gives us. Remember Holy Week, and the intimacy of footwashing? Jesus shows us the kind of intimacy with God and others that embodies “Perfect love casts out fear.”

Don’t let the word “perfect” throw us off track. This passage is not saying that we have to achieve a polished perfection in order to please God. In the Greek, the word for *perfect* is *teleios*, meaning “finished, accomplished.” The finishing of our hearts, the courage that we are growing into is actually completed in God’s grace. It reminds me of that old saying “Please be patient, God isn’t finished with me, yet.” God’s love holds us, and that same love is rounding our edges, and finishing us in grace.

It seems that in this season, we are being constantly reminded of transition and change. Kids grow and graduate. People move. Pastors leave and new ones come. National elections suggest change and more change. Sometimes the transitions cause us to fear.

Fear must be soothed out by love. A heart full of love has a purpose. A heart full of love mirrors the heart of Christ: It serves God, and grows in trust. We need not fear, but actively love, and trust.

Jesus words in John 15 make it clear: keep my commandment to love one another, as I have loved you. Then, your fear will subside, and joy will be complete. Love is not an abstract concept here. Loving one another is about caring for all, especially those who are most vulnerable. All those quilts, loving made are a wonderful, tangible reminder of God's love with the most vulnerable.

The love that God is growing in us, is what gives us courage to take the loving risks needed to care for others.

Many people say they are spiritual and not religious, and they avoid organized religion, believing that the flaws and hypocrisy in some institutions sully spirituality. It is true that the Communion table itself has sometimes been a place where doctrines have excluded and divided people rather than binding up what is broken, rather than freely giving the bread of life.

We don't do this by the sheer willpower. We do it with God's love in us. God's grace makes possible the kind of community that Jesus calls us to. Whatever has come before, today, we are invited to be in community with others in a way that puts love first. Our aim is to become aware of God's love in us every day. That will change our behavior and our choices.

How do we deepen our ability to love that way? Here are some practical tips:

First of all, we trust that God is working in us and through us, and we cultivate a daily spiritual practice. Find what works best for you. Gardening? Quilting? Tai Chi? Making art, craft, or music? Silent meditation? Gardening? Walking, dancing, or swimming meditation? Creating models or math problems? m Spiritual journaling? Reading spiritual books? Whatever you are passionate and dedicated to, invite God to be part of that, each time.

My hope is that you find the support you need to deepen whatever practice you have. Whatever helps to remind you that YOU are God's beloved—that's what we want more of. The more we turn toward God in our thoughts and actions, the more we will activate our love for others. We can help one another to continue to find ways to serve others. Maybe it's taking a deep breath and being more present with your child, partner or neighbor. Maybe it's working with the Earth Camp or the Sanctuary committee, of helping with the children in the Roots program, or Eucharistic ministry.

But, friends, we gather around a table of welcome. The communion table represents Divine Love, and grace freely given to us, for nurture of our souls, and God's beloved community. There is room at this table for those who dream and those who are despairing. There is room for the seeker, the sorrowful, the confident, and the lost. There is room here for young, old, wise, foolish, the immigrant, the citizen, , the LGBTQ+, and the straight.

At God's table, there is always enough to go around. There is always room for you. Be strong and be humble. They are not mutually exclusive. Spread your banquet before someone who can't repay it: That's our living in grace.

As we hold bread in our hands today, I invite us to think of these words by activist Father Daniel Berrigan:

Sometime in your life,/hope that you might see one starved man,/the look on his face/when the bread finally arrives./Hope that you might have bought it or baked it/or even kneaded it yourself./For that look on his face,/for your meeting his eyes across a piece of bread, you might be willing to lose a lot, or suffer a lot,/or die a little, even.