

Easter VI Year B: 5 /6 May 2018
St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY
The Rev. Gary Cyr, Rector

**We are no longer simply to serve one another,
but to love one another.**

Acts 10:44-48
1 John 5:1-6
John 15:9-17
Psalm 98

"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father"

What is it to love another? It can all be more than a little confusing since in the English language the word "love" is applied to a variety of concerns and situations. Is the love for my pet equal to the love I have for my significant other? Is a parent's love for their child on par with their love for a sports team? I hear people express their love for certain beverages or restaurants; for their brand of automobile or favorite vacation spot. Are those the same kind of love as that for one another? It's the same word used in each situation – l.o.v.e. – so it all becomes a bit blurry for me: language.

There is an old film entitled "Love is a Many Splendored Thing." And indeed, it is, or so it seems to be in our English language. Fortunately, Biblical Greek has at least five different words to convey what we say in one; and today we hear two of those words, though only in one instance is it directly translated as love.

Today's gospel reading is a continuation of the story about the vine and branches where we learn that we abide in Christ as Christ abides in us. We also heard of pruning and casting off the dead weight, the suckers, if you will, that draw nourishment from the roots yet produce nothing. It's a simple metaphor regarding those beliefs and practices that distort or disrupt our relationship with God in Christ. There are many things that prevent us from loving God and receiving God's love for us, and those obstacles need to be pruned and casted off. Whatever

prevents us from loving God is unnecessary and even superfluous. Now we better understand why that is.

Throughout this text, the Greek word we hear translated as love in English is *agapaō*, or more familiarly rendered agape. Some of you may recall that we held an agape service on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week where we served one another by washing each other's hands and sharing in a simple common meal. This communal relationship that the word entails is embodied in Jesus' choosing of his followers. They didn't seek him out so much as Jesus picked them out of the crowd. And now, Jesus is no longer referring to them as servants but friends. This is where we encounter the second Greek word in the passage that references and means "love."

In the passage I led off with, the word friend is a translation of the Greek word *philos* which comes from the verb "to love" or *phileō*. It is a deep regard and affection for the other. When coupled with *agapaō* we better understand the depth of indwelling that Jesus is speaking of when he says to his followers I abide in you as the Father abides in me. Jesus' death and resurrection is the ultimate act of surrender one can do for those one loves. This kind of love is primarily interested in the good of the other person rather than one's own welfare. It transforms and transcends everything. This kind of love is almost unfathomable. Yet it lies at the heart of God's inner life as Trinity – the Creator, the Redeemer, the Sustainer – and who we are called to emulate.

When Jesus says "I am the vine and you are the branches," it's this deep indwelling and mutual abiding that he is speaking of. This love is the birthright of faith such that the love we give to others is simply the love we have first received. That is what Jesus is telling his followers. God's love is freely given, and for those of us who have put on Christ in baptism, we must now love with equal and radical mutuality. Yet so many things, so many beliefs, so many biases and prejudices get in the way of such Christian love. These are the "things" that we must prune away and toss into the cleansing fire of faith.

It's easy to love those who agree with us. It's much harder to love those who hold vastly different opinions and attitudes than we do. It is a true challenge to love those who don't love us. Yet God's love is not predicated on whether we agree or even like each other. Christian love

is work, no question about it. But we know that Christ abides in us. That we abide in Christ. It's that truth that we dwell in and are expected to share with one another, especially with those who have yet to feel or experience God's abiding love and grace. Each act of kindness, each gesture of generosity, every time we forgive an offense or pardon a slight, we give birth to this indwelling exemplified in the Trinity.

Love one another as I have loved you, Jesus commands. Jesus, who bore the cost of true discipleship so that we might be free from death caused by sin, is simply asking us to forfeit that which hinders our participating in Jesus' sacrifice and dwelling in God's love and presence.

We are no longer simply to serve one another, but to love one another. Not judge one another or measure each other according to OUR own standards or stipulations, but by God's standard of mutuality and radical acceptance. Imagine what our society would be like if we just loved in such a way. Imagine that God is constantly at work seeking to bring about this self-giving mutuality and that we, like the disciples, are called to participate in this mission. That is what ministry entails and what each of us, who have put on Christ, are invited to participate in.

Love may indeed be a many splendored thing, but God's love abides in us as we abide in God. May our lives reflect such generous and abundant love.