

## ABIDE IN JESUS' LOVE

John 15:9-17

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

May 6, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Sixth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 15, verses 9 through 17. It is on page 764 of the pew Bible.

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus gave some final instructions to his disciples. Even though he knows he will rise again and will speak with these disciples again, there's something about knowing you are about to die that focuses your attention on the most important things. And this passage is part of a long discourse Jesus had with his disciples that evening.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 15, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

<sup>12</sup> "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup> Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. <sup>14</sup> You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup> No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. <sup>16</sup> You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. <sup>17</sup> These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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If you were here last Sunday you may notice that this continues right where Jesus left off, and it continues his themes of abiding and bearing fruit. In fact, if you all didn't have such good memories, I could probably just preach the same exact sermon and it would fit perfectly well. But, as it is, someone would say, "Hey, you said that last week. You're just being lazy." And I would have no excuse.

But you will notice that some of the themes from the last few weeks are the same. That's unavoidable. One of them is the idea of abiding, but there's a subtle shift from abiding in Jesus, the true vine (15:1), to abiding in his love (15:9). And then the other theme that we've heard about recently is the concept of love—specifically the Bible's kind of love. So these themes are similar to the last few weeks, but unless you've completely mastered them now, it's worth hearing them again.

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It starts with the concept of love. Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you” (15:9). It starts with God’s love—first the love that exists within the Trinity, and then that love is manifested toward us through Jesus Christ. Then Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us (15:12).

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So we should probably remind ourselves what love is, because the word is used in many different ways. The world might say, “Love is my religion” (Ziggy Marley). But what does that mean? Does it mean affection? Does it mean romance? Does it mean just being really nice to everyone? Sometimes, according to the world’s definition, love is used to justify leaving the people we are committed to, because we have “fallen in love” with someone else or maybe just because we have fallen out of love. This is really quite silly and has nothing at all to do with the Bible’s kind of love. In fact, it’s the complete opposite. It’s a forsaking of love. There are so many different kinds of love that we should always clarify what kind we’re talking about.

There are several Greek words that are sometimes translated into English with our word “love.” Depending on who you ask, some people will say there are four, or six, or seven, or even eight different Greek words for love. But the good news for you is that I’m going to pretend there are only three, because those are the only ones I understand, and only two of them are even used in the New Testament. The three words are ἀγάπη (*agapē*), φιλία (*philia*), and ἔρως (*erōs*). And they all have different meanings.

First, ἔρως, because I kind of just want to get it out of the way. This is the one of the three that never actually occurs in the Bible, and its meaning is quite different from the other two. It describes romantic feelings. And you might recognize some English words that are related to it. It’s that special feeling that is most appropriate between husband and wife. It’s a good thing when it exists in the proper context, but it can be destructive when it creeps up in the wrong places. And the only reason I mention this word is because it’s significant that it’s never used in the Bible. Even when the apostle Paul says, “Husbands, love your wives” (Eph. 5:25; Col. 3:19), he does not use the word ἔρως, even though it was available to him in the Greek language. Instead, he uses the word ἀγάπη, because he’s not talking about an emotional or even a romantic thing. So ἔρως is romantic love, and the most important thing to know about this word is that it’s not in the Bible.

The other two words are φιλία and ἀγάπη, and their meanings overlap a little bit, but φιλία has more to do with affection. There are some English words that are derived from it, like the name of the city Philadelphia, which means “brotherly love” or “brotherly affection,” from φιλία, meaning “love” or “affection,” and “ἀδελφός” (*adelphos*), meaning “brother.” There’s also “philosophy,” which means “love of wisdom,” and “philology,” which means “love of words.” And you can be glad I don’t have more philology, or I might give you all eight Greek words. But I only have a little bit, so I’m only giving you three. So φιλία has to do with affection. It’s kind of similar to our English word “like,” but it’s a bit stronger, because it includes loving actions in behalf of the person we have affection for.

And then there’s the word ἀγάπη. This is the primary Bible word for love, and it’s the word used exclusively in the text we just read. It refers to self-sacrificial love. And I don’t know if this meaning is really intrinsic to the Greek language; probably not. Rather, we get the definition from the way the Bible uses it.

Jesus defines this love when he says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (15:13). This is, of course, the most loving thing you can do for a person. And we remember that Jesus says this on the night before his crucifixion. He’s about to practice what he preaches. Within twenty-four hours he will lay down his life, not only for his friends, but also for his enemies, so that they might also become his friends. This is the height of ἀγάπη love.

Ἀγάπη love means self-sacrifice, regardless of whether or not the person who does the loving has any affection for the recipient of the love and regardless of whether or not the recipient deserves the love. Now sometimes there is affection there, like how the Father loves the Son, or how Jesus loves his friends, or how a husband loves his wife. But the love is not actually based on affection or any feelings. It is based on the character of the person who loves and the command of God. So when we say that God loves us, or when we say that “God loved the world” (3:16), it’s not because of anything in us. It doesn’t even have anything to do with God’s affection for us, because, before God loved us, we were his enemies. And this actually means that God’s love is stronger than we initially thought. In Romans 5 Paul says,

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6-8)

Then he goes on to describe us as enemies of God (Rom. 5:10).

So the depth of God’s love for us is not seen in his affection for us, but in the fact that while we were enemies—while he was angry with us concerning sin, and while we were actually under his wrath—Christ died for us.

It’s hard enough as it is to die for a person, even when we like that person. But what if you don’t like the person? What if the person is just totally unlovable and does not deserve your love? Dying for that person is much more difficult and requires much more love. That is the love God demonstrates for us.

So you see that this kind of love is not a feeling. It’s an action. It is self-sacrificial action that pays no attention to our feelings and even persists in spite of feelings to the contrary.

And this is important. If this kind of love were a feeling, we would be dealing with some strange and troubling passages, because Jesus often speaks of this love in the past tense. Think about this with me. He says, “As the Father loved me, so have I loved you.” Your Bible probably has the phrase “has loved,” but the word “has” isn’t there in the Greek. It’s just a simple past tense: “As the Father loved me, so I loved you.” And that sounds a little strange to us, because we’re conditioned to think of love as a feeling. But if this kind of love were a feeling, Jesus’ statement would mean that God the Father *used* to love Jesus but no longer does. And it would mean that Jesus *used* to love his disciples but no longer does. But that, clearly, is not what Jesus means. And John 3:16 would be very troubling too, because it says, “For God so loved the world ...” If love were a feeling, it would mean that God *used* to love the world but no longer does. But love is not a feeling. It is an action, and it is entirely appropriate to speak of actions in the past tense. So God loved the world by sending his Son. And Jesus speaks of the concrete ways the Father loved him and the concrete ways he loved his disciples.

So ἀγάπη love refers to self-sacrificial action regardless of one’s feelings.

This kind of love is natural to God, but unnatural to us. That's why it always begins with God. It is God's nature to love. 1 John 4:8 states it simply and profoundly: "God is love." Love is his primary and defining characteristic. So he created the world as an expression of his love, knowing full well that man, the object of his love, would corrupt everything and require God to go above and beyond, sending his own Son to redeem our corrupt and fallen race. And his love for us in sending Jesus Christ is not based on anything good in us. Rather it is based on the character of God as love and our need as sinners. He loves because it is his nature. "God is love."

But this kind of love is unnatural to us. When I think about this, I realize how unworthy I am to give this sermon. I stand before you not as a person who has mastered it and can give you the secret of how to do it. Instead I am reminded of how I have utterly failed. I've known for a long time that I am a selfish person, but there are certain events that reveal to me the depth of my selfishness. When you get married and suddenly are required to always place a particular person's interests ahead of your own, you realize how impossible that is for us. It's just not in our nature to do so. It is God's nature, but it is not ours.

And then this realization becomes even more profound when you have a child, because they need everything from you. A wife can take care of herself. A baby can't. Even though a dad is usually tasked with a minority of the responsibility, it still reveals how selfish I am. So when the baby wants his diaper changed, he starts to cry a little bit. But I'm watching baseball, so I say to myself, "I'll change him after this inning." But then the Twins' pitchers can't get anyone out and the inning just goes on and on. So he cries a bit louder, and the Twins keep walking guys, and pretty soon I'm just mad at the world. And all of this because I want to change the diaper when it's convenient for me. I'm pretty sure that if I was the one with a dirty diaper, I would change it right away. But when it's someone else, I try to delay it until it's convenient for me. This proves to me that I am not love. God is love, but I am not.

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This kind of love is unnatural to us, so Jesus tells us to abide in his love (15:9). Being a Christian doesn't reform our old, sinful nature. We are still just as sinful as ever. That won't change until death and the resurrection of the dead. But we do receive a new nature that lives alongside the old nature. This new nature abides in Christ's love, and it loves as Jesus loved, even while our old nature persists in selfish sin. This new nature actually delights in God's commandments. And Jesus' commandment is that we love as he has loved us.

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Now we generally don't like commandments. The word "love" has a good reputation. But the word "commandment" doesn't. When someone says, "I love you," that is generally received well. But if someone says, "I command you," we don't like that so much. But this whole thing about love and commanding us to love one another is for the purpose of joy. Jesus says, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (15:11). And we heard from the epistle lesson in 1 John that "his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). That's not how we usually think of commandments. And if it weren't for the sure and certain forgiveness of our sins, God's commandments would be an incredible burden. But with the complete forgiveness of all our sins, the commandments are not burdensome, at least, not to the new man.

## ABIDE IN JESUS' LOVE (John 15:9-17)

Now I don't know if you're going to like this or not. Maybe it will seem perfectly obvious, or maybe it will sound totally unrealistic, but according to Jesus, the most joyful life consists in receiving Christ's love and keeping his commandment to love one another as he has loved us. And that means unconditional and self-sacrificial love. Now if love is not unconditional—if God's love depends on some worthiness in us, or if our love depends on the worthiness of someone else—then this doesn't work, because we would find excuses not to love, and we would live in constant uncertainty, not knowing if God still loves us in the midst of our failures.

But love always starts with God. It is the expression of his nature. So his love comes to us before we even begin to love. He does not require us to love first in order to earn his love. And his love is unconditional. Since God's love is always unconditional and self-sacrificial, it does not come and go when we fail to love those around us. It endures, despite our unworthiness. And this is the kind of love he commands us to have for one another. And in this Jesus promises the greatest joy. Fullness of joy consists in receiving Christ's love and keeping his commandment to love others as he has loved us.

If we receive his love, but do not keep his commandments, then we do not abide in his love, and we do not have the fullness of joy. And if we had not received his love, but were still commanded to love regardless, we would have no joy but only fear. But, in fact, Jesus has loved us, and he has loved us unconditionally and sacrificially. So we have joy, and this joy is most full when we love one another. His commandments are not burdensome, because his love frees us to love one another without having to look over our shoulder to see if God is pleased with us. God is pleased with us on account of Jesus' sacrifice for us. And this is God's joy. Sacrificing himself for us is his greatest joy (Heb. 12:2), and we find fullness of joy in receiving this love from him and loving one another. This makes no sense to our sinful flesh, because sacrificial love will not gratify our selfish desires. So it may not be pleasant—this kind of love was certainly not pleasant for Jesus when he suffered deep anguish—but Jesus promises joy in it, and if anyone knows what he's talking about in this respect, it's Jesus.

Jesus is the one who joyfully laid down his own life for his friends. This is the greatest expression of love, and this is the source of all joy. May we abide in his love and experience his joy, both today and forever. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.