

A Friend Indeed

John 15:1-17

Fifth Sunday in Lent/ 21st March 2021

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). Vine and branches together. A beautiful image of our relationship with Christ. If we place these well-loved verses within the broader context of John’s Gospel, we see that they are part of what scholars call the Farewell Discourse, Jesus’ final teaching to his disciples before his departure, before his crucifixion. These discourses take place around a table, the Passover table. And it’s there at table, in community, that Jesus gives us his instructions, these commandments, including a new one. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:34-35). This commandment is so important for Jesus he says it not once but twice, driving home the vine-branch image of us being related, connected, abiding together in the Lord and the Lord in us. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command” (Jn. 15:12-13)—meaning we are his friends when we love one another. “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” (Jn. 15:15).

What does love look like? That’s the question we’ve been exploring these weeks of Lent. Just look at Jesus and allow this scene to seep into your soul, and touch your heart, and move you deeply. Take his words into your body, consume them like bread and wine, and allow them to nourish and shape your lives. For we have been loved by a love that will never let us go.¹ Love incarnate. In the Word made flesh we have seen and still see that God seeks to dwell among us full of grace and truth, that God comes close to us in Jesus, the Christ, to love, not condemn, and to love us back into relationship in order that love can send us deeper into relationship with one another (John 1:1-18; John 3).

I imagine Jesus saying: You have seen my love. You know how much I love you, how far I will go for you, the depths of pain and suffering that I will endure for you. I will lay down my life for you. That’s how much you mean to me. How much I love and have loved you. Because you are my friends. Disciples, sure, students of the Way, but not servants. You are my *friends*. And you can tell that you are my friends—and others will know that you’re friends of mine—when you *love* one another, when you *agape* one another. And you can love one another, show *agape*, other-oriented love, serve the needs of the other, care, support, and protect the other, even make sacrifices for the other, because I am in you, abiding in you, like a vine participating in the life of its branches. Yes, you can live this way when you stay close to me, my friend. I am in you and you are in me.

Can you sense the relational, welcoming quality of these words? The individual is in relationship with Jesus and individuals are in relationship with others in the *ekklesia*, in the church, in the community. Jesus’ relationship with God and the Spirit sets the pattern for our relationship with God and our relationships with one another. Our life together as a people of

God, then, bears the semblance of the divine dance of relationship, of life together in community. The Hebrew scriptures talk about covenant, the unbreakable relationship between God and God's people. Similarly, Jesus talks about vine and branch and the image becomes even more intimate and personal. Just as the branch draws life from the vine so we draw our life from our relationship to Jesus. This is the language of mutuality, dependence, cooperation, connection which, inevitably bears fruit when we abide in Christ.

Abide. This is one of John's favorite words. It's used in sixteen of the twenty-one chapters on John and used forty times. Abide. Remain. Stay. Stay near Jesus, our friend, and you will see the fruit. You won't have to work at it, it will come naturally as his life flows through you. Our lives will be shaped by the life of our Friend and when we know we are his friends and when we befriend him and allow him to befriend us then the church—his community—will take on the life of its Lord, the Lord who is consumed with this love.

As this happens, the church reflects the life of its Lord and fulfills its purpose. If it doesn't, then what is the church good for? Contemporary New Testament scholar Jaime Clark-Soles get straight to the point. She says, "If we are not a community marked by friendship and love, then we should close up shop."² And friendship here is more than being nice or polite to one another. It's radical friendship. This friendship is holy, it's a means of grace and extends grace, it's built on trust, acceptance, support, encouragement, as well as challenge, vulnerability, hospitality, assurance, safety. Holy friendship suffers with and sometimes for the sake of the other. It's a source of life and hope and healing. A friend reminds us who we are and whose we are. And the church lives this way because it is rooted and grounded in Christ's love, in the love of God. For this love is the ground underneath our feet. Friendship and love.

Over the past year I've done a lot of thinking about the nature of the church scattered and apart yet united by the Spirit. As I shared in the *Messenger*, Dorothy and I are grateful for this church, the kindness and love and genuine care expressed by this congregation over the past year, both toward fellow members of the church but also to the wider needs of the community. This year has been a time of deep soul-searching on so many levels as we sort and sift through our lives, especially in the face of a deathly pandemic. The pandemic has reordered our priorities. It's been, at times, a clarifying experience as we come to grips with what really matters in our lives and what doesn't, what ought to demand our time and attention and need not, who or what requires, needs more love, compassion, forgiveness. I think the same is true for us as a church and it will be interesting to see how the nature of the church, the work, the ministry of the church will be different when it's safe to gather. What will the church look like post-COVID? We already know it will be different. What is essential for us as a church and what isn't? What requires our attention and time and what doesn't? Where are we being summoned to deepen the work of this community that it might be formed and reformed by a deeper love and radical friendship for one another? What will this look like? Perhaps we will move some attention away from the church as an institution and institution building toward building up people, upbuilding one another, our neighbors, in the life of the community. After a long year of forced isolation and separation from friends, neighbors, family, and the members of the church, I have a feeling we have all gained and will return with a renewed appreciation for the church as a community. The loneliness that many have felt this year speaks to the deep human need for connection and community, to be together. I wonder, will this, then, lead to the renewal of the

church, not in terms of numbers but in terms of deeper, life-giving relationship, a deeper fellowship or what the New Testament describes as *koinonia* or community.

Recently, I've gained inspiration and appreciation for the courageous life and witness of Dorothy Day (1897-1980), for she knew something about the healing power of community. Perhaps she has something to teach us as we move into a post-COVID world. Day, a Roman Catholic lay worker, activist, writer, was the founder of the Catholic Worker movement during the Great Depression in the 1930s in New York City. She lived a remarkable life and lived out the gospel with nerve and an enormous amount of love. Her community in New York City was motivated by Matthew 25, provided shelter for the homeless, meals for the hungry, clothes for the naked, it ministered to the sick and dying, advocated for workers' rights and fought against social inequities. Day and her movement were almost a lone voice in the church, both Catholic and Protestant, against racism in American society, and they were among the first to make the connection between racism and economic disparity, an issue that social critics, theorists, and theologians are drawing our attention to once again.³ Day truly believed in the power of love to heal the sin-sick soul. She knew that Jesus' message was radical, disturbing, and difficult, but it was the way, perhaps the only way, to counter what she called "the long loneliness" that comes with modern life. She writes, "We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community."⁴ And at the heart of the Christian community is the love and friendship of Christ, present to us today, as we claim every Sabbath and every time we gather around the Lord's Table and break bread and share a cup and remember him.

In her autobiography, Day wrote, "We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone anymore. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship."⁵ I really like this image. Companionship. A companion is someone with whom we share *pan*, bread. And, oh how we long to be together again, to break bread—really break bread—together, to eat together safely, to gather with our friends around the Lord's Table, our Friend's table, our Friend indeed, in blessed communion, fellowship divine, to know and be known in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:35), and to know again that we are not alone. Vine and branches. This, too, is what love looks like.



Image: Adé Bethune (1914-2002), American Catholic liturgical artist associated with Dorothy Day (1897-1980) and the Catholic Worker Movement.

¹ This is an allusion to the poem (and later hymn) “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” written in 1882 by the Scottish Presbyterian minister George Matheson (1842-1906). See Ian Bradley, ed. *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go: Meditations, Prayers and Poems by George Matheson* (HarperCollins, 1990). Here is a very moving recording of the hymn by the Westminster Choir College <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiZ9xXoZ1Mk>. I referred to this hymn in last week’s sermon [When Jesus Wept](https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/when-jesus-wept/) (<https://catonsvillepres.org/sermons/when-jesus-wept/>).

² Jaime Clark-Soles, *A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel: Reading John for Dear Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 101-102.

³ For a good, basic introduction to Day’s life and witness I recommend my friend Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty’s book *Dorothy Day for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

⁴ Dorothy Day, *A Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (HarperOne, 2009), 286.

⁵ Day, 285.