

Grace and Peace be with you, dear Friends!

Today's gospel follows directly from the imagery we heard last time about God the Vinegrower, Jesus, the vine, and the branches as disciples. These are some of the last words Jesus shares in the upper room before giving up his life.

As I mentioned earlier, the faith community of Saint James said goodbye to two long-time saints of the church this past week. In the midst of life there is death, and for the Christian, new life in resurrection. Jesus is at the center of this belief. And so it is, that Jesus is trying to impart the essence of what he's been teaching and living through his life and ministry.

So we hear an almost circular presentation and re-presentation of his love and call to love all God's people. I say 'all God's people' because as I read the book of Acts, we get scene after scene of the faithful community living out the calling to love and bear fruit. We see how individual disciples have been transformed into ambassadors of Christ, bearing good news and receiving empowerment through Holy Spirit as people are presented with the Word and lives are changed.

I believe it is a necessary requirement of our spiritual lives...that we remain in the Vine, to receive nourishment, equipping and sustenance...able to grow in knowledge, wisdom and love.

Let me share a few key concepts for us to use to anchor our lives in Grace:

ABIDE: Abide in my love (v9). Abide refers to a place to call home... to rest, to be renewed, and to center ourselves. When we center in love, we are not as prone to make ethical decisions out of greed, revenge, or prejudice. When look out at the world from our 'home' place of love, we see with a lens and an ability to make a difference rooted in love.

You are loved unconditionally, now and forever. Abide in that love, draw strength from it every day, rest in it every night. Whatever you're going through right now, of this you can be sure: you are deeply loved by God, and always will be. God will never forsake you.

KEEP: keep my commandments (V10). Jesus certainly spoke of the need to follow God's will and God's way. Jesus re-presented the law given to Moses and boiled it down to this: love God and love your neighbor. Theologian Walter Bruggeman calls this demand of our relationship with God as 'delight of duty'. When God's love touches us, this command becomes our delight. Obedience cannot be separated from grace in our relationship with God. Our Obedience becomes the Gospel; the word lived out in our actions.

JOY: My joy may be in you, and your joy complete (v11). Loving one's neighbor isn't always easy or fun... often it involves hard work. The promise in this verse is that doing the right thing brings satisfaction that is joy. Remember, God is in charge... we may not understand the path, the reason, or the bigger plan or direction, but our trust (faith) in the leading and prompting of God & Spirit brings joy as all is revealed. That's when the singing, praising & shouting has deep meaning!

LOVE: No greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (v13). The word love has many meanings – this time love is about solidarity & faithfulness in the midst of suffering. This is not easy. Many of us would choose comfort and safety to standing next to another enduring harm or difficulty. Christ living within us stretches us to give away the coat we have, give out of everything we have, not just our abundance.

FRIENDS: No longer servants, but friends (v15). When we love our neighbor, when it matters because we have relationship of care and compassion, we have a very different motive and response. If we SEE another as 'OTHER', as stranger, as alien, as foreigner... and not as NEIGHBOR, we have not love.

Jesus shifts this perspective as he says I call you friend. It is not a top-down, master-servant, worthy-not worthy attitude, which is often characterizes majority-minority viewpoints. We are not better than... more loved... more blessed... because of what we have or have done.

This statement is a re-phrasing and re-framing of our empowerment to love as Jesus loves. When we meet any one, we are meeting Jesus. What a friend we have in Jesus, who is at the center of it all.

Friends, take heart! God loves all people, because all people are God's people. There is nothing that will separate us from, unless we choose to unfollow Christ.

Pause

Think about those friends who know you best and longest.

Which friendships are the most precious to you?

What makes these friends so valuable?

Consider... God desires that sort of friendship with you

Pray

God, you amaze me every day with the ways that you are at work, with the lives that are changed, with the world you have spoken into being. I pray that I would notice some of them today. Amen.

Go

Go into your day knowing that even though God knows all about us, God still chooses to be our friend.

Be a friend of God today.

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