

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 05/05/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, May 5th

John 15:9-17

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Authentic Christian Community

The Gospel lectionary for the Sixth Sunday of Easter is a continuation of the text from last week where Jesus described Himself as the True Vine and His disciples as the branches. He challenged them to abide in the vine and through doing so they will bear fruit that will glorify God. This week's text deals with agape love. In what appears to be a new topic, the mention of bearing fruit in v.16 connects abiding in the vine with abiding in the love of Christ and the subsequent fruitfulness of this love. This passage contains a commandment of Jesus to His disciples – *that you love one another as I have loved you* (v.12). This commandment is a reiteration of 13:35-35: *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* We tend to think about this commandment in the broadest of contexts and apply it to our neighbor. In doing so, we perhaps miss the point. In both 13:34-35 and v.12, Jesus is addressing His disciples. We are commanded to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (as revealed in the synoptic Gospels), but John also emphasizes how we must strive to love our fellow disciples to the level that Jesus loves us. If this be the case, why is it that most Christians today appear to be desperately searching for authentic Christian community where such agape love exists?

John 15:9-17 Commentary

As context, this passage is part of Jesus' farewell discourse with His disciples (14-17) which thus gives a degree of urgency to the content. Chapter 18 begins with the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

In last week's text (vv.1-8), God the Father is described as the Vinedresser, Christ as the True Vine, and the disciples as the branches. In this week's text the message builds on the interrelationship of the Father, Son, and disciples. The message of abiding in the vine in order to bear fruit in vv.1-8 is further described as abiding in Jesus' love – to remain in a steadfast relationship with Him. This love begins with the Father, courses through the Son, and surrounds the disciples. Abiding in Jesus' love brings joy, yet we must not miss the fact that abiding in Jesus' love comes through keeping His commandments - just as Christ kept the Father's commandments. Love cannot be divorced from obedience. Abiding in Jesus' love is devoting oneself to His commandments.

¹² *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

Another dimension of this love is now addressed. Jesus restates the new commandment (13:34-35). The disciples must also love one another as Jesus has loved them. The nature of this love is self-sacrificial. Verse 13 will shortly be lived out by Jesus. Agape love is completely different than what our culture understands as love. In our culture, love is often a desire of the self and does not consider the needs of the other.

In v.8 Jesus referred to His followers as disciples. Now Jesus refers to them as friends. This description marks the intimacy, trust, and the openness of the relationship between Jesus and His disciples who abide in His love. Notice, however, how being a friend of Jesus requires doing what He commands. The text is also clear that Jesus chooses His friends, not the other way around. There is no room here for a consumeristic mindset of deciding on when to be a friend verses when to request demands from the relationship to address personal needs. At the same time, there can be no elitism associated from being a friend of Jesus – disciples do nothing to warrant selection. Being a friend of Jesus, however, empowers disciples to bear fruit that will abide in eternity, regardless of the difficulties that may be encountered. The passage closes with the idea that disciples abide in Jesus' love by keeping the commandment to love one another.

Reflection and Application

Our familiarity with the command to love others as Christ loves us may cause us to miss the radical nature of such love. The verses that follow this week's lectionary text remind us of the world's hatred for Christ and for His disciples (vv. 15:18f). This hatred is found in any age. The radical nature of authentic Christian community is what completely differentiated the early Church from the harsh reality of the Greco-Roman world. Through Christ it was possible to have a personal love relationship with the Creator of the universe. No other god or religious system offered that. At the same time, Christian communities were the only places where people of different social strata, different nationalities, different ethnic groups, slaves and the free, rich and the poor could do life together in authentic caring relationships between themselves and their neighbors. No wonder the church grew exponentially – despite the high social cost of belonging, even including outright persecution. Loving each other like Christ loved us remains the most powerful evangelistic tool the church possesses.

Today, this passage confronts the modern institutional church. Christians are now more likely to be known for who they disapprove of. Many are pursuing social justice grounded in humanism and thus are not in the vine or abiding in Christ's love. Perhaps the criticism of Christ to the church of Ephesus is also directed to us, *"But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first"* (Revelation 2:4). Ironically, many Christians today are finding they must look beyond the local church in their search for authentic Christian community, purpose, and belonging. Where Christians do life together and remain in Christ's love will always be out of step with the world. Such communities continue to be the original counter-culture – oases of love in a lonely, isolated world. This passage reminds us that being a Christian requires more than a once or twice a week "hit and run" encounter with church. Christ's command is not optional. We have no choice in the matter. If we want to be a friend of Jesus, if we want to remain in His love and experience joy, we must love others as Christ loves us.

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