

JOHN 15:9–17. (EHV)

“As the Father has loved me, so also I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you hold on to my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have held on to my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that my joy would continue to be in you and that your joy would be complete. This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: that someone lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you continue to do the things I instruct you. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. These things I am instructing you, so that you love one another.”

What is love?

When a parent tells a child, “I love you,” and the child says, “I love you, too,” what does that mean? Children and teens ask their dad how he knew Mom was the one he should marry, or they ask Mom how she knew she wanted to marry Dad, and they attribute it to love. What does that mean? Couples get divorced and they explain to their children that they no longer love each other or no longer love each other the same way. What happened to the love? How was it able to change or die? If it changed or died, was it ever really there?

What is love?

Of course there isn’t exactly a one-size-fits-all answer to that question. Parents and their children love each other in a different way than a husband and wife love each other. People love their friends in a different way than they love their brothers or sisters.

But in today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that the chief trait that defines Christians’ relationship with each other is love. So we get to explore this concept of Christian love under the direction of Jesus, the author of love and the one who is love itself.

1. Christ’s Love for Us

Today’s Gospel picks up right where Jesus’s discourse on the Vine and the Branches left off last week. Jesus gave this entire discourse on Holy Thursday. Last week we heard Jesus tell us that if we remained in him, like branches remaining in a vine, we would bear much fruit. Today he tells us that remaining in him means remaining in his love, and that a big part, the main part, of bearing much fruit is having and showing love ourselves.

This leads us to ask: What is love?

Jesus answers that question by making clear that love starts with him. He says that he loves his disciples just as the Father has loved him. The relationship of God the Father with God the Son is one that stretches back to eternity, before time began. We will confess in the Nicene Creed that God’s Son is begotten of the Father from eternity. So the Father has loved the Son from eternity, and Jesus has also loved us from eternity. But we have not existed from eternity, so love must start with God the Father and with God the Son, Jesus Christ.

Then, later, we get this progression: Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us. He then prophetically tells us that no one has greater love than to lay down his life for

his friends, which of course he is about to do. He then says that he calls us friends, as opposed to servants, because a servant does not know what his master is doing. A servant just takes orders; what's going on behind the orders is not his business. But Jesus says he has called us friends because *everything* he heard from his Father, he has made known to us. Then he says that we did not choose him—which is a great passage to bring to the attention of Christians who think that our Christian faith depends on choosing Christ—but he chose us and appointed us to go and bear fruit that will endure. And he says he is instructing us about these things, so that we can and will love one another.

So again, love does not start with us. It does not come from our own powers. It starts with Christ, in full agreement with his Father, choosing to love us, choosing us to be his friends, choosing us to bear fruit that will endure, from eternity, then making the Father's heart known to us, then laying down his life for us. These truths are what enable us and motivate us to love one another.

Let's pursue that thought a little further, that Christ has chosen us to be his friends and calls us his friends. Friendship on earth is almost always based on equality—similar abilities, similar interests, similar backgrounds, similar social standing. We can admire those whom we consider superior to us. We can have sympathy for those we consider inferior to us. Under certain circumstances, we can even carry on a cordial and polite conversation with either. But rarely will we be their friends. The prince doesn't hang out with the pauper. The champion quilt maker doesn't hang out with the football fanatic.

But Christ has chosen us to be his friends and calls us his friends! What greater inequality and discrepancy could there be than the one between him and us? We are sinful; he is righteous. We are ignorant; he is all-knowing. We are weak and frail; he is all-powerful. We are mortal; he is eternal. We live on earth; he lives in heaven. But it is precisely in choosing us to be his friends and calling us his friends and making the Father's heart known to us and laying down his life for us that he brings us up to his level. He gives us what we need to stand on level terms with him.

2. Our Love for One Another

When we know this, then we know love, and can say something about what it is.

First, love is not merely a feeling. It is decision, it is choosing, it is commitment, it is action. Jesus loved us by choosing us, by laying down his life for us. This is why Jesus can tell us to love our enemies. If love were merely an emotion, he would be telling us to feel warm fuzzies for our enemies, even though we cannot just arbitrarily change our emotions. However, even if you're unfavorably disposed towards someone, you can still choose to act in a way that benefits them instead of in a way that harms them or does nothing for them.

That leads nicely to the second point about love. Love is acting in someone's best interests. Love is weighing what is best for them and then adopting a course of action in line with that. Loving is doing and giving what others need. Jesus made God the Father's heart known to us and laid down his life for us not just to show how noble he was, or just to amuse himself, but because it was in our best interests and was what we needed. We were sinful, but his death would pay for our sins. We were mortal, but his death would conquer death for us. We were ignorant, but making God's heart known to us would make us wise.

And that leads nicely to the third point about love. Love is acting in someone's best interests, and you can only show true love and truly act in someone's best interests if you hold on to God's commands. "If you hold on to my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have held on to my Father's commands and remain in his love. . . . You are my friends if you continue to do the things I instruct you." Sometimes we think that since Jesus calls us friends, we can give him advice and he needs to listen to us just as much as we need to listen to him. Sometimes we think that since Jesus calls us friends, he is our cheerleader and approves of all of our decisions as long as we're pursuing our own happiness and what makes us feel good.

In a video I recently watched, a young woman defended her sinful lifestyle by saying, "I was raised Christian and I believe in Jesus. Maybe some of the things I do are sinful and he doesn't support it. But there [are] also reasons why I do [this sinful activity], and he understands that. So I feel like I don't have a bad relationship with Jesus." Back in Wisconsin, a young, single member of one of my churches was renting out his second floor to a young Christian woman. But then they started dating. I talked to them about the temptations that would easily lead to and about the impression it would give to others. They then talked to their parents to get a second opinion. Their parents, who were also Christian, basically told them, "Do what you feel is right and we'll support you." I could have torn my hair out. Thankfully, this particular couple was more mature than many. They realized that their parents weren't giving advice in harmony with God's commands, and the young woman moved back in with her parents until they eventually got married, and they're still happily married to this day and have a pile of kids. If we continue to abuse Jesus's friendship by doing what feels right to us, without regard for his commands, and expecting him to support us, then we're not actually his friends. We are his friends and remain in his love if we hold his commands in high regard and keep them. That's precisely what his love for us, the forgiveness and salvation he won for us, has enabled and empowered us to do.

So if a Christian comes to you and is looking for advice, and you give him or her advice purely on the basis of what that friend or you yourself thinks will make your friend happy, without first consulting God's commands, that isn't love. If you're just a cheerleader for your children or your fellow Christians, approving and supporting every decision they make without regard for God's commands, that isn't love. If Jesus showed that kind of love toward us, we would still be in our sins, headed for hell with no hope of eternal life.

And actually, precisely because true love models Christ's love, pursuing happiness in itself isn't even a recipe for true happiness. "If you hold on to my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have held on to my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that my joy would continue to be in you and that your joy would be complete." If you pursue happiness in itself, you will only have momentary happiness. If you pursue God's commands in response to the love of Christ for you, you will have enduring joy, and you will bear fruit that endures into eternity. This is why Augustine wrote: "In some inexplicable way—I do not know how—whoever loves himself, not God, does not love himself. And whoever loves God, not himself—it is he who loves himself."

What is love? If we start with the love of Christ for us, what he has done for us, we will know what love is. But don't just start with it. Remain in it and return to it again and again. Whatever is lacking in our love, he makes up for in his own perfect, undeserved, and unending

love for us. But in knowing that, we also know how to love one another and have the strength and desire to do so. Don't just sit on that knowledge, ability, and desire. Put it to use. "This is my command: Love one another as I have loved you. . . . You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will endure, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. These things I am instructing you, so that you love one another." Amen.