

Abide in Love

John 15:9-17

"All you need is love." When the Beatles sang those words in the turbulent 1960s, reactions came in two kinds: an enthusiastic embrace of love as the simple solution to the world's problems, and a critical rejection of love as a dreamy emotion that would distract people as those problems grew worse. Those two attitudes toward love have, in some sense, marked all modern political culture—with one side pleading for tolerance and asking, "Can't we all just get along?" while the other side demands a clear-eyed acknowledgment of, and a forceful response to, the base motives and evil intent of others.

However in spite of the dominance of these two perspectives, neither one finds much support in our text. Jesus certainly praises love—it is a gift from God, an excellence of character, and a way of life; nothing here justifies dismissing it as a naive flight of fancy. On the other hand, the word "love" is highly ambiguous; it demands clarification. Jesus did not just say, "Love one another," and leave it at that; he described that love and offered examples. As beautiful as love may be, we too often throw the word around lightly.

The uncertainty of the word "love" is corroborated by the well-known fact that it translates several different Greek words. Most attempts to offer stark, mutually exclusive definitions of these words have failed; it is not the case, for example, that *eros* and *epithymia* are always focused on desire, or that *agapē* and *philia* are free of this element. Nor are some of these words associated only with God, while others are reserved for humanity. In this passage the word "love" always translates *agapē* and its various forms. The

word came into Latin as *caritas* and thence into English as *charity*—though the gradual shift of this word to mean "philanthropy" has brought us back to "love" as the best translation.

Love in this sense is a virtue of God: *an* excellence of character that God has by nature and in which we participate by grace. Such love is primarily interested in the good of the other person, rather than one's own. It does not attempt to possess or dominate the other. Nor is it limited by the scarcities that are imposed by time and place: one can have a few good friends and fewer lovers, but one can have *agapē* for all.

For Christians, the true standard of love is found within the inner life of God. According to Jesus' analogy, the disciples' relationships to one another should conform to their relationship to Jesus, which in turn finds its ultimate example in the Word's relationship to the Source. The love of God helps us to understand what wondrous love truly is: concerned about others; not possessive or subordinating, thus allowing genuine space for the other to be; this love can be offered without reserve. One of the many analogies that Augustine offers for helping one understand the nature God's love is we can see God as the lover of God's creation, the creation and Christ are the beloved, and the Holy Spirit is what unites God and God's beloved.

The love that structures the inner life of God gives us a sense of the proper pattern for Christian love. Far from a mere feeling of euphoria, it is a disciplined habit of care and concern that, like all the virtues, can be perfected only over a lifetime. As Jesus observes, this love should be so deeply woven into our lives that we might even find ourselves called to die for it.

Jesus ties love to friendship. At first glance, Jesus appears to raise the topic somewhat accidentally—as though, when speaking of the love that

involves laying down one's life for one's *friends*, Jesus is suddenly reminded to speak about friendship. But the connection is deeper: according to Aristotle, one of the best ways to orientate oneself in a particular virtue is to imitate those who already embody it. This is most likely to be successful when we have become friends with those whose lives we seek to try to be like. "For," says Aristotle, "a friend is another self." Friends form each other in the moral life, taking on each other's characteristics—both good and bad. We are known by the company we keep; in fact, we are very likely to *become* the company we keep.

Aristotle describes three kinds of friendship. Some people are our friends because this is *useful* to us; they allow us to make business connections or get into a particular social group. Other friendships are pleasurable; we cultivate these because we enjoy them. But the third kind of friendship—the best kind—is for the sake of friendship itself. We cannot have this level of friendship with many people, because it requires a degree of physical presence and availability that should not be stretched too thin. These friendships are the most formative: a true friend who loves as God loves will, in time, teach *us* how to love as God loves.

Thus, when Jesus says "You are my friends if you do what I command you," he is not simply offering a useful or pleasurable friendship to those who have done his bidding. He is describing the kind of deep friendship that Aristotle calls the best kind. We are called into this kind of relationship with Jesus and, thereby, with God. When Thomas Aquinas offered his Christian synthesis of Aristotle's ethics, he took up this idea explicitly—suggesting that part of the goal of the Christian life was to become "friends with God." Through this friendship, we hope to take on God's characteristics as our own—and to love one another as God loves us. **David S. Cunningham**

Our scripture stresses some key ideas very valuable for life in community and ministry guidance. First, love (*agapē*) is expressed in affection, modeled by the relationship between God and Jesus. And that love is transformed into a joyous existence, bearing good fruits and dwelling in a loving community of friends. Second, community is built as the body of Christ, a living organism. For the New Testament, communion (*koinōnia*) is present in the life of Jesus, the Spirit, and the Father. Communion (*koinonia*) includes the sharing of human resources, material goods, and communal fellowship. *Koinōnia* means that the church is called to a commitment of solidarity toward unity as a witness in a broken and divided world. Sharing in God's mission requires the proclamation of a liberating word as a manifestation of a communal fellowship in worship and the caring for God's creation. It is no surprise that faith, life, and testimony in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) are directly related to the God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

For more than thirty years Carmelo Álvarez, who came to visit us a few years back, have been a missionary in Latin America and the Caribbean in three different countries. In his writings he explains in the 1970s and '80s a Pastoral of Accompaniment was in the Catholic and Protestant communities of faith was born: integrating the spiritual, emotional, psychological, anthropological, sociopolitical, and economic dimensions in the journey of faith for so Christians in situations of brokenness, alienation, injustices, and exclusion. The faithful have learned to trust in a liberating gospel that promises hope in the midst of oppression. They experience God's presence in their deepest need.

The best example of this is the life and ministry of Monsignor Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador, El Salvador. He combined the prophetic and pastoral dimensions in daily sermons and Bible studies. His

theology was constantly challenged by the conflicting realities in the daily life of the people of God. And he accepted the challenge, becoming increasingly more relevant in his preaching.

Today this Pastoral of Accompaniment can become relevant in communities of faith in the United States as we commit ourselves to address concrete situations, keeping in mind the situations confronting our communities and offering new insights and new alternatives. The tasks confronting these situations include strengthening communities of solidarity, affirming diversity, promoting healthy relationships in families and communities, embracing strangers, and promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogues. A community of celebration that affirms life and offers hope in joyous moments of remembrance and commitment to God's reign is a good place for us to start.

Jesus challenged his disciples to see and accept the challenges that lay ahead. That is a good model for us. **Carmelo Álvarez**

"All you need is love." However, we can only we this faithful community if we abide in the Love of God, abide in the Love of Jesus Christ, and abide in Love for One Another!

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