

Remain in My Love

John 15:9-17

9 "As the Father has loved me, so I have 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 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 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, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

"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.

But in spite of the dominance of these two perspectives, neither one finds much support in today's Gospel scripture. 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 explication. Jesus therefore cannot just say, "Love one another," and leave it at that; he needs to describe this love and offer examples. As beautiful as love may be, we too often throw the word around lightly. We are called to greater word care: we must watch our language in the presence of God.

The ambiguity 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 (sexual love) and epithymia (desire) are always focused on desire, or that agapē (Christian love) and philia (family love) are free of this element. Nor are some of these words associated only with God, while others are reserved for humanity. In this passage, however, the word "love" always translates agapē and its cognates. The word comes 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, despite its ambiguity.

Love in this sense is a religious virtue: 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 and greatest example 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 among God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit helps us to understand what wondrous love this truly is: concerned about others; not possessive or subordinating, thus allowing genuine space for the other to be; and can be offered without reserve. One of the many analogies that Augustine offers for helping us understand the nature of love is that God is the lover, the beloved, and the love that unites them.

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 teaches that remaining in his love produces true 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 habituate oneself in a particular virtue is to emulate those who already embody it. This is most likely to be successful when we have become friends with those whose lives we seek to emulate. "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." 3 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**

Disciples missionary Carmelo Alvarez puts remaining in Jesus' love like this...our scripture stresses some key ideas and values. 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. It is a hope of glory and eternal life in a coming kingdom, manifested here and now in praxis of solidarity in suffering, and in sharing spiritual gifts. It leads to a reconciling dimension confronting conflicting—and even violent—relationships and situations. Love becomes a transforming power more than a superficial and emotional expression.

This community of faith, remaining in and rooted in Jesus' love includes the sharing of human resources, material goods, communal fellowship, and the pursuit of justice. This 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 and bearing fruit requires the proclamation of a liberating word as a concrete manifestation of a communal fellowship in worship and the caring for God's creation. It should be 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 has been a missionary in Latin America and the Caribbean in three different countries. In the 1970s and '80s he reached out to 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 story is told of two friends in military service during WWI. One of the friends was wounded and left in "no man's land." His friend asked for permission to comfort his fallen friend. The officer said it was too dangerous. When the officer turned his back the young man ignored instructions and went anyway. He managed to get his friend back to the trenches, but by that time it was too late the friend had died. The officer asked the young man if it had been worth the risk. "Yes sir, it was. My friend's last words made it more than worth it. He looked up at me and said, "I knew you'd come." That's the kind of love we can have when we remain in Jesus' love.

Divine love is a model and a power. Jesus challenges his disciples, "As (kathōs) the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (v. 9) and "This is my commandment, that you love one another as (kathōs) I have loved you" (v. 12).

This scripture can help us to move ahead with some degree of certainty and trust. Jesus was challenging his disciples to see and accept the challenges that lay ahead. That must be a good model for all of us as we remain in his love and produce fruit for the kingdom. Remember that love is an action word! **Carmelo Álvarez**