

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams once said that walking together in the company of Christ is what the church is all about. “The question,” he said, “is how we relate to each other in the church in such a way that we see Christ between us.”<sup>1</sup> Last week, we heard Jesus say “Abide in me as I abide in you.” This week’s reading is the second half of last week’s Gospel that could be called “abide in Christ’s love.” The pivot point between these two passages is the very reason that we walk together with Christ between us: “I have said these things to you so that my joy might be in you, and that your joy might be complete.”

Inspiring as that may be, we are pragmatically aware of how appallingly difficult it is to actually live out the work we have been given to do. Every spiritual path is filled with difficulties even as God prunes away that within us that does not serve God. Love is the essential element in our relationship with God and with each other, and learning, effort and discipline are all necessary to activate and transform the love we have been given into spiritual gifts. First, we have to learn how to identify Divine love, which like human love, can come to us in astonishing, sometimes counter-intuitive or unexpected ways.

Let me tell you a story: My family has roots in Montana cattle ranching. When I was a boy, I spent numerous summers helping my Aunt Lainie, Uncle Ralph and my three cousins through the annual branding season. Several years after they got out of ranching, my aunt and uncle came to visit and when everyone else was talking and catching up with each other, my aunt pulled me aside, looking very serious.

“I just wanted to apologize to you for the way your uncle used to fuss over you,” she said. “It must have been horribly embarrassing for you!”

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<sup>1</sup> Griswold, Frank T. *I Have Called You Friends: Reflections on Reconciliation*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2006.

Now, let me tell you what that “fussing” looked like. Every summer, when all the cattle had been de-horned, branded, inoculated and turned back out to pasture, I would spend another night or two getting my clothes clean and resting up for the bus trip back to Seattle. Once my suitcase was packed, I would start out early in the morning to walk in to the Greyhound depot in town. Now, it didn’t matter how many extra days I had spent, my uncle was somehow always waiting in the kitchen on the morning I was leaving. And here is the entire conversation we had every summer:

Ralph would say, “Leavin’?”

“Yup,” I would say.

“Comin’ back next year?”

“Yup.”

“Got whatcha need?”

“Yup.”

“OK,” he’d say, and then he’d slap the kitchen table, smile at me and head outside to get back to work.

That’s it. That was the fussing my Aunt Lainie felt she needed to apologize for. “He really does love you,” she told me. I knew that he did and he knew that I loved him dearly.

Now, if human love is not always easy to see or to understand, much less explain, holy love is stranger still and all the more awesome. Holy love—the love that Christ commanded us to abide in—holy love is different because it isn’t *for* us—not for us as individuals to *keep for ourselves*, that is. Holy love, God’s love, is for *others* and we get to experience it when we give it to each other; it fills us and is passed on from us to those around us, staining us like a well-aged wine stains a terra cotta chalice. With enough filling and emptying, an unglazed ceramic chalice will take on a deep hue—dark, like mahogany.

That hue is what we notice in spiritually mature people; that’s what radiates out of deeply practiced people—people who live out the discipline of filling

themselves with the presence of Christ for the sheer joy of emptying that love for other people just to see them light up, even if only for a moment. That's what *completes* the joy. We stay with Christ and with God's love so that God's joy might be in us. But to make that joy complete, we hold it only so that we can hand it to someone else.

We, too, can be filled with joy and love—not always happiness, mind you, but the deep joy that comes from a deep and mutual indwelling with Christ—one that moves from acquaintance to friendliness to deep friendship to union: the stages of contemplative discipline. We become acquainted with Christ in the liturgy and friendly with Christ by accepting the invitation to the Eucharistic table. We form deep friendships with Christ in our prayer-life, both collectively and individually and, in time, we come to rest in unity with the Beloved One.

As a discipline, in practice it is a cycle that we must tend to. Benedictines like to say, "Always, we begin again." We watch for Divine love spilling over from us with the understanding that we will never get to see all of what God does through us. But if you are abiding with Christ and with the love of Christ, then God has entrusted you to be God's eyes and arms and heart in the world—to be one more vessel of God's love, forgiveness and reconciliation. How joyful is that!

If you have ever met someone's anger without defensiveness, whether the anger is fair or not—catching another person's emotions in a glove rather than in the center of your chest—if you have ever let yourself be present to the other person and then sought reconciliation rather than retribution or denial, if you have ever taken that path, then you have seen God's love in action.

If you have ever forgiven someone even when reconciliation is not possible, or when forgiveness has gained nothing, then you have seen God's love in action.

If you have ever sacrificed for others—and I'm not talking about having something taken from you—if you have ever *chosen* to give something up for others without recognition, without receiving thanks, without any compensation,

perhaps even without a sense of satisfaction—if you have ever chosen to give something of yourself simply because it served another, then you have seen God’s love in action.

If you have ever decided to do something purely for the sake of your conscience, knowing that you alone must bear the responsibility for the consequences whether you can explain your decision or not—or if you have ever chosen to do something purely for the sake of your conscience knowing that no one would ever know that you had done it—if you have ever taken one of these paths, then you have seen God’s love in action.

If you have ever acted purely for the love of God when you felt no sustaining warmth or encouragement, if you have ever made one of those leaps into the darkness, into the unknown, into the silence, if you have taken one of those paths, then you have seen God’s love in action.

If you have ever been so deeply moved by an experience of goodness or truth or beauty that you have acted to make that experience available to someone else; given something of yourself or your resources to make sure the experience was waiting there for others—if you have ever been generous for no reason and without expecting a drop of gratitude, without the uplifting sense that you were being unselfish, then you have seen God’s love in action.

These are just some of the paths taken by the people that Jesus calls friends. Jesus’ friends abide with each other and with God, walking together in the company of Christ along paths that produce fruit on behalf of God and God’s creation. With practice and discipline, sometimes the friends of Christ get a tiny glimmer of what God sees. Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and prolific author, describes one of these moments:

“In Louisville,” he writes, “at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though

we were total strangers...there is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun...it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes.<sup>2</sup>

What Merton saw in a flash, God sees constantly: the non-corrupted image of each of us, as God created us, in our full capacity to love. "I have said these things to you, "Jesus said to his friends, "so that my joy might be in you, and that your joy might be complete." Pass it on!

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<sup>2</sup> Merton, OCSO, Thomas. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1968.