

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

---

It’s been that kind of week. Death has come to visit St. Elizabeth again, leaving people feeling grief and loss and separation. It’s been that kind of time. Discord has infected politics, leaving people feeling angry and anxious and divided into tribes. It’s been that kind of world.

Racism, hate crimes, religious intolerance. It’s almost enough to make this reading sound naïve. Dated, maybe, or at least a little out of touch with our reality. How can Jesus be talking about love and joy now with all this distress swirling around us?

Would it surprise you to hear that the disciples were probably asking themselves the same question? Jesus has gathered his friends for a last meal together and has stunned them with the announcement that Death is coming for him.

Apparently tired of terrorizing the people, the unprincipled and unpopular Emperor Tiberias has retired to a life of debauchery. But not before putting the tyrant Pontius Pilate in charge of Judea, and leaving his grandnephew, the even more degenerate Gaius Caligula in charge. On top of that, by the time John’s Gospel was written, Jesus’ followers have been thrown out of the synagogues, and Emperor Vespasian has not only crushed a full-scale Jewish revolt but has destroyed the Second Temple.

And yet here, in the middle of Jesus’ final words to his friends, on the night before he was murdered, in a storm of political power-mongering and persecution, in the heartache of a culture increasingly

divided by religion, nationality and philosophy – in the middle of all that, Jesus offered love and joy.

Now, the notion of love in the ancient Middle East was not centered around affection. The key element of love, as far as our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith were concerned, was bonding; attachment, particularly to a group.

The astonishing truth that John's Gospel conveys from the very beginning is that God's love is not some abstract concept. Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus has been creating opportunities to experience God's binding love. Jesus, the True Vine, is the human face of God's attachment to God's children, the branches that produce the fruit of God's love.

"I have spoken these things to you," Jesus says, "that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

Now, there is an important psychological distinction between joy and happiness. Happiness tends to be connected to external sources; on other people, on places or events. Happiness is wonderful and happiness is impermanent. That's the nature of it.

Joy is more consistent. And we cultivate joy *internally*. Psychological joy comes when we make peace with who we are, why we are and how we are. We are children of God, loved just exactly as we are, *and* we are branches of the vine through whom God generates love.

"I have spoken these things to you," Jesus says, "that *my* joy may be in you..."

The deeper, hardier spiritual joy that Jesus offers is a gift of grace. In fact, the Greek words for "grace" and "joy" share the same root. Think of joy as the sensation of received grace, a response to the presence of grace.

Joy is the awareness of grace streaming like life-giving water beneath our shifting emotions; the sense of grace supporting us, even in grief. Grace flowing from God, even when the world around us seems intent on spreading despair. Joy abides, remains, even when it appears to be elusive or hard to access. That's the nature of it.

Staying present to the love that binds us to God is not a condition that we have to meet so that God will grant us grace. Abiding, staying awake to God's grace, is an obedient *response* to what God has

already done. But finding and accepting ourselves in the stream of God's love is only half the instruction that Jesus left us.

"I have spoken these things to you," Jesus says, "that my joy may be in you, *and that your joy may be full.*"

The joy that Jesus gives to his followers is the binding love that he has received from God; the same love with which Jesus loves all his followers. And the way for his followers to bring that joy to fullness is to love as we have been loved; to pass that love along.

The fullness begins as the essential nature of the Risen Christ pours into us. We share not only the love of God, but the joy of Jesus the Anointed who gives us that love. That joy becomes full as we give it away.

The fullness of eternal life is the shared joy of the endless receiving and giving away of God's love.

Fullness comes in our increasing awareness of ourselves and each other as nodes in an ever-expanding network of love – a web of life and love abundant beyond measure. Over time and with practice, we discover that there is no need to seek, no need to grasp.

We begin to experience and enact the essence of the instruction that Jesus left us: "As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in my love. 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."

Living into this network of love may seem daunting when all that is good looks so far away; when the value of truth appears to be evaporating; when gratitude for beauty seems to be fading and it all seems to be withering in the darkness of hatred, fear and separation.

People, you see, can only sense themselves and the world around us as cherished by God when they feel cherished by another person. And in the wilderness of indifference and neglect, there are voices that not only prepare for the love of God but provide it.

Some people have developed into sacramental carriers of Divine love. And so, if you have ever encountered such a soul, call them to mind – any person who has cherished you, anyone who has treated you like a treasure. See in them a revelation of God's love. Meditate on their presence, their words and actions. No matter who they are, let them inspire you to be gracious to someone else.

The who and the how we enter the network of God's love don't matter. Or, as the Hindu mystic and poet Kabir said, "Wherever you are *is* the entry point." It only matters *that we enter*, trusting that Jesus has chosen us.

This morning, just before we break the bread that God blesses as the Body of Christ, we will pray the prayer that Jesus taught us. Now, in the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke, words have multiple meanings. And one of the phrases that we will pray uses these English words: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

I invite you to hear them in a new way. The Aramaic can just as authentically be translated as: "Untangle the knots within so that we can mend our hearts' simple ties to each other."

By asking God to "untangle the knots within," God can *rebind* us to the True Vine – that's what the word "religion" means; to "rebind." And so, by extension, God can rebind us through the church that represents with humility the human faces of Divine love, beaming with the joy already waiting there to nourish a spiritually starving world.

And praying "...so that we can mend our hearts' simple ties to each other" is a humble, but elegant reminder of the deeper unity that God weaves for our human family; a reminder that our part is to love each other.

As we aspire to love each other as Christ loved us, we learn with God's help, to untangle the knots within ourselves, within our church, within our communities and to mend our simple ties to all of creation.

Trusting God to mend our hearts, we enter God's gates joyfully and "sing to the Lord a new song..." And in that way, against the backdrop of the world's darkness, we give away just a little more of the radical nature of God's love until it is revealed in its fullest glory.

---

Works cited or consulted:

Douglas-Klotz, Neil. *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.

Hart, David Bentley. *The New Testament: A Translation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Lewis, Karoline M. *John*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014.

Pilch, John J. *The Cultural World of Jesus*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996.

Shea, John. *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004.