

Living in the House of Love (John 15: 9-17)

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This past week I retired after 32 years at the University of Washington Libraries, and my friends and colleagues threw me a big party. There were some speeches, and I was expected to say a few words of farewell. I'd been thinking on and off over the last few weeks about what I might say. What words of wisdom should I impart? How might I inspire the younger generation of librarians and how could I encourage those in the middle of their careers? Despite my careful consideration, when the time came for my farewell discourse, I was pretty overcome with emotion, so I decided just to say how grateful I was for all my wonderful colleagues over the years, and to leave it at that. There was a lot I left unsaid, but people seemed to understand what was on my heart nevertheless.

In today's Gospel we hear a much more important farewell discourse - the final address of Jesus to his disciples. All the words of Jesus are important, but it seems that we should pay particular attention to those uttered in the last days of his life. What did Jesus want us to remember above all?

The Gospel reading, which takes up where last Sunday's Gospel ended, reiterates themes we have heard before in John -- namely love, obedience, mutuality, and self-disclosure. One of the things I love about John is the way he returns to certain points again and again so if I miss something the first time, I have another chance. Jesus must have been that way with his disciples.

The Gospel reading starts with love: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." We're so conditioned as Christians to equate God and Jesus with love that we might not hear what Jesus is saying about the kind of love he and God experience, but it's crucial if we are to understand what comes next.

One of the things that the Gospel of John presents very clearly is the intimate love between Jesus and his Father - so intimate that Jesus can say, "I and my Father are one." It's that kind of intimate love that Jesus invites his disciples to experience - not only to experience, but actually to dwell in, or as Eugene Peterson translates this passage, to make ourselves at home in. Recently Dawn Collins reminded me of a book written by one of my favorite spiritual writers, Henri Nouwen, which is a series of meditations on Russian icons. One of the chapters is on the icon of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev, which I chose for the cover of this Sunday's bulletin. Nouwen entitles the chapter, "Living in the House of Love," for the more he gazes on the loving regard of the three angels in this icon, who symbolize the three Persons of the Trinity, the more he feels invited to rest in the center of that Love. Let's keep that wonderful image before us as we move on to the next sentence in our Gospel reading, because here we encounter something that may trouble us a bit.

“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.” Wait a minute here - I thought God’s love was unconditional! We have to keep God’s commandments or else God won’t love us? Is God some kind of tyrant who demands obedience? Or maybe God is more like the image one of my friends holds. For him, God resembles the powerful CEO of a very large company - in fact, my friend likes to refer to God as “the Big Boss” and he talks about following the boss’s orders. But that’s not what Jesus is saying here.

Remember how this passage started with love? Love is the given. Love is the given! Or as St. Paul said in his letter to the Romans, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. But we can choose to evade that love rather than dwell in it. Think of the Prodigal Son, how he decided to leave his father’s house and go off on his own. It’s clear from the parable that his father loved him absolutely, and that he wanted to be in relationship with his son, even though his son had broken the relationship. It was when the son, hungry and destitute, remembered his father that he experienced a change of heart and decided to return home. As long as the son turned his back on his father - in fact, was doing the very opposite of living his father’s way -- he was not dwelling in the house of love that was his birthright.

So what is our Father’s way - or, if you prefer, our Mother’s way - for at one time or another, we all choose a different way. In verse 12 Jesus tells his disciples once again what he has said several times already: Love one another as I have loved you. This is the command that Jesus heard from God and that he has obeyed all along, and so Jesus commands us. And then what follows is the most explicit statement in the Gospel of John of what it means to love as Jesus loves. It means loving to the point of laying down one’s life. In the context of this discourse Jesus seems to be talking about how his followers are supposed to act towards one another, but of course we know that the sacrificial love of Jesus was not confined to his disciples or to the Church. It embraced the entire world! But I’ll tell you right now: I think I’m doing well if I act charitably and think kindly of every member of this congregation, let alone all Christians. Sorry folks, but without the Spirit of Jesus in my heart there’s no way that I can hope to love as Jesus loves.

And Jesus even promises us joy as a result of this costly obedience! The anonymous Celtic poem that I chose for the first reading* captures the sense of joy that we are told comes from keeping the commandments of Jesus and abiding in his love. The 6th century Irish nun, known as Saint Ita, would agree. Once she was asked by St. Brendan, one of the many saints of the early Celtic church whom she fostered, what were the three qualities most pleasing to God. She answered: simplicity, acquiescence to the will of God, and large heartedness. Large heartedness isn’t a word we hear too often, but I would say this is both love and joy combined.

But here’s another amazing thing: even as we obey God we are not doing it as servants, for Jesus has bestowed on us the honor of being his friends! A servant may do the will of his master but he doesn’t expect to be told why; a friend, on the other hand, knows the wishes of her friend and embraces them willingly and freely.

Recently the *New York Times* reported on a study of the neural response patterns of friends which suggested that friends resemble each other not just superficially, but in the very structures of their brains. The study prompted one neuroscientist to postulate the existence of “an ineffable shared reality” between friends. Would it be too much to say that the more we dwell with Jesus in the house of love, the more we experience that “ineffable shared reality” which makes obedience not a burden but a joy? And that grounded in that shared reality we can confidently ask in the name of our friend Jesus and expect God to answer?

Last week’s Gospel gave us the image of Jesus as the vine and us as branches dependent on that vine in order to live and be fruitful. This week it is in the context of being chosen as friends of Jesus that we are entrusted with the mission of bearing lasting fruit. To return to the imagery of the anonymous Celtic poem, we are called to be overflowing chalices, not withered trees. We can only do this if we continue to be in relationship with Jesus the vine. We need to remain in the house of God’s love.

I have used the image of dwelling in the house of love in this sermon, but all images have their limitations. One thing this image does not capture, which is central to John’s understanding of Jesus and his relationship with God, and Jesus and his relationship with his disciples, is that of mutuality. Last week’s Gospel reading told us that we do not only make our home in Jesus, but Jesus also makes his home in us, just as Jesus lives in the Father and the Father lives in Jesus. This is how we are empowered to obey the commandment of Jesus to love. Now, I don’t for a moment pretend to know or understand how this happens, but I do know that it begins right here and right now, as we gather around the holy table to share in Christ’s body and blood. Let us dare to dwell in God and let God dwell in us. May we, like the praiseworthy subject of that Celtic poem, be “holy and happy, beautiful in love” even as we resolve to “do the will of God in heav’n above.” AMEN

**[An Anonymous Description of a Holy Person]*

He is a bird round which a trap is closed,
 A leaking ship unfit for a wild sea,
 An empty vessel and a withered tree,
 Who lays aside God’s wishes unimposed.

She is the sun’s bright rays, pure gold and fine,
 A silver chalice overfilled with wine,
 Holy and happy, beautiful in love -
 Who does the will of God in Heav’n above.

