The Gospel of John: *He Calls Us Friends*

John 15:12-17

As we return to John 15, Jesus is teaching His disciples as they make their way to the Garden to Gethsemane. We spent a few weeks looking at vs. 1-11 and the imagery of the Vine and the branches. This morning we will continue with vs. 12-17:

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

My message is entitled *He Calls Us Friends* and it will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Command; 2) The Essence of Christian Friendship; and 3) Fruit That Lasts.

I. The Command

Up to this point in John 15, Jesus has been painting a powerful picture leveraging the metaphor of the True Vine, the Vinedresser, and the Branches. We looked at those verses for two weeks and observed how the picture beautifully illustrates the relationship of Jesus to His Father and the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. Jesus paints Himself as the True Vine and His Father as the Vinedresser who carefully and lovingly tends to the Vine. Jesus then teaches that the Branches, who are the disciples of Jesus, will only bear fruit when they intentionally abide in His love. If the disciples are not abiding, they are not going to bear fruit, and the Father will eventually cut them away from the True Vine.

How is the disciple to know if he is truly abiding in Christ? The indication that the disciple is truly abiding in the love of Christ is that the disciple will obey the commandments of Jesus. This is what Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” And Jesus restates and re-emphasizes this truth in John 15:9-10: 9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and abide in his love.”

Notice that keeping the commandments of Jesus serves in two capacities: 1) our obedience demonstrates our love for Jesus; and 2) our obedience ensures that we will remain in His love. I’ll come back to that in a minute, but I think the next obvious question is this: what are the commandments of Jesus that we are to be keeping?

Jesus addresses that question in our text for this morning. First, in vs. 12 Jesus states: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” He then restates the commandment at the end of our passage in vs. 17, “These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

Church, in case you missed it, let me sum up what Jesus just said: the evidence that we love Jesus, and the evidence that we are abiding in the love of Jesus, will be revealed in the way that
we love one another. Thus, loving one another in the Church is not optional…it is inevitable if we truly love Jesus and abide in Him.

Now let’s stop there for a moment and look in the mirror for a minute. How are we doing at loving one another in the church? If we were to ask our unbelieving neighbors about their perception of how we Christians love one another, how do you think they would answer that question? And what does loving one another in the church actually entail? Does that mean I have to like everyone in the church? Does that mean I am supposed to have “warm feelings” towards everyone in the church?

Jesus summed up exactly what He meant when He stated: “Love one another as I have loved you.” He then goes on to remind us what that looks like.

That will lead us to our second subheading:

II. The Essence of Christ-like Friendship

Books have been written about what Jesus says here in vss. 12-17, but let us at least touch on five principles of the Christ-like-love that we have been called to extend to one another. According to Jesus, to love as He has loved us means our love is 1) without condition; 2) sacrificial; 3) kindred in heart; 4) with absolute candor; and 5) is other-promoting.

1) Christ-like love is without condition—As many of you know, there are multiple words in the Greek language that would translate as “love” in the English language; however, each of those words in the Greek is quite specific in the kind of love it is referring to. For example, the Greek word eros would refer to a romantic, devouring kind of love. The Greek word philos is the kind of love that we might have for a very close friend. But notice that when Jesus uses the word “love” here in John 15, love is not something we have…it’s something we do. Love is a verb, and the verb for love that Jesus employs is the Greek verb agapaow. To agapaow is to willfully love somebody without condition or without regard for one’s own benefit. But it goes even deeper than that. To agapaow is to love a person when they are not the least bit loveable.

Paul captures the power of agapaow in Romans 5:6-8:

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person…but God shows his love (agape) for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

To love one another as Christ has loved us begins in the will and the mind. We decide we will love one another regardless of the circumstances. That means we love one another when we totally disagree about wearing masks. That means we love one another even when we are on opposite sides of the aisle politically. That means we love one another even when we cannot yet bring ourselves to like one another!

Sadly, our “love for one another” in the Church often varies little from the way the world “loves one another” outside of the church. We tend to love those who agree with us. We tend to love
those who make us feel good or somehow benefit us or at least those who don’t make us tired! It’s easy to love the loveable, right? But how much harder is it to love as Jesus loved us? Well…it’s impossible, quite frankly…at least it is impossible if we are not attached to the True Vine. Remember what Jesus said, “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” We will never agapaow without abiding in Jesus and Jesus abiding in us. However, if we are abiding in Christ, we will find it within us to agapaow one another in a way that is NOT normal…we will love the unlovely, we will love without condition, and we will love people from enemies to friendship.

2) The second principle is quite closely related to the first, and it is this: Christ-like love is sacrificial. In vs. 13 Jesus states, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Just hours before He dies on the cross for us all, Jesus presents Himself as the model for costly, sacrificial love. If anyone is in doubt that Jesus loves His Church, we need only look to the cross, right?

So, let me ask you…how do your friends know that you love them? What would they point to? How do your fellow church members know that you love them? What would they point to as the evidence of your sacrificial love?

Listen: if we are going to love one another in the church as Jesus first loved us, it’s going to be costly. Now…this idea of sacrificial love is tricky. “Laying down our lives” may take different expressions for each of us. What would it look like for you to “lay down your life” for your friends and your fellow believers? For most of us, the greatest sacrifice we could make that would mean the most to others is our TIME. Time is our greatest commodity and that which we are most reticent to sacrifice for others.

I’m going to trust that you can handle me speaking to you with frankness and candor, so here it goes… One of the greatest challenges we have as a church right now is enlisting volunteers to teach and care for our children. Would you like to know why? Because people do not want to commit the time it requires to be a Sunday School teacher or a nursery worker. Everyone wants the flexibility of schedule to do what they want to do on the weekends. They don’t want to be tied down to a weekly commitment in case they want to spend the weekend at the lake or go see some friends or just sleep in on Sunday morning. The truth is that we are lucky to get people to commit to even one Sunday per month. That is an embarrassing thing to say out loud, but it’s true, and it’s telling…isn’t it? That’s where we are as a culture…we are increasingly, unapologetically selfish with our time. But the Church should shine brightly in contrast to the culture in this: we are those who live and love sacrificially, and that means we give of our time…not just our money.

Let me ask you a question: who were the most influential people in your life…the people who spoke into your soul…the people who mentored you and discipled you? How often did you see those people? Once a month? Once every other month? Or did you see those people on a more regular basis? What do you thank God for the most when you think of those people: their time, or their money? I suspect that the people who loved you the most were those who sacrificed their
time for you, just as those who feel most loved in your life are those to whom you devote the most amount of time.

Now…time is not always the test of our sacrificial love. For others of us, laying down our biases, our preferences, our comfort zones, and our personal agendas would be a means of sacrificial love. Still others are called to give sacrificially of their finances or expertise…to the extent that they are not able to do all the things they would selfishly choose to do if not for the sacrifice of loving others. Laying down our lives for our friends may look different for some of us, but all believers are called to love like Jesus loved…which means we are all called to love sacrificially. Now…if that makes you uncomfortable, you are in good company!

I will tell you that in my flesh, I am a natural born TAKER. I am not, by nature, a giving or generous person, particularly with my time, but that rule generally applies to every part of my life. If you ever see me loving sacrificially, giving sacrificially, serving sacrificially, listening sacrificially, turning the other cheek sacrificially…I can tell you right now that is Christ living in me! Apart from Christ in me, I am the most selfish person you have ever met, and sadly that tendency continues to be my default starting place every morning when I wake up. Every day I must surrender to the leadership of Jesus in my life if I hope to love sacrificially in any way whatsoever. I suspect the same is true for many of us. Nevertheless, to love as Jesus loved us is to love sacrificially.

3) The third principle to loving one another like Jesus loved us is having a kindred heart. Jesus states in vs. 14, “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” Now, at first, this sentence sounds like a conditional statement, as though Jesus will choose to NOT be our friend until we do what He commands. But that is not what Jesus said. Jesus is not making a conditional statement; He is making an observation: those who are His friends will obey His commands. Why? Because the friends of Jesus have a kindred heart with the One who loved them first. Dr. Kent Hughes writes: Jesus’ friends obey him because they share the same outlook and goals. Close friends agree in heart. They will sometimes disagree, but their hearts’ aims are the same.

With the exception of Judas, the disciples have kindred hearts with Jesus. They believe in who He is and what He stands for, and they are fully committed to the advancement of God’s Kingdom on earth.

This point led me to reflect on my relationship with the other five pastors at Colonial. We are all very different in personalities and tendencies. We are all quite opinionated, and we don’t always agree. But I can tell you that we have kindred hearts. The aim of our hearts is Jesus, and so we enjoy a friendship and camaraderie that extends beyond our similarities or tendencies. Our souls are pulling in the same direction, so that makes the diversity of our styles and personalities an asset rather than a liability.

Listen: if your heart resonates with the commands of Jesus, we can overcome any other difference and we can be friends! That should be our attitude with every person we meet in our Lord’s Church here and anywhere in the world. We may disagree about wearing masks or if people should get vaccinated or the President’s policies on any number of issues…but if Jesus
has joined our hearts together around His vision and His commands, our friendship will overcome our difference because we have kindred hearts.

4) Those who love like Jesus loves will practice absolute candor. In vs. 15 Jesus states, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

Jesus makes a valuable comparison between a slave and a friend. A slave is bound to be obedient under threat of punishment, and he has no reason or right to understand what the intent of the owner is. Now…we all hate slavery…as we should, and that is exactly one of the reasons we hate slavery: it is dehumanizing. In fact, even Aristotle equated the value of a slave as little more than acquired property. Notice that Jesus does not talk to His disciples like slaves. He does not order his followers to practice mechanical obedience as though they are acquired property. Instead, Jesus has revealed to them all that He has received from the Father…or at least all that they could possibly hope to understand! He has shared deeply; He has held nothing back…even at the risk of offending them. Now…that doesn’t mean that the disciples are Jesus’ equal…they’re not, nor should they think of themselves in that light.

Jesus is greater than the disciples; Jesus is Lord. But Jesus chooses to befriend His followers, and He does so by patiently and courageously sharing the perfect truth of the Father with those who follow Him. Jesus is modeling not only how to love, but also how to lead.

In addition to serving as your Senior Pastor, I also serve as Colonial’s Chief Executive Officer. I know you hate to hear me say that, but it’s true. We are a relatively large organization; we have a large staff; and to dozens of people around here, I’m the boss. Now, as the boss, I have the authority to give people direction with an expectation that they will honor that direction and do as they are instructed. I could even choose to use some form of threat to ensure that my instructions are followed, but as soon as I go about leading in that manner, I have strayed from the example of our Lord. Jesus served those whom He led, and Jesus invited His followers into His private space when He shared the Father’s heart with them. He called them His friends. I have sought to do the same with my staff. I do not withhold my heart from them; I try not to hide my pain or my struggles; and I share with them everything that I have received from the Lord, even at the risk of offending them from time to time. Absolute candor is a necessary and powerful expression of loving like Jesus loved us…and I would add…leading others as Jesus led us. I was reminded of this important truth this week. One of my staff called me on Tuesday to talk about his position and some ideas he had for change. He called me on my writing day…a day I rarely answer the phone if possible! However, I knew this particular staff person needed to talk, and I sacrificed my agenda to spend about an hour with him. I didn’t necessarily agree with his proposal, and I was perfectly candid with him about that, but I was open to exploring new opportunities for him to serve Christ on our team. At the end of the conversation, he said, “I really appreciate your time. I consider you my friend as well as my boss, and it means a lot to me that you took the time to hear me out.” I would hope that the vast majority of my staff could say that we are friends because we have practiced absolute frankness and because they can point to times when I demonstrated a sacrificial kind of love towards them. I desperately desire to love my church members and my staff like Jesus first loved me, but I can tell you that I fail miserably at times. Too often I shrink back from telling the whole truth because I don’t want to risk the
confrontation. Too often my body language communicates the unintended message that I don’t have time for this today. Too often I’m inclined to share my opinions rather than to appeal to the words of the Father. Again, my natural tendencies are to avoid absolute candor…but this kind of openness and vulnerability…this kind of sharing and receiving the words of the Father…is an essential characteristic of loving one another like Jesus loved us…it is an essential quality of Christian friendship.

5) Finally, the fifth principle of loving another like Jesus loved us is “other promoting.” In vs. 16 Jesus states, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide.”

Dr. Kent Hughes writes:

In this verse we see our Lord’s desire to help his friends succeed: “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit.” He was committed to their fulfilling the ultimate in their calling. Friends rejoice in each other’s successes.

Jesus-like love initiates relationships for the promotion of others. Jesus initiated a relationship with His disciples to save, teach, train, equip, and send His followers to fulfill the very purpose for which they were created.

Jesus initiated the relationship with all of us as well. Jesus chooses us…we could never choose Jesus. And Jesus chose us to save us, to redeem us, to call us His friends, and to send us into the world to fulfill our God-ordained purpose. In the same way, we are to initiate relationships and friendships in the church to promote the welfare and Kingdom calling of others.

Nobody does this better than Pastor Bob Lehleitner! Over his 50 years at Colonial, Pastor Bob has taken an interest in thousands of people, initiating discipling relationships for their promotion and success. If you spend 10 minutes talking to Bob, it’s never about Bob…it’s always about what God is doing in the lives of others. Bob genuinely rejoices at the success of others…that is a rare quality and a sure indicator that Bob abides in Christ.

You know, at any given time it would be a reasonable question for me to ask the Church: who is pouring into you, and who are you pouring into? Who has befriended you for your promotion, and who have you befriended for their promotion? This kind of selfless loving relationship should be commonplace in any church where people are loving one another as Jesus first loved us. Again, pouring into others for the sole purpose of their success and promotion is not natural…it is a supernatural kind of love that we are empowered to practice when we abide in Christ, but it is the kind of love that should be present in the midst of those who are part of Christ’s church.

OK, let me finish with our very brief and final subheading:

III. Fruit That Lasts

I’ve mentioned to you before that I am a constant gardener. I love to grow things, so in addition to my garden I grow various fruit trees, grapevines, blackberries, raspberries, and most years I
grow quite a bit of cantaloupe. Those of you who harvest fruit know this to be true: fruit is the first to go bad! Most fruit does not last more than a week or so before it begins to rot, so it is notable that Jesus states in vs. 16, “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”

The picture ends as it began…with a vine that has branches that bear fruit. But notice the tension here at the end of our passage. Jesus has befriended His followers, and He has commanded them to love one another just as He first loved them. But to what end? That they would 1) go and 2) bear fruit that abides. Do you feel the tension? The tension has been with us throughout the 15th chapter of John, and here it is in living color.

The tension is between “going” and “bearing.” Branches do not “go forth” to bear fruit. Branches just bear fruit because they are attached to the vine. Yet Jesus will charge His followers to both abide in Him and also to go, to do, to love, to obey, to serve, to lead, to sacrifice, to speak the whole truth, to promote the welfare of others…and in so doing, they will bear fruit that will last…fruit that will remain.

Our old friend Alexander Maclaren so beautifully addresses this tension of “going” and “bearing.” He writes:

Neither an effortless, instinctive bringing forth from the renewed nature and the Christlike disposition, nor a painful and strenuous effort at obedience to His law, describe the whole realities of Christian service. There must be the effort, for men do not grow Christlike in character as the vine grows its grapes; but there must also be, regulated and disciplined by the effort, the inward life, for no mere outward obedience and tinkering at duties and commandments will produce the fruit that Christ desires and rejoices to have. First comes unity of life with Him; and then effort. Take care of modern teachings that do not recognizes these two as both essential to the complete ideal of Christian service—the spontaneous fruit bearing, and the strenuous effort after obedience.

I think Maclaren captured our next steps as believers in the Church: 1) we are first to pursue the unity of life with Jesus. This is what it means to abide in Him, and it is a practice of the heart as well as the head. It is turning our souls away from competing idols and devoting ourselves to Jesus in complete surrender. Then, as we abide in Christ, 2) we must also commit ourselves to the rigorous discipline of obedience, because old habits do not change themselves without effort, nor do new habits form without very intentional effort and repetition. The kind of love that Jesus commanded is a verb, not a possession. We are called to practice loving without condition. To practice loving sacrificially, with kindred hearts, with absolute candor, and to devote ourselves to the welfare and promotion of others. That will take some doing, but all striving toward that kind of love would be in vain if we are not first abiding in Christ, right? We abide first; we work second.

Church, don’t forget the last thing Jesus said here at the end of vs. 16 before He repeats the command to love one another in vs. 17. He calls His disciples to go forth and bear fruit that remains “…SO THAT whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”

According to Jesus, there is a relationship between bearing lasting fruit and the Father’s response to the disciples’ requests. I don’t have time to unpack how that works, but it’s there. Part of what Jesus wants for His disciples is the same relationship that He enjoys with the Father, and this is
what He has been saying all along. Abide in Jesus as He abides in the Father. Keep His commandments and you will abide in His love, just as Jesus kept His Father’s commandments and remained in the Father’s love. SO THAT… “whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”

The Father desires to bless us…it is His nature to do so. And yet Jesus leaves us with the impression that the Father will not grant the requests of branches that bear no fruit. The fruit opens the door for the Father to pour out His blessings upon the branch. Why? Because branches that bear fruit bring glory to the Father, right?

So, when it’s all said and done, it begins with abiding in Christ. Abide in Him…and we will love as Jesus loved…and we will do those things that He commanded…and we will bear fruit that lasts…and the Father will hear our prayers and move His hand for His glory.

Will you pray with me?