

Sermon – May 9, 2021
“Love One Another As I Have Loved You”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: John 15:9-17

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! I pray that the joy of Easter will grow in our hearts each day as we awake, ready to serve our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. The Easter candy is gone, the chocolate chipmunks have been eaten. I was never certain what they had to do with Easter, but they sure are tasty. But the gift of a risen Lord that is freedom from sin and death is not a gift that fades with time or is enjoyed for a moment and passes, but is a gift that rises up in our hearts, growing each day as we grow into the image of Christ. Let us recall always that we are Easter people. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Mother's Day is a day when we seek to remember and honor our mothers. Happy Mother's Day to all of the mothers with us this morning! May we remember the love that our mothers shared with us as they were able. We will close the service with a time of prayer in honor and memory of our mothers. I will also include a time of testimony for anyone who would like to share a few words in memory or honor of the love of their mother.

Let me share some background for the context of this morning's scripture. Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples. They are at the Last Supper and Jesus has been sharing what will be his final teaching with his disciples. Jesus has told his disciples that he is the True Vine and that they are to abide in him and be branches that produce fruit. As fruit producing branches, we are to expect that no matter how much fruit we are producing we will be pruned by the vinedresser, God the Father, that we might produce more fruit. How the disciples in the upper room heard Jesus' teaching on that night is not our focus. What we are seeking to understand is what Jesus means when he teaches us to abide in him and to produce fruit. Let's look now at this morning's text and see if we can grow in our understanding of abiding and producing fruit so

that we might be those who are abiding in Jesus and are producing abundant fruit, or are those who begin to realize that we are not, and then, as we understand, seek to become those who abide and produce much fruit.

Let's start with abiding. In verse 9 Jesus tells us that as the Father loves him so he has loved us. This is not in the future tense as if to do something or accomplish something would then cause Jesus to love us. This is Jesus explaining again to his disciples the love he has for them. They will need the cross, resurrection, ascension, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit to begin to grasp what Jesus means by the love he has for his people. This is not a love that is to come, but a love that is perfect for all of eternity. It is the love which Jesus enjoys with the Father and also the manner in which he loves us. We are to abide in this love. The definition of the word abide is "to accept or act in accordance with (a rule, decision, or recommendation)." That means if we abide in Jesus' love, we will act in accordance with how he loves the Father and how Jesus loves us. We will be those whose lives towards Jesus and others reflect this love in our own relationships. We do not understand the depth of love that Jesus shares with the Father, and so we naturally ask, "What does Jesus mean when he tells us to abide in his love?" Jesus teaches the disciples that if they will keep his commandments, they will be those who abide in his love. Perhaps like the disciples in the upper room that night, we begin to seek to recall what commandments Jesus has given. We might recall the Ten Commandments and how Jesus has changed them so that they are seemingly beyond our reach to keep. Jesus has kept and will keep his Father's commandments and will go to the cross to die for the sins of all people. With his blood, Jesus will establish the new covenant that will write the commandments, not on stone tablets stored in the temple of our God, but on our heart and he will help us to keep them.

Jesus assures us that what he has told us, the commandments he has given us, the life he has and will live before us, will bring us great joy, complete joy. And we have to ask ourselves, "How can keeping commandments bring us joy, the joy that Jesus has in his life, the joy that Jesus has that comes from his abiding and keeping the commandments of the Father?" Now let me assume that we all would like to experience the joy that Jesus has from his relationship with the Father. This would be true joy, joy that surpasses any source of joy that comes into our lives. This would be eternal joy and it will be complete joy. This will not be joy that fades with time, but joy that is complete, joy without limit, joy that never ends. This is joy that we yearn to have. This is the joy that our soul thirsts for. How do we receive such joy?

In verse 12 Jesus answers our questions. We abide in Jesus by keeping his commandments, and his commandment is that we love one another as he has loved us. Jesus makes this idea of love even clearer by telling us in verse 13 that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” This is Easter, and we know that Jesus will love the disciples and all people enough to lay down his life for them by dying on the cross and suffering for our sin debt. This is the love that we are to share with each other, a willingness to die for each other. How do we live our lives in this manner? How do we lay down our lives for each other? This week those who gathered for the Alpha series learned the story of two men, one a Catholic priest and the other a sergeant in the Polish army during WWII. Let me tell you their story, if I can. It is the story of Maximilian Kolbe and Franciszek Gajow niczek. The story starts earlier but comes to focus on July 31, 1941. In response to an escape of one man from Auschwitz concentration camp, the Gestapo round up everyone in the camp and select ten men at random to die locked in a starvation bunker in the midst of the camp. The ninth man selected is Franciszek Gajow niczek. When he is selected, he cries out that he has a wife and children and that they will never see him again. At that moment, a small man with wire frame glasses takes off his cap and walks forward and says he does not have a wife and children. He requests of the Gestapo commander of Auschwitz to die in the place of the man who has cried out for his family. Surprisingly to all in the camp, the offer to die in the place of the ninth man selected is accepted. This man who stepped forward to offer his life was Maximilian Kolbe, a 47-year-old Catholic priest. Kolbe was an amazing man. He had been sent to Auschwitz because he dared to speak truth to power and had continued to write about the wrongs of Nazis even after they came to power. Catholic priests were especially despised by the Gestapo and were worked harder than other prisoners. Yet Kolbe volunteered to lay down his life for another, a friend he had made in the camp. Kolbe was led off with the other nine men and locked into the starvation bunker. The Gestapo expected to hear their cries as they starved and suffered; instead, Kolbe got the men praying and singing hymns. The starvation bunker seemed like a church service. On August 14th only Kolbe remained alive and because the Gestapo needed the bunker for others, he was given a lethal injection. Franciszek Gajow niczek was the ninth man whom Kolbe replaced. Franciszek Gajow niczek survived the concentration camp and spent the rest of his life telling people what Maximilian Kolbe did for him. Fifty years later when the Catholic Church canonized Kolbe, Pope John Paul II said, “The death of Maximilian Kolbe became a sign of victory. This was

victory won over all systematic contempt and hate for man and for what is divine in man—a victory like that was won by our Lord Jesus Christ on Calvary.” I think we would agree that this seems like an example of the love that Jesus has for us. It may only be for one man and may lack the suffering for all of our sins, but it is an example of one laying down his life for a friend. Now I pray that we are never confronted with such a decision as Kolbe was confronted with and responded to in Auschwitz. This is quite a story of the love a man had for a friend. And it should bring to our minds the question of how we can live this type of love in the day-to-day living of our lives. How do we stop and lay down our lives in the business that is life for us in this place?

Notice that Jesus does not give us a long list of commands to guide us through our living; instead, he tells us to love in the manner that he loved, to love in the greater way, to love others enough to lay down our lives for our friends. Then Jesus tells us that we are his friends if we will do what he commands us to do, love one another. Notice that Jesus calls his disciples servants. We are those who once were slaves to sin and death, but now he will call us friends, those who are set free from the bondage of sin and death and know what their master has done: loved them enough to set them free by laying down his life for them. This is love that dies for us and sets us free, transforms us from servants or slaves to sin and death to friends of Jesus, those who keep his commandments, those who love others as Jesus loves us. Jesus has made known to us everything he has heard from the Father. This is not all that the Father knows, as that is beyond our capability. This is what we need to know to grow into the image of one who loves us with such great love. These words are given to us by these witnesses in the upper room. These words are given to us by those who walked with Jesus and talked with him. These words are given to us by the faithful witness led by the Holy Spirit. If these words abide in us, we are made clean and are transformed into those who love as Jesus loves. Will our love bring us to the point where we are called to go forward and lay down our life for a friend? I pray that we will not face such a decision, but in the very next section of scripture, Jesus cautions us that we will be persecuted in this world. We are to love in this manner. How do we live this freedom as friends to Jesus? How do we love each other with such great love? Jesus’ direction is to live this out in our lives. We need to have his word in us to become those who abide in his word, and then we are to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. All that we possess and seek to possess will end with death. No one takes anything from this world with them when they die. Notice that Jesus speaks to fruit that will last. Lasting fruit is eternal; this is fruit we bear as we love others as ourselves. This fruit is

those who have heard of Jesus through our love and service and will be eternally with the Lord. This is the fruit that lasts. This should be our aim and focus, to love others enough to lay down our life that they may know who Jesus is and how to love as he first loved us. This is the work of ordinary saints whose love is so radical in the world that others who receive it and witness it are drawn through our love to the source of such love.

In the last verse of this section, Jesus again tells us he is giving us these commands so that we will love one another. Let us ask ourselves, “Do we love each other? Are all of our actions towards each other actions of amazing love? Are we laying down our lives for our friends, those whom Jesus set free from slavery to sin and death? Or are we those who get caught up in the small frustrations of living with people who are also with us in this hospital for sinners? Are we more likely to be angry with those we disagree with than to pray for them to become our friends through the transforming power of Jesus’ love?” We who are in this hospital for sinners, this church, are ordinary people who need to be healed of our sin nature, to be cleaned up by Jesus’ words, and, finding our joy complete in Christ, to go forth to become ordinary saints sharing amazing, radical, life-changing love.

For the rest of his life, Franciszek Gajow niczek told people about the great love he experienced from a Catholic priest who laid down his life that he might live. We should seek to do the same in response to the life that was laid down for us on Calvary. We should be seeking every day for the rest of our lives to tell everyone we can about this great love we have been given, in every place we go, to everyone we meet, in words and in deeds of love for one another.

Pray with me: Jesus, teach us to abide in your love. Jesus, come and make our joy complete. Guide us each day to love one another as you love us. Lord, we thank you that we are your friends, freed from bondage to sin and death. Jesus, send the Holy Spirit to remake us into those who follow your commands, and, as long as we have breath in our lungs, are those who are telling others about a man who loved us enough to die in our place that we might live. Amen