

Loving and Remaining United Message for May 6th 2018 *Based on John 15: 9 – 17*

These 9 verses are the continuation of last week's scripture reading: Jesus' story of the vine and the branches, and how Jesus is encouraging his followers to abide in him. We begin today with 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandment and abide in his love.: (vs 9,10) Two really BIG words in here, love and abide. 'Abide': there's one of those words that makes you stop and think. It's a word we don't use much anymore. But incredibly important for this scripture passage—and for John's gospel for that matter! In the entire gospel of John the word 'abide' is used about 45 times.¹ Now, that's a lot of abiding! And in last week's vine story alone we heard it eight times and again today 3 more times. I'm sensing the word abide might be a bit important, eh? So it would make sense to understand what the word abide means. I looked up these verses up in a number of different translations. And here are the words used instead: 'remain' (*Young's Literal, NET, NLT*) – or 'remain united' (*Good News*) or 'stay joined to me' (*Common English Version, Easy to Read Bible*)

I think these more modern versions capture the meaning of abide for us, and the next verse seems to confirm that. Jesus says them; "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." When we stay joined, have a connection with, remain united with Jesus, his joy flows into us, becomes a part of us, his love fills and then can't help but effect who we are and what we do. And how do we 'stay joined' to Jesus? By keeping the connection; by coming to church and worshiping together like we do on Sunday's is one way. Reading the bible, studying the bible either on your own using resources from recognized scholars helps to keep us on the right track, group bible studies bring a synergy that individual study just can't, reading or watching other religious materials also works. But most of all—it takes prayer; daily prayer, just you and God to strengthen your relationship with the Divine Source. We know that a healthy relationship requires commitment. Take time each day to sit and let the life force, the love of Christ into your soul. Abide in Christ's love.

Love: John uses it 39 times in his gospel. In English we have only one word for love, and we know that it has multiple meanings and connotations. Greek has different words for the different kinds of love, and the one used in this passage is *agapē*. Here's a definition for *agapē* 'love':

Love in this sense...(is) an excellence of character that God has by nature, and in which we participate by grace. Such love is primarily interest in the good of the other person rather than one's own. ... (O)ne can have a few good friends and fewer lovers, but one can have *agapē* for all.²

This is the kind of love that Jesus means when he says to love one another – neighbours, strangers, friends or servants.

I'm going to go out on a not very long limb and say that I doubt that many, if any of you here have had a servant or have been a servant. It's a challenging concept for most of us lower and middle class Canadians to think in terms of. I've never had a servant—closest I came was I had a cleaning woman for a few years when we were on the other farm in a larger house and the kids were still home, I was working full time and going to school. And I don't really think a cleaning woman who came every 2 weeks actually counts as a servant, more like a paid helper!

Did you watch *Downton Abbey* when that series was on TV? What the show did a great job of showing the interplay between the upstairs folk, the family, and the downstairs folk, the servants. I found it fascinating -- the whole culture around it is so incredibly complex. I do think you have to be born into it to completely understand it. It is totally power based, but interesting how both sides have power, and use it, rightly and wrongly. Just when I think it would be neat to

¹ My Notes from a workshop I attended Feb. 17/18 with guest speaker was Karoline Lewis, well know New Testament scholar/professor and renowned Johannine scholar

² David S. Cunningham. In *Theological Perspective for John 15: 9-17 in Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 2 p. 499*

be an upstairs person, the next show focuses the not so fun part of being the upper class, the responsibilities, lack of privacy, the commitments and restrictions on your life, including—especially including, the responsibility for the lives of those in the downstairs and on the estate. What I also found interesting, is the degree of commitment most of the servants feel to the family they serve, it seems the longer in service, the stronger the bond. A tremendous sense of loyalty, of servant to master, or mistress and the servants to each other, how it binds them all together, an obligation one to the other, maybe even to the point of almost a friendship – like with Ladies and their and her ladies maids. Yet it's still never really equal, because the upstairs folk ultimately have the power over the servants.

We talk in church often of ourselves as Christ's servants, it's is something that we hear and say fairly routinely. Christ is Lord, we are the Lord's servants. The role of servant is definitely a different relationship than that of employee-employer. It's more personal, always with the sense of indenture about it. The dictionary definition of a servant is "one that serves especially one that performs duties about the person or home of a master or personal employer".³ Now, I am not saying that Jesus and his disciples are the Downton Abbey of the bible! But still, the servant/master relationship is a different relationship I think than one of employer and employee, which is one many of us are much more familiar with.

But in today's gospel reading, Jesus changes the relationship status between himself and his disciples. What does John have Jesus saying? "There is no greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends. ... I don't call you servants anymore ... I now call you my friends" (vss 12, 15) And that's what Jesus did, didn't he? He laid down his life. This is the complete wholeness of the love of God in Christ, ultimate love in every aspect possible—no matter how many different words you use to describe it. God's love for us is love beyond anything we can imagine. So this is a decisive and deliberate shift in Jesus' way of being with his disciple, their roles with each other have changed. What has caused this change to be? Because Jesus told them, shared with them everything he heard from God. And you don't really do that with servants, they do as they're told to do, as they are obliged, they're not given reasons as to why. We choose those with whom we wish to have friendships, and Jesus clearly chose them, and they chose to remain with Jesus—Lord knows Jesus gave them lots of opportunities to leave, but they never did.

And this leads us to an interesting discussion. What do you do for a friend? Well, you stick close; you're there for them when they need you. Not out of an obligation to them, as in a servant-master relationship, or even an employee-employer relationship, or out of a sense of responsibility that sometimes one can often feel towards doing for one's family. You do for a friend because you want to; you've chosen to be in relationship with them because they are a friend of the heart.

So what is Jesus saying to his disciples here?

The relationship is changed, altered. This is not just a relationship based on Christ's Lordship, but out of genuine love. Jesus chose to, he wanted more from the relationship between himself and the disciples, the relationship had grown and changed. They no longer were his servants, but his friends, and friendships come from care and love. And when we love another, we give and take and do for each other to fulfill the other's needs.

And what does God, the ultimate love need from us? To go out and bear fruit, to build the kingdom, to bring others to know God's love and to do God's work, which is how **we** get to show God's love. We abide in the love of God in Christ, and then share that love with others. I saw a face book post this week that described it well: Service is sharing God's love! Around and around it goes, where it stops, nobody knows! And what's really cool is God will provide, God will give us whatever we need to do just that, all we need do is ask in Jesus name.

³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/servant>

And that is what church is for, what church is all about. Going out into the world to love and serve God, reaching those who aren't sitting here, who aren't members of this church. Sharing the love of God in Christ to those in need, bringing others to know God's love in Christ. That's what it means to be church.

So, Jesus commands his followers to love others. And we keep that commandment not because we're God's servants, which of course we are, and not because we have to, not because we are God's servants, but because we choose to, out of our love for God. We do for God out of love for God, we give not to receive, but out of love for God's amazing and incredible generosity and love for us. Amen