

Psalm 98; John 15: 9-17  
Friends, the Beloveds.

The Psalm Barbara just read to us reminds us that JOY is what finally comes to God's people because of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Joy that makes you sing not just any song but a new song. Did you hear a sense of freshness and renewed energy in the words of the psalmist? He does not stop at talking about God's mighty saving acts for the house of Israel but goes on to urge all the earth, the sea and all that fills it and the world and those who live in it to sing together for joy.

Why? Because, says the psalmist, God is coming to judge the world with righteousness, and all peoples with equity. And when God judges with righteousness, God sets everything in God's created world that had deviated from the Divine order back into the right relationship with God again. And God's equity, or what's fair in God's eye, is always mercy.

The Psalmist may have witnessed this power of the Divine Love in God's rescuing the Israelites from the slavery in Egypt, or from the captivity in a foreign land, from their life in exile. But the Psalmist is also convinced that this joy extends far into the future, filling all the ends of the earth, for all generations, including even us.

God's intention all along is to fill our lives with joy. God desires that we live in joy. And that joy comes when the world and all who live in it are brought into right relationship with the Divine. Remembering this, listen now to the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to John, Chapter 15: 9-17.

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.

Where was Jesus and who was he talking to? This passage is a direct continuation of where we were last week when Jesus was talking to the disciples right after his last supper with

them and right before he was betrayed and handed over to the religious authority and the power-that-be of his day.

Knowing his time with the disciples was about to end, Jesus was doing his very best to impress upon them who he was and who they were; how they needed to somehow still abide in him just as the branches of the grapevine needed to be connected to the vine in order to bear fruit. Using the familiar imagery from their everyday life, Jesus was teaching them how to continue doing the works of love Jesus had come to do, after he was taken from them. He was showing them how to still walk him when he couldn't walk with them holding their hands.

And it all hinges upon their relationship. Earlier, Jesus had painted the picture of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. But he cannot show them the complete picture of this relationship without bringing into that picture his own relationship to the Divine Source, whom he calls Father. Jesus says, he as the Good Shepherd knows his own sheep and his own sheep knows him JUST AS the Father knows Jesus and Jesus knows the Father.

In the image of the grapevine and the branches, Jesus says the branches cannot bear any fruit unless they stay connected to the vine, and Jesus is the true vine. But, it is the vinegrower, God, who is doing all that is required for growth and causing the branches to bear fruit. The Divine is always present in the picture as the source of all who Jesus is and what Jesus does.

And in today's passage, Jesus begins "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you." Then he tells the disciples, it is by keeping his commandments, they get make Jesus's love their homebase, JUST AS Jesus makes his home God's love by keeping his Father's commandments. When we hear "IF you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," we may hear as "Well, do this, or else!" as if Jesus' love for us conditional. It is not that at all. Jesus' love is always there because it is the steadfast love of the Faithful God. But when it comes to how we experience it, it all comes down to the relationship; the relationship between God and Jesus shapes the relationship between Jesus and his followers, and that's the "right relationship" God intended for us.

And at the heart of the commandments is love: God so loved the world God gave God's only son to the world, knowing the world would not accept them but reject him.

On the part of the Son, Jesus, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end, even when he knew it would lead him to the cross.

And now, Jesus tells his followers, his first disciples as well as all those that follow, down to you and me and those who are yet to come, we are to love one another as Jesus loved us.

With both God and Jesus, this business of loving seems to involve a significant risk of “loss,” whether it is one’s only son or one’s own life. Jesus says: No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Does this mean, we have to be ready to die for any of our friends?

We are quick to understand this expression of “laying down one’s life” to only mean “dying.” True, in case of Jesus, he laid down his life for us and it led to his death on the cross. But if the act of “dying” was the point, as many who say “Jesus came to die for our sins” seem to think, he could have just jumped off the cliff. Jesus had plenty of opportunities to do that while he was teaching and healing and befriending the “wrong kind people” in the eyes of many.

But he didn’t. Instead, he **loved** his own who were in the world till the end, and it was the way he **loved** absolutely each one, obeying his Father’s will that led him to the cross. He lost his own life because the way he lived and loved threatened the power-that-be of his world. But even a greater power, the steadfast love of God, the Divine source of all life and love restored him to abide in the love of his Father. God is God of Life, and Love is ever stronger than death.

What if we understood “laying down of one’s life” to mean offering up one’s life, one’s whole life, completely without reservation to God, the Divine Source of all life and all joy, to be used as God sees fit, as Jesus did, instead of holding tightly to our own best laid plans? How might that transform our lives, the way we live?

Jesus now calls his followers his “friends.” If we keep his commandment of loving others as Jesus loves us, we are brought into this friendship with Jesus, and if we are his friends, the greatest love we can show him is by offering our lives in his service. That, too, is the “right relationship” that reflects Jesus’ relationship with God. And what flows through that relationship is God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, the source of our unbounded joy.

Christian love is often spoken of as ‘sacrificial love,’ as ‘long suffering love’, but through the sacrificing of one’s immediate, almost instinctive hold on our life, and in the enduring of suffering for the sake of others, and in the laying down of one’s life, which is to say offering oneself for the other, we are empowered to taste life at its richest and drink from the deeper well of love that is more expansive, and joy that is more nearly complete.

Yet, we are often afraid to go that deep, trust that anything good could come from the painful reality that is staring us down.

My former pastor used to tell us how he conducted premarital counseling. Sitting across his desk from a young couple deeply in love, he would ask, “so, how will you two share the burdens that come with everyday living.” They would quickly say “Oh, we’ll carry them 50-50. We believe in sharing the responsibility in marriage in equal parts.” As if everything could be split by taking turns in cooking or trading the chore of doing laundry with taking the trash. With the best of our intentions, there will be times both are doing more than the other at the same time.

There will be time the burden of loving those who are entrusted to our care may feel too heavy, whether they are teenagers too smart for their own good or our loved ones losing who they once were because of illness, physical, mental, or spiritual. We may lose patience with them. Other times, what is ours to bear in the name of Jesus is not at all clear and we may slip into relationship that is not life-giving, whether it is family or work or friendship. Other time, we may fool ourselves into thinking that we are following God’s will when we are really manipulating situations to meet our selfish scheme, in our personal life as well as in our public life, individually or as a country. We are not perfect and the opportunity to mess up is always there.

And what would it look like for the church as this living body of Christ in the world to lay down her life for her friends? We are small congregation in a small village, with small budget and... if we see those things as signs of our potential for fruitfulness or lack thereof, uncertainty and fear may paralyze us.

Then remember, too, what Jesus said: You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. This is a good news; that Jesus chose us, that he’s taking ownership of our relationship, because Jesus would not set himself up for failure. When Jesus calls us his Friends, that Greek word for Friend, Philoi, means we are his dearly loved ones. We are God’s beloveds. The God of steadfast love and faithfulness will not fail us even when we fail. Jesus gives us the commandments and tells us to keep it, because he knows we are capable of keeping when we abide in his love.

It all comes down to the steadfast love and faithfulness of God, God who wants to fill our whole being with joy more than we are afraid of our limitations. God invites us to offer up our whole life to God, only so that God can fill them with the divine boundless love.

May we trust this good news and live in joy. Amen