

Sixth Sunday of Easter  
May 6, 2018  
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John 15:9-17

## **Love to the Death**

Before we dive into today's text, I just want to take a moment to say a temporary farewell. As some of you may already know, this is my last Sunday with you all for the academic year. This summer, I'm going to be heading back to Eugene, Oregon where I will be serving as a chaplain at a local hospital. And while I am very much looking forward to being back home and taking another step towards ordination, I am sad to be leaving.

This past year of field education here at Holy Cross has been a genuinely wonderful experience. It has been my great honor to get to know this community and to serve in it as your seminarian. But, you can't get rid of me that easily. This is a *temporary* farewell. I will be back here at Holy Cross toward the end of August as I begin my senior year of seminary, and at that time I will be picking up right where I left off and continuing to serve as your seminarian for another year.

Now, speaking of farewells, our gospel reading this morning is part two of Jesus' vine-and-branches metaphor that we started last week. And this metaphor belongs to a larger set of teachings commonly referred to as "Jesus' farewell discourse."

Chronologically, this teaching takes place back on Maundy Thursday, the eve of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus has just finished washing his disciples' feet and he is now elaborating on his new commandment that they should love one another as he has loved them.

Jesus begins by telling his disciples that his love for them reflects the love between himself and God the Father. The love in which the disciples are caught up is the love of the Trinity itself—the very same love that organizes the inner life of God.

And this Trinitarian love—the love Jesus has for them—is *agape*, or as it's translated in Latin, *caritas*, from which we get our word "charity." This love is a selfless love whose chief concern is the good of the other. Jesus tells them to abide in this love—literally to make their dwelling in it.

Next, Jesus makes it clear that abiding in his love means keeping his commandments as he has kept the Father's commandments. Just as Jesus is going up to the cross in obedience to the Father, so the disciples are to obey Jesus' commandments with the same sort of selflessness.

And the commandment that the disciples are supposed to keep—the commandment that enables them to abide in Jesus' divine love—is nothing other than the new commandment given at the foot washing: that they love one another as he has loved them.

But then Jesus clarifies what he means by this new commandment: There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. And you can almost imagine Jesus reaching his hands out toward the disciples as he says, "one's friends."

To be the *servant* of a rabbi was a title of honor in Jesus' day. But here Jesus elevates the disciples to an even higher honor: they are now his friends. And they are his friends precisely because he has chosen them—because he has grafted them into the vine of divine love and appointed them to bear the lasting fruit of *caritas*.

Jesus acknowledges the friendship between them so that the disciples may understand the meaning of his imminent death. Jesus goes to the cross with their good as his chief concern. He lays down his life so that they may live. And he does this because he loves them – because they are his friends.

Now, a feel-good sermon might have ended right there. But this probably isn't a feel-good sermon, at least not until the end. We'll get there. What is essential for us to understand is that this teaching is meant for an audience very different from ourselves.

Jesus' words are not only meant for the disciples who were in the room with him after the foot washing. His words are also meant for the members of the community for whom St. John writes his gospel. And we need to hear this teaching with their ears.

St. John's community was in terrible danger. Christians were now being expelled from their local synagogues and were suffering violent persecution at the hands of both Roman and Jewish authorities.

Members of the community were being pulled from their homes, arrested, tortured, and sometimes even killed. And some of the Christians placed under arrest for their faith might be offered a plea bargain of sorts: "If you renounce your faith in Jesus and tell us the names of the other Christians and where your friends are hiding, then we'll let you go. If not, we'll kill you"

When Jesus says, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends," he speaks not only of his own death upon the cross, but also of the death of these persecuted Christians who would have heard this gospel.

If we listen with their ears, we can hear Jesus say, "When they arrest you, and interrogate you, and threaten to kill you, don't give up the names of your friends. The greatest love that you can have for them is to lay down your life, so that they may live—so that the church may live."

Jesus is trying to instill in his listeners such a charitable love for one another—such a selfless love concerned so chiefly with the good the other—that, in the face of persecution, they are willing to suffer and die to protect one another. According to this teaching, the intramural love that is supposed to govern Christian community is a love-to-the-death.

So, what does such a teaching mean for Christians like us, who live so safely and so comfortably?

While we might not live in a culture that is openly persecuting the church, we do live in one with a very different system of values. Our culture loves a fight-to-the-death. From Frank Miller and Marshal Kane in the film *High Noon*, to Thanos and the Avengers in *Infinity War*, we love a good fight-to-the-death story. These epic battles between the forces of good and evil incorporate our favorite Western values: honor, valor, courage, duty, and sacrifice.

But Jesus' love-to-the-death redefines all of these: These values are lived out not through mortal combat, but through mortal *caritas*—not through acts of forceful domination, but through relationships of sacrificial love. Jesus bids us to life through a death to the self—a death even to life itself.

How might we abide in Jesus' love-to-the-death? How might we more charitably love our fellow Christians? Perhaps we begin with something as simple as acts of self-denial: consuming less so that others have enough, or speaking less so other may be heard. Or perhaps, as a spiritual exercise, we might make a list of those for whom we would be willing to die. If things got bad, how many people in the seats next to us would we be willing to die for? How far are we willing to go in following Jesus' new commandment?

Now, I said this wasn't a feel-good sermon, not until the end. But here it is: It *is* still Easter and we are always a resurrection people. And any list that we might make of those for whom we are willing to die is also, at the same time, a list of those for whom we are willing to resurrect. And it is in this—just as it was for the disciples in the upper room and for St. John's community—that our joy is made complete.

My friends, may our striving to obey the commandment to love one another bear new and lasting fruit and make us evermore the friends of Christ. Amen.