

P Christ is risen!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we hear Jesus say to the disciples
and to each of us:

¹² "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

From the Greek this translates as:

This is the commandment, which is mine, (namely or in order that) you may show or prove my reciprocal love to the degree that I have loved you.

...In order that you may show or prove my reciprocal love to the degree that I have loved you.

In his letter to the church in Colossae, St. Paul writes about faith that is being threatened by false teaching. In this letter, Paul is also opposing certain ascetic practices. He writes:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3:14)

Above all...clothe yourselves with love.

Paul, like Jesus is stressing a love without conditions, an unconditional love...a love that binds everything together in perfect harmony. Perfect harmony in music is when two totally different notes are blended together and make a beautifully pleasing sound...perfect harmony...when we can live with others who are totally different but can live in peace, or in perfect balance with one another...or at the very least, respect for one another.

Today in our Gospel lesson, we have another section of what is known as the Farewell Discourse of Jesus. In this discourse, Jesus speaks of his impending death and the upcoming trials that the disciples are about to face after his departure...rather his return to the Father. Of course, the disciples are fearful and anxious. Nonetheless, Jesus attempts to tell his disciples how they are to live, not just with each other, but also with everyone else after his death. Despite the trials they faced and the trials we face today...we are told by Jesus,

⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be complete.

Jesus took joy in loving and serving others and not judging and condemning others. But he also knew the trials a person of faith will be confronted with and makes that clear in the Farewell Discourse when he tells the disciples:

¹⁸ 'If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. (John 15:18)

Here is where I think we all stumble. If the world hates us...we hate back tenfold...UNCONDITIONALLY and with pleasurable ease. Funny how we love conditionally but we hate unconditionally when Jesus is teaching us the very opposite of that. Our view of the

world and those in it...is filtered through unreliable sources from various forms of media. We are then blindly acclimated to hatred which is then manifested into violent reactive behavior, into false empty rhetoric and opinions, and in our own isolation and fear. But we stumble into this because it becomes a very easy and a very viable reason to NOT love as we have been loved...it becomes very easily, and dare I say, it becomes our joy and our cause to love just those who love me, those who think like me, live like me, and worship like me. In this our love and our faith that comes from God unconditionally becomes a strategy that is then excused with our conditions and prejudices when dealing with others. However, despite how we discount our love and our faith, Jesus teaches us that they are more than a way of thinking or strategizing, our love and our faith are to be our way of life...period, it is our way of following Jesus Christ rather than just thinking about him. This is being a disciple. This is the true mark of a disciple.

As difficult as this is, Jesus shows us unconditionally, God's love for us. Without a doubt, God loves us with all our faults and loves us and sees the best in us when we are at our worst and knows firsthand what trials we face and will face. Again, from the Farewell Discourse we hear Jesus saying to us:

^{16:1} 'I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. ²They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. ³And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. ⁴But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. (John 16:1-4)

The world may discourage us, it may cause us to doubt, it may even make us confused about the faith and love from God in Jesus Christ, and the world may even hate us but these are all part of our faith that Jesus is teaching us today. But may we know without a doubt that through our Baptism we are NOT just a disciple, NOT just a "friend" as the text tells us, we are made a "loved one"...a loved one that is a branch on the vine that is connected to God and cared for by God the vine-grower or the vinedresser, the one who cares for and feeds that very vine that we are all connected to. Just as a plant, a flower, or a garden need someone to tend to it, so God tends to the vine that feeds and nurtures the branches that are each of them and us.

And as a beloved part of that vine that is Jesus Christ, it seems that the only fruit that we can bear is love. We cannot plant a tomato plant and expect to get watermelons. We are connected to a vine that enables us to bear love that enables what I referred to a last week, interrelationships, mutuality, and community. These interrelationships, the mutuality, and community can all be seen within the vine and branch image that Jesus referred to last week.

If we visualize the vine and branches and what they actually look like we can see that a vine and its branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another...its impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together and live together as they grow out of one central vine. What this image is suggesting is that in community as seen by the branches, there is no free-standing individuals but branches that encircle one another. The fruitfulness of each branch depends on its relationship to the vine...and nothing else.¹

¹ Keck, Leander, senior editor. *NIB, The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes. Volume IX. The Gospel of Luke The Gospel of John.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. Commentary on John 15:1-17, Reflections #1, page 760, vine and branch image.

St John Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers known for his preaching, points to this same image of vine and branches when he says that in order to show God's love as it has been shown to us, God's love will then be intertwined with our own. May we then see in this image our connection to God when we love one another as God has loved us. In this image, we are engaged with God in doing so, we bring God's love and presence when we love as God has loved us. And in that love, we are also given His joy to complete our joy found in this love for others.

Even knowing this, I think we can all agree that this is a magnificent image and a wonderful ideal, but the reality is that it just doesn't happen. But in this discourse, if Jesus has shown us anything, he has shown us that love is never easy. Love is very joyous, but it is also very difficult and very hard work. Love is also very dark when we see it from the cross as Christ dies on that cross out of love for us. God's love for us may be similar or even comparable to the love we have shared and experienced but there are so many ways that God's love is not similar. In his commentary on Jesus' Farwell Discourse, Luther has written:

It does not require such great skill to begin to love; but, as Christ says here, (*in this discourse*) remaining in love takes real skill and virtue. In matrimony many people are initially filled with such ardent affection and passion that they would fairly (consume) each other; later they become bitter foes. The same thing happens among (Christians). That is the devil's joy and delight. He strives for nothing else than to destroy love among Christians and to create utter hatred and envy. For the devil knows very well that Christendom is built and preserved by love.²

We have a tendency to love when it's easy and when it is reciprocated because we live in a world that encourages the culture and society to be polarized out of fear of difference and love is then merely shared with those who love us in return. We give love easily when we know it is returned but when it becomes challenging and difficult, it is abandoned with the click of the mouse or a button, cut off, and left to die. Moreover, there are some who feel God can only love them when they love God. Nonetheless, we have a God who loves us even when we don't love in return.

We have a God who has sent His Son to reveal a love for us, a love that we did not choose but a love that has chosen us. God has chosen us to love one another as God has loved us. St John addresses this earlier in the epistle appointed for today:

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶ for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

Moving a little deeper into the Epistle, we hear this today:

⁵ Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

⁶ This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but

² Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Luther's Works Volume 22, Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 14-16*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961. Page 246.

with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. (1 John 5:5-6)

The translation of “conquering the world” in this epistle may be a bit misleading. Conquering the world is not taking over the world by defeating it or beating others down in order to reign supreme over it and feel better about ourselves. We are not sent to destroy the world with a righteous supremacy we are sent to love *those in the world*. John is reminding us in the Gospel that, if we have the faith, we say we have then we can “overcome” the worldly ways with God’s love. Overcoming is a better translation than conquering. Overcoming the world is abiding in the love of Christ, reflecting the light of Christ...sharing respect and love in the face of difference, sharing respect and love...understanding that...giving love is giving that love freely with no strings attached...giving with the expectation of getting nothing in return...revealing not ourselves in the giving but revealing the glory of God...God becomes known to the world through the grace and love we take joy in sharing. But even when we stumble, St. John reminds us:

³⁷Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away; ³⁸for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. John 6:37-39

In this promise, the dissonance of the world is blended into perfect harmony with God through the love of Jesus Christ for us and for all the world.

Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.