

TRINITY UNITED CHURCH: MAY 9, 2021
SUMMARY: MOTHER'S DAY 2021
(John 15:9-17)

Today is Mother's Day and we are honoring the very best of the mothering spirit of all people everywhere – of course, of those among us who actually are mothers now, but also including our own mothers - both living and those who have died - as well as all mothers everywhere and of all times. We thank God for the very best of their maternal nurturing and care, praying God's blessing on them, and on us as, with gratitude, we remember them in our minds and hearts.

Today's reading begins: **9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.** Jesus is describing this beautiful and perpetual love-flow, the constant streaming out from the heart of God, through the Son and the Holy Spirit and easily including us... Our place, he says, is quite simply, to 'ABIDE' within that sacred flow, *μεινᾶτε*, meaning to stay, to settle, to remain, to exist unchanged, all of which suggests a state of permanence, our calling to settle in as open, available, channels as St Francis prayed, to be the conduits of God's perfect love, perfect shalom-peace as it flows into, through and out from us.

And then we're told how we are to do that: **10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in God's love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.**

That's the point of it all is 'joy' *ἡ ἀγαλλία!* It's what John 10:10 describes as our having life in all of its abundance – what that Ethiopian eunuch experienced after meeting Phillip - as we're told he went on his way 'rejoicing!'

12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants^(a) any longer, because the servant^(b) 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. We must surely get it that Christianity is a 'revealed' religion... Yes, its truth is forever more - bottomless... but it's not secretive..., *because* as Jesus says, *I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*

And then, **16 You did not choose me but I chose you.** I wonder how often we allow ourselves to miss that - let it pass us by. No. Please, let's sit with that for a while: our sacred chosen'ness? And chosen not just to inflate our egos but, as he says in the next verse, for a particular purpose! I love the image of the church as part of God's toolbox, with God reaching in for us as the exact tool required to do a particular job! Notice how 'chosen' *ἐξελεξαμένην* is in the *1st person, singular, aorist, indicative* - meaning '**You – and particularly you - are chosen – and are constantly being so!**' ...and chosen for a particular purpose. Which, he says, is: **...to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.**

Paul gives us a good idea of what the 'fruit the lasts' actually is as he writes in 1 Cor. 13 that while everything we know will eventually end, the greatest of the only 3 things that truly lasts: faith, hope and love, *is love*...

Then, just in case they were still missing this, he sums it all up for us in this last verse: **17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.** Notice he's not speaking about

how we need only to be caring or even liking one another here - *and certainly never judging or condescending* – but to be LOVING which is so much more... He's speaking about the setting aside of our ego selves for the sake of the other. *'the laying down of our lives for the other...'*

Remember CS Lewis's very helpful distinction of the 4 loves named in classical Greek? English conflates them all into just one confusing word 'love'. Storge is the 'love of things' Kind of fickle. It describes the loyalty which we may give to a sports team, perhaps, while they are winning... It ebbs & flows depending on our mood. That's not what Jesus was teaching here. Phileo is about love as 'our appreciation of admirable qualities, such as a fine friendship – a very good thing, but which can be lost by betrayal or disillusioned by failure. Eros describes 'physically embodied love' – infatuation perhaps (false fire – ignis fatuus) that can quickly flare up and die just as quickly, romantic attraction, for example. Scripture uses Agape to describe the highest form of self-sacrificial altruism – it's 'the 'selfless concern for the welfare of the other. It is love absolutely undeserved, unachieved, unearned.

Unless Christians are able to 'abide' in this highest form of love we really have nothing sacred to know, and certainly nothing to offer creation that it can't get anywhere else. In fact, it's deeply tragic that we so often conflate who and what God is and does for us in Jesus Christ with some combination of any of the lower love-forms - as if God could ever most essentially be about just wanting our loyalty, or infatuation, or friendship!

Agape is what St Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) taught as her 'Little Way' where our highest calling is to love entirely for the good of the other. That is the nature of divine love! It's the essence of what Jesus Christ was and what our following him must be all about. God self-describes as the purest expression of this form of love as we read it in 1 John 4:16, that ***'God is agape-love and those who live in (again, 'abide' in) that agape-love abide in God and God abides in them'***. This is a love perpetual. Eternal! Utterly bottomless. Always, infinitely more! I recently came across something quite hauntingly beautiful Pierre Teilhard de Chardin¹ wrote describing how ***"God does not offer (God)self to our finite beings as a thing all complete and ready to be embraced. For us, (God) is eternal discovery and eternal growth. The more we think we understand (God), the more (God) reveals (God)self as otherwise. The more we think we can hold (God), the further (God) withdraws, but with the intention of always drawing us ever deeper into the wonderful, loving depths of (God)self.***

We grow into the joyful & abundant life that Jesus teaches as we allow ourselves not to get stuck in any of the more immature stages of our faith. Until we do so, we remain trapped within the ego-focused influence of our worst narcissistic selves, hiding behind whatever God-talk we may choose – and our actual appreciation and participation in Christ's abundant life remains beyond our reach.

I'm intrigued by philosopher Ken Wilbur's teaching of how we need at least 3 levels of conversion if we are to grow into the maturity of faith that God intends for us – which is ultimately our appreciation of God's kingdom as having already come on earth actually as it is in heaven. Our cleaning up is an important but very initial stage of our faith. It's as we feel convicted of whatever we believe is toxic in our lives and so choose to stop those behaviours – to 'clean up our act' in our efforts to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ.

While helpful and even necessary to start with, it's deeply unfortunate as people get stuck at this level the whole of the lives, trying to convince themselves that this is their living the fullness – the joy - that Jesus promised.

Our growing up challenges that. As we are blessed by some deeper insight, perhaps after exposure to some wider, better teaching, preaching, reading – or perhaps, for some, it's after some crisis: ...after deep suffering, or even after some great loving – so we may find that we are beginning to challenge some of what we had previously felt was all there is to know – and we begin to grow up. This can feel both threatening and liberating, depending on our contexts. It's when some people may actually feel that they are losing their faith – and that's too bad, because actually, potentially, that can be art of our growing up – our coming to understand how god's grace is bigger, wider, better. But then there's more - so very much more. Because if we are truly blessed, we may be given just to begin to glimpse it! We begin to wake up to a reality of truly how there is nowhere where God is not! That it is actually all Christ from the very beginning of time and wherever there is goodness and life and love and beauty.

How dare we try to fit the infinity mystery of Christ's ubiquitous sacred Self into the small and rigid predictability of our pre-fabricated religious boxes? A woken-up Christian shows up by living a life that 'gets' how there is always more than enough of God for everyone and everything: more than enough of God's restorative love, justice, grace, healing to fill all of creation forever... And it's given to us to know it, AND TO LIVE IT!

The full abundance of life that Christ points us towards in today's text compels us to shift our perspective on everything towards this new most radically inclusive paradigm – changing/ expanding our small exclusivist thinking toward an expectation and an appreciation of the utter spaciousness of God within the entirety of creation. If, instead, we insist on following just our own self-preserving agendas God will continue to do as God does, using any and all around us to do God's work. But when we as the Church ARE able to catch the wonder of that breathtakingly inclusive and infinitely wide vision and begin to get it right, well, now THAT'S what our living the 'joy' of Christ's abundant life is all about!

All we as the Church need be and do is what we can to ensure our leaning into our Go-given role as the catalysts, the kingdom-starters that we are called to be, trusting God's Spirit to complete the work that God intends. Our call is simply to be - how does the New Testamentⁱⁱ put it?: ...just be the little bit of salt that seasons the whole, just the bit of leaven that causes the whole lump to rise, the bit of light that is enough to penetrate and displace the darkness however dark it may be. Oh, may we be open to this stunning reality... Open to it and lie into it! May it be so

Amen

Rev Robin Jacobson

ⁱ Op cit Universal Christ (2019:78)

ⁱⁱ Luke 14; Matthew 5; Mark 9