

“Staying to Go”

Second in a Lent series on John 15

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John 15:1-17

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I am the real vine and my Father is the vine grower. . . .

Make your home in me, as I make my home in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it is at home in the vine, neither can you unless you are making your home in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. . . .

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; make your home in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will be at home in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and am at home in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be filled to the top.

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. 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.¹

I

What else can they do? They are hunkering down. This teaching of Jesus seems perfect for sheltering in place until the storm passes. (Will it ever pass?)

They are in their last hours with Jesus. Soon Jesus will be dead. They will be hunted and hiding. Jesus is getting them ready for this. We need to be ready too.

We got into this last week. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches.

With that, he's warning us. We utterly depend on him. We need to be deeply connected with Jesus, living always in who he is, and what he does, and what he says. Otherwise, we'll be a cut-off branch. It might look alive, for a while, but it's fruit-producing days are done.

Jesus is warning us, and he is promising us. Staying in Jesus, we are filled more and more with his presence, and he is giving us all we need to be fruitful. We've got our parts to do, but it's not all on us. Not at all.

¹ I've adapted the NRSV translation.

I left off with a question. What "fruit" does Jesus have in mind? What are we branches in the business of bearing? Hearing what he says now, it seems we're growing fruit for home consumption, not to give away. Hmm.

II

Jesus gives two teachings here which, I figure, are among his best known. They're back to back, and short enough to fit on a tombstone.

Love one another as I have loved you.

and

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

"*Love one another.*" It's Jesus "New Commandment." Don't confuse it with his "Great Commandment," that two-part one: Love God, Love neighbour.² Or his Troubling Commandment, "Love your enemy."³ This New one makes no mention of enemy or neighbour. Just our bunch here, loving one another.

"*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" Mr. Putin just used it this week, at a rally cheering his army's invasion of Ukraine.⁴ See, Russian caskets are coming home. If you want people to keep sending more sons, you've got to convince them there is something meaningful, noble, loving even, in the slaughter. Before we sneer at Mr. Putin's misuse of Scripture . . . we've been using the same line, for the same reasons for generations.

Love one another. Love to your death your friends. Both seem in-house, us-against-them.

Except, we belong to the Vine.

III

So the Vine fills us.

Jesus fills us with nothing less than the greatest thing possible: God's divine love!

He gives us a glimpse into God: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Father is at home in the Son, and the Son is at home in the Father, both forever held by the

² Jesus cited the "love God" and "love neighbour" commandments in Matthew 22:35-40 and Mark 12:28-34. In Luke 10:27 they were cited back to him in answer to a question. These commandments were not original with Jesus, but were well-known from Deuteronomy 6:5-6 and Leviticus 19:18.

³ Matthew 5:43-48, which is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

⁴ www.christianpost.com/news/putin-john-15-to-hail-ukraine-invasion.html

Spirit.⁵ Three in One, the One who are three. Perfect love, that God-Home, the Trinity
It's mind bending.

Now, listen to this. Jesus says here that he loves us — you! — *as his Father loves him*.
Heart-blowing! Overwhelming. Realizing this is his love for us!

He has come and made his home among us, so he can bring us into that God-
Home. Jesus invites you in. You're at home in God's love. God's love is your fixed
address.

You are beloved! Sink in that. Beloved! Rest in that. Everything you do, everything
that happens to you, everything you are . . . all of it is as someone who is perfectly
loved by God: extravagantly, unceasingly, devotedly, wholly.

Receive that you are so loved, by such as One, and joy fills you to the top,
overflowing.

IV

Now, your marching orders. "*I give you this new commandment,*" Jesus tells us what
to do. "*Love one another.*" He commands, like a master would a slave in that culture,
or an officer a soldier. But how can you command love?

Then Jesus calls us his friends. Not his subordinates, though we clearly are. Friends.
A special kind of love. Do friends issue commands?

The picture I get here is of us being so immersed in Jesus, because we are
branches on his vine, feeding on him: his words, his life, his love. He en-culturates us
into his love. He so immerses us that we become friends, in the closest friendship
possible.

We don't do what we are told, then, *because it's an order*. Rather, we're doing what
he says because we love him who loves us more.

How much more? This . . .

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

⁵ "The Son is the permanent and eternal 'home' of the Father, as the Father is the eternal home of the Son." Michael J. Gorman, Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 72 n.4.

Jesus says this, because he is about to do it. He is about to willingly put his life on the line, and surrender it, for all whom he loves. He lay down his life for . . .

*. . . his friends
. . . his deniers
. . . his betrayers
. . . his despisers
. . . his torturers
. . . his executioners
. . . his persecutors
. . . his enemies
. . . all who are on the other side of the battle line
. . . all of us for whom, while we were his enemies, Jesus died.⁶*

When you experience that depth of love, can you do anything but love? Can you feel anything but joy? Can you do anything but whatever this friend wants? You know it's good. You know him. Your vine.

V

As I said, those two snippets from Jesus' teaching —

*Love one another. . .
and
. . . lay down one's life for one's friends.*

— they can have feel of a closed-in community, with a keeping-it-inside love and an us-verses-everyone else embattledness. It's easy to fall into this. The story of Jesus' people is full with examples.

But Jesus shows us the true posture of love. It is arms widened on a cross, not swinging a sword or aiming a rifle.

Jesus himself shows us that loving one another within the community of his people is not instead of loving our neighbour, or even in tension with loving our enemy. Rather, the love we have with God flows over into the love we have with other disciples, and keeps flowing over into the love we give to those outside, and those on the other side.

VI

I wondered what this fruit is that Jesus wants us to produce. Might it have something to do with love: his love, our love together, and not it stopping there?

⁶ See Romans 5:6-11.

We are branches of the Vine. What does a vine do? Jesus doesn't pick a tree here (you know I love trees!) "I am the Shrub." "I am the Potted Plant." No, he's the Vine. What does a vine do?

It moves. It doesn't stay where you plant it. It spreads. It climbs.

Jesus begins with his God-love for them. Then their love for one another. *Live in my house. Stay in my love.* Then he says, "*You didn't pick me. I picked you. I gave you this job: Go!*"

Go.

You stay, so you can go.
You live in the house, so you can leave the house.
Jesus gathers us, so we can go away.
We belong in the Vine, so together we can branch and move.⁷

Jesus shows us love's direction. God's love does not close in. It moves out.

And then . . . fruit.

The branches of the Vine do not hunker down. They go into the storm. Yes, there is a storm. But that's where love goes. We follow our friend.

Amen.

⁷ Gorman calls us "the mobile, creeping vine." (101)