

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, May 6, 2018 // Easter 6, Year B

The Gospel: John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, "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."

Background and general observations

This passage, with its emphasis on "abiding" in Christ's love and "bearing fruit," continues and elaborates on the metaphor of the vine and the branches. Jesus emphasizes the importance of staying connected to him, abiding in him, and drawing our life from him, just as branches are connected to the vine and draw their life from the vine.

Most biblical scholars believe that the Gospel according to John was written toward the end of the first century, a time when the early Christians were experiencing increasing hostility from the Roman government and from the Jewish authorities. One might detect in John's Gospel, and certainly in this passage, the growing awareness of how important it is for a persecuted community to stay together, to remain committed to each other, and to be clear and steadfast about the source of their true life. The imagery of bearing fruit could refer to the disciples growing in love for each other, and it could also refer to the making of other disciples; that is, drawing others into their fellowship of faith and love.

*We also have in this passage a reminder of Jesus' "New Commandment," the *mandatum novum* from which we get the word "Maundy" in Maundy Thursday: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Jesus first gives this commandment in chapter 13:34, and he repeats it here for emphasis.*

An interesting point to ponder is that Jesus commands us to do something that he enables us to do. Our Lord's love for us enables us to love each other; our staying connected to God's love allows that same love to flow through us to one another and to bear much fruit. One might say that prayer is all about opening ourselves more completely to the divine love in whom we live and move and have our being, the divine love that abides in all of us. The more we turn our hearts and minds to this love and to this true source of our life, the more God's love and life flows through us, inspires us, and animates us. On the other hand, the more we ignore or remain distracted from God's life-giving presence, the more apt we are to forget God, remain closed to God, or block the free flow of divine love into our lives.

Children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd do not talk about "sin" but about "blocks." That is, the children learn about and intuitively understand the idea of being connected to God as branches are connected to a vine. They also understand that sometimes certain blocks or blockages (what we might call sins) develop that prevent the free flow of God's life and love from the vine into the branches, that is, us. As the children prepare to receive Holy Communion, they wonder, "What might be blocking the free flow of God's love into my life? What might

be preventing God's life from growing in me and so preventing me from growing in God? What is keeping me from feeling fully alive and whole and joyful?" The children are thus pondering and confessing their "blocks," not their "sins," an important distinction.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. Notice how Jesus says in this passage, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Following up on the comments above concerning how children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd learn about things that can block the free flow of God's life, love, and joy into our lives, take a moment to ponder what might be preventing the free flow of God's life and joy into your life. Try not to think of "sin" but rather hindrances, resistances, or hesitations that prevent a more intimate relationship with God. What are your blocks? How have you managed—or have you?—to dismantle whatever blocks are in the way? What support might you need to move closer to God?

2. Jesus says he no longer calls the disciples "servants" but calls them instead "friends."

What is the difference between thinking of Christ or God as your master or lord and thinking of Christ or God as your friend? How do you tend to think of Christ? Do you sense the kind of intimate connection that comes with friendship, or a less personal and perhaps more distant connection such as a servant has to a master? What does this say about the nature of your relationship with God?

3. "You did not choose me but I chose you."

Our culture prizes self-autonomy and personal choice. We might even talk about choosing our religion or even choosing our God. But what difference would it make if you believed deep down that God chose you?

Do you think of yourself as the initiator of your relationship with God, or do you think of God as the one who initiates the relationship? When you are moved to prayer, was that your idea or God's prompting? How is your relationship with God affected when you think of God as one who is not just passively waiting for you, but as one who is constantly initiating, seeking you, and knocking on the door of your heart?

4. Continuing with this idea of "choosing" vs. "being chosen," think about how this idea might be applied to the life of a church community. What is the difference between choosing and being chosen? For example, if you are new to a church community, consider what it feels like to have an array of choices you might make about how to get involved. Now, consider what it feels like to have someone approach you and "choose" you. What responsibilities does a church have to balance choosing with being chosen? How can the church issue an invitation for fellowship without inadvertently being its own "block" by assuming choices that are someone else's to make?

If we are called to love one another as Christ loved us, might that include a calling to “choose” one another, as Christ “chose” us? What are some of the ways we might choose others, especially those who are new to us or perhaps even those who currently have no relationship with us?

5. One way of thinking about our role as “friends” who have been “chosen” by Jesus is to say that he has chosen us to be partners or collaborators in the work he has begun. We are not servants or slaves taking orders from a master. Instead, we are friends of Christ who turn to him regularly in prayer and with thanksgiving. In a sense, we are asking or pondering with Christ, what is my role in continuing the life and good work of Christ on earth?

Think of your life as if it were a book. Some of the chapters have already been written. You can look back over the course of your life so far and re-read those chapters. Much has happened already. But right now, and every day, you are beginning a new chapter. This page and the pages ahead are blank. Christ is your friend and co-author (if you allow him to be) of your life going forward. Turn to Christ in prayer and ponder with each other, “How shall we write this next chapter together?” What do you hear Christ saying? What do you say in response?