

Jesus's Message of Love  
Easter VI  
1 John 5:1-6 and John 15:9-17  
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Recently a high school art teacher in New York City gave his students a project: to create a pandemic picture of life as the world slowly begins to emerge from lockdown. One student drew a laptop computer, opened, with a person stepping out of their Zoom square and back into the flesh-and-blood world. Another crafted a woman exiting her apartment from the vantage point of her cat, who watched her human leave after all those months of being stuck home together. But the one that most captured my heart was from an artist named Amy Young, who granted permission for her picture to be shared with you this morning.

Here we see a family seated around their table, which holds lasagna, salad, spaghetti and meatballs, those family staples that sustain life. Near the center of the picture is an empty chair, and behind it on the wall is a picture of a couple. Grandfather is at the table, but Grandmother is not. Grief bathes Grandfather in blue. Around the table are small but significant markers of the pandemic: face masks, band aids on vaccinated arms. It is a scene of grief and resilience, of how loss and comfort co-mingle when one sits down into the belonging of a family and mourns the loss of a cherished member. This scene has been replicated 1000 times over across the world. All the empty chairs. And in our own particular way, it is right here this morning. We, too, have empty pew seats. We, too, have face masks and vaccinated arms. We, too, have our grief and our steady hope of divine provision rooted in our belonging to God and one another.

Jesus has gathered his community around a table. The threat of his death is thick in the air. He offers a farewell, an address which spans five chapters of John's Gospel. My chair will be emptied soon, he is saying. Here are the things you must remember for the future. His message can be summarized in three short sentences: I, Jesus, am born of God's love. I share that love with you. You stay in my love by loving one another. God is love. I am love. Abide in this love by loving others. The word love is repeated nine times in John's nine verses, five more times in the first letter of John. That's fourteen times this morning we have received an instruction about love.

Now love is an easy word to say, sometimes. It can roll off our tongues in the moments of bliss after a perfect day, perfect dessert, a cooing baby. Love can be harder to confess, poking its way out, tentatively, of our vulnerable hearts. Do you remember when you received someone's "I love you" in a way that changed your life? Or felt a steady love that grounded your soul, shaped your days? To love is to give one's heart over to someone, something, which seems easy enough to understand, until we are asked to do it. Then we must discern the complicated how's, when's, and who's, the actual stuff of love.

Scripture commands we love as God loves. When you hear this directive, what do you imagine? What picture emerges in your mind's eye? Is loving God coming to church, getting up early each morning to pray? Is loving God the rush of gratitude to our Creator, surging on a stunning spring day or the mystical union between heaven and earth felt during a cherished hymn?

Scripture adds to the first phrase the second one: love God by loving one another. How do you imagine embodying this love? Picking up groceries for a neighbor in need? Staying up late to listen to a child in crisis? Offering forgiveness when someone says, I was wrong. Is it the daily commitments of being a faithful spouse, a responsible citizen, an attentive parent, a devoted activist or merciful neighbor? "Genuine faith," says Judith Jones, "is firmly connected with active love."<sup>1</sup> The word love is ever around us. The acts of love are not easy. As I leave you, says Jesus, my command to you is to love.

Jesus does offer some specificity. He models the love he offers us after the love of God showed to him. As the Father loves me, so I love you. Think about how God loved him; sending him into the world as a vulnerable infant, who becomes an adult experiencing the joy of being called "beloved" and the struggle of wrestling with Satan in the wilderness, experiencing the triumph of healing the sick and the abandonment of misguided disciples who had not a clue what was really going on. Jesus would have moments he felt extraordinarily close to God – the Father and I are one – and spaces where he was alone, rejected, left naked in front of the world's cruelty. God offered Jesus, as preacher William Sloane Coffin once said, "minimum protection, maximum support."

For Jesus, the loving response to God's love culminated in laying down his life. On the night before his life would be emptied, he names this approaching sacrifice as his greatest act of love. "Few, if any, of us are asked to do the same, but the cruciform shape of Jesus's love is one we are called to follow," said Robin Maas.<sup>2</sup> This kind of love is not always easy, ever gentle, relentlessly cheerful. It is solid, steady, grounded in our identity as beloved. It is clear about truthfulness, able to see what is worth dying for. "All of us," Maas continued, "are called to a series of little deaths, invitations to restrain the self, or the self's need for gratification," until our hearts are molded into Christ's purposes.

These past months have called forth such denials of us, molding us into ones who ask not what is convenient for me but what is for the community's good, not what do I want but what protects another's vulnerability, and whose unjust pain cannot we no longer ignore?

Notice how Jesus refers to us in his cruciform description. He calls us friends. Jesus renames us his friends. Before we were followers or his servants. Now we are friends. Friendship implies a mutuality of need, a vulnerability of shared intimacies, a commitment to staying together over

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<sup>1</sup> Jones, Judith, Commentary on 1 John 5:1-6, Working Preacher, May 10, 2015. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-1-john-51-6-3>.

<sup>2</sup> Maas, Robin M. Van L., *Crucified Love: The Practice of Christian Perfection* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 98, 121.

the long haul. Notice also that Jesus doesn't say, "I hope one day we'll be friends, after we've gotten to know each other better, after you've matured a bit, grown into being worthy of my friendship." Jesus names us friends he has chosen right now. What a privilege to be a friend of Jesus.

My oldest friend is a woman I met in junior high school. We survived adolescence together, conferring about homework, parents, and future plans. We took trips to the beach, to the Mountain West, and to tour colleges. She knew my deepest dreams, darkest fears, and worst faults. We stood up at each other's weddings and traveled to be present at parents' funerals. Through a particularly rough portion of my life I marveled at her uncanny ability to be by the phone when I most needed to talk. To this day, her friendship conveys to me the grace of God active in my life.

Jesus names us friends. He says, with you I want a history that remembers God's power to heal, God's capacity to work miracles. With you, friends, I seek an intimacy of shared laughter, late night conversations, and meals around a table. With you, I kindle trust – you trusting that I am with you always, me able to trust your faithfulness to my active love for the world. Being a friend of Jesus is not just a privilege but a responsibility; we are embodiments of God's grace for one another.

The day after Jesus' farewell address, he is lifted up upon the cross. His seat at the community's table stands empty. The friends of Jesus will have to recall together his instructions, have to gird up their courage to live lives of love in a world that does not reward vulnerability nor sacrifice. But soon they will realize that if his chair is empty, it is because his Spirit now fills the world, blows into their shattered lives. This is the final way God loves; by resurrection. Here is a love that refuses to leave Jesus in the grave, nor any of us in ours either. Friends of God, trust that out of the tumult of this present moment, with all its empty chairs, waylaid plans and uncertain futures, we are ever gathered around God's table, a table of eternal belonging, ever-flowing grace and resurrecting love. Amen.