

PPT Those of you here for our first service with you would have heard Francis preach on Jesus' parable of the Lost Son. He brought out a bit of how radical God's grace is, how overwhelming the Love of the father was for the returning lost son, how the Father offered so much more than just mercy and how much joy God has in us coming to him. If you didn't get to hear this I'd really like you to ask him for a copy in written or audio form after the service as in that sermon we shared what we believe God calls us all to in this place.

The Gospel passage today from John chapter 15 builds on that illustration of God's Love for us, that picture of the Father receiving the lost son. It relies on us understanding that radical love which God has for us, the sort of love which does not wait for us to beg for a place as his servants but lavishes us with the privilege of being his children as we turn and come to him.

This extravagant love is what the Father has for Jesus and what Jesus has for us. We need to accept it, to abide in it, to remain in it. The passage this reading is part of is all about branches abiding/remaining in the vine. **PPT** If we think of a grapevine - The branch is not alive unless it has the sap, the life, of the vine flowing through it, within it, providing all that is necessary for its life and fruiting, Abiding for us means living within, dwelling in, the love Jesus has for us; being filled by that love, being provided for by that love.

The love the Father and Jesus share is unrestrained and unconditional. It involves Jesus being obedient to the commandments of the Father. For us we must decide to accept Jesus' love, and to remain in it and this involves keeping Jesus' commandments. And Jesus sums up what his commandments are in the one command – to love one another as he loves us.

The love we are to have for one another is the love which Jesus has for us which is the love the Father has for Jesus. Love is the relationship between the Father and Jesus. Believers are invited into this relationship of love. Jesus loves us with the intensity of love that the Father has for him, not a feeling but a relationship.

And to remain in this love, to accept it, we demonstrate our love in return by having this love for one another.

John reiterates/repeats this in his first letter that we also heard read this morning – that loving God involves obedience to his commandments which relate to loving his children – our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's get into this passage a bit more to explore what this obedience to this command to love one another is about. **PPT** To begin with – remaining in Jesus' love is about a life full of Joy – the sort of Joy we might expect in God's future Kingdom – complete – and yet available to us now as we live in his love, obeying him in loving one another. That is something of my experience – that the greatest joy I have is both in the flashes of knowing God's love for me and the relationships I have with my sisters and brothers in Christ.

PPT Jesus love for us is as his friends. We are really Jesus' friends if we do what he commands us. What is the nature of this sort of obedience? The disciples knew they were his friends because Jesus had made known to them everything he had heard from the Father. We know we are his friends because Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit which teaches us all things and reminds us of everything that the Father taught through him. A friend is someone who has a special interest in you, someone who is on intimate terms with you, someone who has a close association with you. I want to be with and do good things for my friends, as much as they would like me to. So as friends of Jesus we want to obey him. We obey him in love and understanding, not blindly. We obey him as his friends and not as his servants or slaves. It is our willing choice.

PPT We are chosen to be loved. We did not choose Jesus! The initiative came from God. It was not us doing something to be connected to God. We are not trying to be a good branch in the vine. We just need to stay connected to be living in his love. As we are connected, as we accept his love and demonstrate that by obeying his command to love one another we will bear fruit – fruit that will last – that abides – it is the same Greek term. It is the natural expectation of

a branch which abides in the vine that it will blossom and fruit. The fruit that abides is fruit that has eternal significance and legacy. And that includes fruitful prayer – that the Father will give us whatever we ask him in Jesus name.

What is the fruit that abides? In John 17 Jesus prays that all his disciples and all who come to believe in him and follow him may be one in love that the world may know and believe that the Father sent the Son and loves them as he loves the Son. As we remain in Jesus' love, obeying him by loving one another we shall see the fruit of people coming to know him too and coming to accept his love too which has eternal consequences. Loving one another, being one in love, will lead to the fruit of others being saved. Is that what we want to see here?

PPT What is involved in loving one another? Jesus commands us to love one another as he has loved us. And the greatest measure of this is to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus has surely demonstrated this to the greatest extent on the cross. But he also demonstrated this in his self giving as Paul described it in Philippians 2:6-8 –

*though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

He demonstrated it in serving the disciples even to washing their feet. He demonstrated it in forgiving his tormentors from the cross. The self-giving serving love of Jesus is the pattern we have of how to love one another. The command to love one another sums up all that Jesus taught and demonstrated

– it is what all his commands point to. Can we make a conscious decision to give ourselves in love and risk everything for the other, most probably not our life but possibly our reputation, or some resource or risk being rejected or ostracized.

What does it take to set aside all that one believes about others, to set aside the prejudices that prevent or stifle friendship, in order to join others in being truly the Body of Christ? What would it take to set aside even for a moment what is familiar and cherished, whether beliefs or practices, in order to stand with another, especially someone different, perhaps even someone on the margins?

In our Acts reading today – sometimes called the ‘Gentile Pentecost’ – the disciples would have faced those questions. Peter was given clear dreams and commands to go to these non-Jews to share the Good news of Jesus with them. And before they were even baptized and without them being under God’s Law as given to God’s chosen people, being uncircumcised, they received the Holy Spirit! They became brothers and sisters in Christ! It was quite a struggle for the apostles to accept what God was doing and love these as fellow believers.

PPT So let’s get practical. We remain in Jesus’ love as branches abiding in the vine and producing fruit if we obey his command to love one another. Jesus is commanding his followers - us - to love our sisters and brothers in Christ who have been chosen by him – not by us. Jesus is commanding us to love one another as we really are, as we live with each other and come up against each other’s rough edges, the things that irritate us about each other or even hurt, the different personalities and backgrounds, views and opinions. We are to be at peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ, to pray for them, to value them above ourselves and look to their interests before our own. We are commanded to love those Christians whom we are with and who we meet each day, each week, not just those at a distance.

Who do we find it difficult to love as a sister or brother in Christ? Who do we not really want to have to relate with? I’d like to invite you to take a moment

now to think about that. We'll have a moment of silence. Ask God to highlight for you anyone who is a Christian but whom you find it difficult to be at peace with or to serve, to love as Jesus has loved you....