

# “Bearing Fruit”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – May 6, 2018*

Sixth Sunday of Easter

I John 5:1-6

Rev. John Wahl

John 15:9-17

Christian author Brian McClaren, in his recent book entitled *The Great Spiritual Migration*, encourages churches in our day to ask this grand question: “what can we do to better teach people to love?”<sup>1</sup>

The whole letter of First John – which we have been reading from in recent weeks – is about love. Love is the hallmark of our identity as Christian believers. We are to love God above all else, but if that love does not spill over into our ability to love others, then the claim to love God is proven hollow.

Today’s verses from I John 5 expand that emphasis to say that this love also results in something else: obedience; which is the fruit of God’s grace, not its root. Thus John, consistent with his fellow apostles, has the cart and the horse in the right order; obedience is the result of loving, not the cause.

This is why John is able to confidently declare that the kind of obedience he is talking about is not “burdensome,” indicating something hard, as in the sense of being hard of hearing. For many people, hearing is difficult due to age or physical damage to the eardrum. People like this want to hear well, wish they could hear well, but it can be a burden when your ears don’t function the way they should: frustrating and saddening. You wish you could hear better, but you can’t do it no matter how hard you try.<sup>2</sup>

If we do not have within us the Spirit of Christ as a gift of grace, trying to obey Jesus’ commands and God’s law can be difficult, frustrating, burdensome. And if you believe that your eternal future depends on getting it all right, it can also be terrifying and exhausting. Who can be obedient every second of every day?

But we profess a God of love – loving God, loving others, and keeping God’s commands form inseparable links in a circular chain. Jesus denounced the religious leaders of his day for imposing “heavy burdens (that were) hard to bear.” (Matthew 23:4) Thus, Jesus offers to take on our burdens, our heavy loads, in exchange for his yoke which is easy and light. Loving others – what John’s Gospel calls bearing fruit – is

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<sup>1</sup> Brian McClaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, p. 51

<sup>2</sup> Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*.

therefore not solely a result of our own effort, but is connected with the free gift of God's grace and love for us.

Turning, then, to John's Gospel, Jesus – in the midst of this long farewell to his disciples – says, “as the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” They had seen the way that the Father had loved Jesus, but also what had issued from their intimacy. As a baby, Herod had tried to kill Jesus. As an adult, he had been sent into the wilderness for 40 days under the assault of the devil. When he returned, Jesus was rejected in his hometown and was almost immediately pressed into conflict with the pious bureaucrats plotting to put an end to him.

We might wish that Jesus had said something else, like: *As the Father has loved me...I will spare you of all I went through and let you live a life of ease, with a wall of protection surrounding you.*

But, instead, it seems that Jesus' words of love are the same as the Father's; and that if we abide in his love, we may have to fight long battles against injustice, and people will wrinkle their brow and be puzzled by our weirdness, and we're unlikely to get ahead in the world, but will we be sent to serve in daunting places. And that is what's so wonderful about being loved by Jesus: it's daunting, it's difficult, it's something you think you have no ability to pull off – but you still go; and the one who loves you has gone there ahead of you.

And after saying to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you,” Jesus goes on to tell them, “You are my friends; no longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends.” It's a good thing that Jesus said, “I have called you friends.” He did not say, *you have proven yourselves to be great friends*. Instead, he calls you and me his friend knowing all that we are incapable of – apart from God's grace.<sup>3</sup>

In the ancient world, there were two kinds of friendship. One was political: one party was the patron and the other was the client; and aside from the particular business dealings they were engaged in, no relationship existed. On the other hand, there was something called “fictive-kinship” which was more reciprocal. These were friends that were always looking out for the well-being of the other, willing to defend the friend as a brother or sister would – even with one's life.

Jesus is saying that he is the disciples' friend; willing to give his life for them. He has brought them into a relationship of reciprocal love, creating a community of friends, willing to sacrifice themselves for each other. Based on what is being said here, Jesus does not die as an atonement for sins, but as a proof of God's great love toward

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<sup>3</sup> James Howell, “As the Father Has Loved Me” from *Day1.org*

humanity. The one who has just bent on his knees to wash the disciples' feet as a sign of his love for them, now claims friendship with them; and with us.

This, of course, does not get us off the hook; for the example Jesus gave is one for us to follow. Human branches, unlike real grape vine branches, need to some self-cultivation through the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to hone skills like forgiveness, kindness and compassion. Without these, sooner or later, we will find reasons not to love others and will become bitter like a sour grape. But with them, we will be reminded that others are flawed like ourselves; scarred and struggling as we all are; fellow unmerited, unwarranted recipients of love.

The result, Jesus tells us in verse 11, will be nothing short of pure joy. Capturing the spirit of joy, and wanting is to abound in all people, is the goal of being a branch in Jesus's vineyard. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the primary thing people did with grapes was make wine, which is imagined as one of God's great gifts to humanity; something to gladden the heart and allow joy to spring forth. Christ is our true vine, but a vine without branches produces no grapes. It is our holy calling to bear fruit for God – fruit which, as Scott Hoezee describes it, “can be turned into the sweet ambrosia of a love distilled, decanted and delighted over to the complete joy of all God's people.”<sup>4</sup>

This mention of joy may seem inappropriately placed in this farewell address. After all, where is the joy for the disciples in Jesus' departure and impending death. Joy represents a marked juxtaposition to the realities that the disciples face – that we also face. And maybe that is the point; because there is still joy, even in the midst of the hardship that Jesus described and is still to come. Joy is an affirmation of God's grace when all that is good seems far away. “It's the security of God's love when it seems love is nowhere to be felt. It's the hope that even in the darkest places of separation, God's love for us, and our love for God, is promised and present.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches; without our connection to the vine, we cannot bear good fruit. But, because of that that grace-given friendship, we can choose to participate in the circular chain of love. We can grow what – when divinely pressed and aged – can provide great joy; in any time, place and circumstance.

What a friend we have in Jesus; one who, today, invites us to come to his table to be fed; and who, each day, calls us to love others and bear good fruit. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> Scott Hoezee from *Center for Preaching Excellence*.

<sup>5</sup> Karoline Lewis, “Choose Joy”