

“Fruits and Friends”

[John 15:8-17](#)

Rev. Allen M. Thompson
First Presbyterian Church of Danville, VA
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This is our third Stewardship sermon for this year, and we are going to put the series on hold next month because this year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. So starting next week, we start a series on simplicity, which is what the Reformers 500 years ago were trying to bring us.

But today, we have our third of three passages from John 15. Over the past two weeks, we have heard what it means for Jesus to be the vine and us to be the branches, and what it means for us to bear fruit for Jesus. Today, Jesus tells us a little bit about what that fruit looks like.

In the first eight verses of this chapter, we can get a little nervous because Jesus uses some language that might sound threatening. Jesus says that he is the true vine and that his Father is the gardener, and that the gardener cuts all the branches that don't bear fruit...that those branches get thrown into a fire. Meanwhile, he prunes the branches that bear fruit so that they can bear even more.

So even though Jesus also tells us that we will bear fruit if we abide in him, there is still an edge to these verses that should inspire us to always seek to bear fruit, and to abide in Jesus, because our purpose is to glorify God. At the heart of this whole section is our stewardship verse for the year, verse 8: “This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

That is where we start today, and after Jesus says this, he tells us where to start with bearing fruit. Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide in my love.” So the first step to bear fruit is to abide in Jesus's love.

If Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, then it is Jesus's love that nourishes us, supplies us, so that we can be servants of him. God's love is the basic source of all that we are able to do.

Just think about our lives, and how important it is to be loved in order to accomplish what we need to accomplish. The reality is that if we are not loved and nurtured in life, then we are unlikely to bear much fruit. So much of what we are able to do and accomplish in life is the result of a foundation of love that allows us to pursue and explore our gifts and our calling. Love provides freedom.

Now, that might not sound very romantic, but love is not always romantic. The word for

love here is “agape,” and that means self-giving love. Romantic love is “eros,” and friendship love is “philia,” and appreciative love (like when you say, “I love hamburgers”) is “storge.”

But Jesus is talking about agape, which is self-giving love. It is love that provides, that sacrifices, that gives and makes possible, that does not even expect something in return, and that is not even earned, but given. Agape can include those other loves, but it goes beyond them

So love might mean presence, or providing. On a very simple level, think about how love provides for children. Children know that they are dependent on others, and when children are loved and provided for, they are free to do the learning and growing that they need to do. If a child knows where her next meal is coming from and that she has somewhere to sleep at night, and that there will be someone to protect her, then she is freed from the stress of trying to do something that she cannot do for herself.

When we know we are loved, we can relax, and when we can relax, we can produce fruit. I mentioned this last week, but consider a tree that is well rooted. It doesn't have to spend energy finding a place to live; it can put all its energy into bearing fruit. Likewise with a branch that is on a good vine, which is what Jesus tells us to be. If the branch is securely attached, then it's job is to bear fruit.

So abiding in Jesus's love is the foundation for all we are able to do. If we know that Jesus loves us, then we can explore his purpose for us...

...but do we really know that Jesus loves us? I mean, I know that we sing the song, “Jesus Loves Me,” and we teach it to our children, but sometimes it can actually be hard to feel like Jesus really does love us. It can also be hard to admit that we feel that way, if we do.

And the reason we might start questioning Jesus's love is right here in what he says next. Jesus seems to have pretty high standards. He says, “If you keep/obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept/obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.”

If we are not careful, Jesus's love can sound conditional. We are not always able to keep his commands. We are not good enough.

But Jesus isn't saying that he is going to withdraw his love—he's saying that we are at risk of wandering away from it. Jesus isn't warning us, he's telling us how to learn and live in his love. Where do we go to find Jesus's love? We go where he has instructed us.

But all too often, when we are unsure of being loved, then go looking for things that

substitute for love— things that appear to provide the security and the purpose that love is supposed to make possible.

There are plenty of ways that we try to find substitutes for love. We might find them in substances, or in destructive relationships. We might try to substitute financial security for love, or hobbies, or other things that we put before Jesus that might be easier to follow...that might have commands that are easier to keep.

If we are unsure of love, or if we are untrusting, we might place unfair expectations on those we expect to love us. But if we aren't looking to Jesus for the source and substance of love and for our purpose, then we are always going to be looking.

But here, Jesus tells us to abide in his love, because his love does not waver or wane...and it might sound difficult to seek his love in his commands, but isn't that how we come to learn and understand anything? We study, we experience, we practice, we follow. We grow in romantic love by walking alongside our spouse. We grow in appreciative love for a sports team by buying the tickets and driving to the games. We grow in friendship love by setting aside some of our needs and comfort and time in order to invest in the friendship...

...and that's what we have to do in order to grow in understanding of Jesus's love, as well. Just as we have to invest in a home if we want to abide in it, we have to invest in Jesus if we want to abide in him...

...and Jesus will always return with love the investment that he calls us to place in him. That is why he talks about his commands with joy.

He says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete," and then he actually gives us a command:

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

The command that Jesus gives— the freedom that Jesus's love gives us— is the freedom to love as he loves us.

So Jesus has said that as the Father has loved him, so he loves us. Now, we are to love others as he has loved us.

And that sounds wonderful, but as with keeping any command, it's not easy. First of all, sometimes it's just hard to love other people. But Jesus tells us to do it.

But knowing how to love other people can be tricky. This whole speech from Jesus was

during the Last Supper, right before he was arrested— the day before he was crucified. This was also only a few hours before Jesus asked the Father to not let him be crucified, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

So if we are to love others as Jesus loves us, and if Jesus loves us as the Father loves him, what does that say?

How has the Father loved Jesus?

- let him be human and suffer...but let him experience creation from the creature's perspective
- let him die on the cross...but let him know resurrection
- let him have power...but let him know us

So how does Jesus love us?

- forgiveness...but transformation (go and sin no more)
- abundant life...but set aside our own (rich young ruler)
- love and grace...but commissioned to serve

So the love of God is not just holding hands and affirmation. The love of God is love that forms and transforms. It is love with a purpose in mind.

It is love that forms and transforms, and sometimes has to turn us a different route than we might want to go, or sometimes tells us no.

One of the most difficult steps for Kelsey and me as parents lately has been the introduction of the word, “no.” It’s a delicate art, trying to bring “no” into a child’s life as she starts to become more able and more curious— especially when that ability and that curiosity are the most enjoyable things in your own life.

But you know that you have to set some boundaries, not because you want the boundaries, but because the child has little ability to differentiate between what is helpful and what is harmful.

Now, is that the love that God has for Jesus? No, not in an immature way, but Jesus did have some boundaries, and some restrictions, that he kept.

So sometimes love has to have a purpose other than being affirming. Our purpose in loving others as Jesus loves us is not so that we can be glorified as people who love, or the glory of others whom we love...the purpose is the glory of God.

So Jesus’s love for us is not a love that lets us do whatever we want. It is not an all-affirming love...and that is why everything about this passage is so difficult.

Nobody wants to be on the branches that are cut and don't bear fruit...

Nobody wants to be on the branches that wither and are thrown into the fire...

Everybody wants to be a part of God's love, but we don't want to accept that God's love involves cutting and pruning...maybe even a little burning. Even if Jesus tells us the way to avoid being cut and burned, we still don't want to consider the possibility...

And if we are hesitant about that, then we really don't want to read the end of this chapter (which is about the suffering and persecution that the disciples will endure for being Jesus's friends).

Jesus wants us to know that we are deeply loved, even if it's a love that we might not always want or understand, because it is only his love that can last and remain and carry us through even the darkest and most difficult places in life.

So when it comes to God's love, we have to accept the love and the cutting at the same time, and accept them together, or we lose sight of our purpose. So when we look at loving the world, the world might not always love us back, but that does not mean that the love is unrequited...Jesus offers us his love in place of any worldly affirmation love.

Now if all we think of God's love is that it involves commands and that it is going to be difficult, then we still might think of God as cold and distant...even if we know that we can grow closer to him. So the next thing Jesus says is very important:

"You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

We love others for the glory of God, we bear fruit for the glory of God, and we are loved for the glory of God...but we are not simply servants. Jesus has called us friends. So what's the difference?

A servant does things because he has to; a friend does things because he wants to.

Servants work for you, but friends abide with you.

I have visited enough folks who have sitters to know a difference. Sitters and loved ones are very different in the ways that they care. Now, some sitters go above and beyond the call of duty, but usually a sitter just hangs around to be sure things are ok, but neighbors and friends and family members do all the chores, provide companionship, and aren't even paid for it.

Jesus is also talking to people who had thought of themselves as bound to the law. They were servants of the law. Servants keep commandments because they have to; friends keep commandments because they want to...because of love...because they find joy in it.

Friendship love needs nothing back (no sacrifices, etc.). You know the friend will be there the next day. Servants might leave, and they require job descriptions, screening and vetting. Remember *Downton Abbey* and how often servants left? Friendship is a free relationship that grows naturally. Friends also get more information, trust, and confidence, as Jesus says here. A friend's payment is not money, but depth of knowing and loving.

The love of friendship is also a love that makes more friends. When we look into the world where God has called us to love one another, the truth is that we don't have to know each other...we just have to know Jesus. Just as he has supplied us with love, he calls us to love.

In other words, we all have the same mutual friend. We can introduce others to this friend. We all have Jesus in common...even if others don't know it.

Sometimes I wonder if one of the biggest difficulties the church faces is that we've all got the same mutual friend, but we are afraid to talk about him...

But Jesus wants us to talk about him...even the things that make us uncomfortable...

But more than that, Jesus wants us to share the love he has for us with one another. He wants to be the source of that love. Even if we have trouble loving, Jesus loves, so we should follow. Even if Jesus's love challenges us, we know his friendship, and that he will be there as we try to grow. Jesus really does want us to look at the world and say, "any friend of Jesus is a friend of mine" because we should accept that because Jesus loves, we love...

So what does this mean in terms of bearing fruit? Well, Jesus doesn't talk about the vines in this particular part of the passage, but think about grapes for a minute. The harshness of the environment brings about unique characteristics of flavor in the fruit, and being coddled doesn't always produce the best fruit. Vinekeepers actually cut away leaves to expose the grapes to more sun so they will be sweeter. Nevertheless, that is love. Love produces the best fruit: the Father loving the vines, Jesus loving us, us loving one another.

Jesus closes by saying this:

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and the Father will give you whatever you ask in my

name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.”

Jesus gives fruit that will last...love that will be there even when we have gone searching for other loves, even when we have not loved others or ourselves. Jesus’s friendship will be there, and his offer to love us and transform us and help us to bear fruit will be there.

What’s more, we are chosen for Jesus’s purpose, not for our own, and the faster we line the little branch of our life up with his vine, the sooner we can start producing the right kind of fruit.

Abide in Jesus’s love. Follow him, keep his commands. These tasks in the world are not always the simplest, but they are the most fruitful. Follow his command to love, and let others know the safety, the security, and the freedom of not only being Jesus’s servants, but being chosen as his friends.