

Jesus' Loved Ones

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John 15:9-17

When I was a boy, my parents mistook me for a mild-mannered Clark Kent sort of guy, but my sisters knew the truth: I was the Superman of antagonism. Being a middle child and less volatile than the other two, I became a master of aggravation.

I would needle and tease my sisters unmercifully, especially the older one, until she erupted in a volcano of outrage. Then I would quietly step aside when mom or dad rushed in, striking my most angelic pose as my sister ranted and raved. Usually, the ploy worked, and I took great delight in seeing my sister reprimanded for a spat I started.

But from time to time, mom or dad caught wind of my treachery. Then, of all the horrors of the damned I feared as punishment, the worst was, "Tell your sister you're sorry."

The problem was, I wasn't sorry at all! In fact, I was hopping mad at getting caught and having to endure my sister's smug grin from behind my parent's back. But yielding to dad or mom's stern injunction, I'd spit out the words, "I'm . . . *sorry!*"

"Say it like you mean it," came the instant reprimand. So I faked remorse as best I could, but I never meant it and I didn't forget.

So when Jesus says in John 15:12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another," I got a problem. Because being commanded to love sounds a lot like being told as a child to say I was sorry when I wasn't. I didn't like it then and I don't like it now. If I tell someone I'm sorry, I want it to be because *I* am sorry and not because someone, even Jesus, is pulling rank on me.

But thankfully, Jesus doesn't just say, "This is my commandment that you love one another." That's just the zinger that galvanized my attention like a lightning rod taking a strike. No, what Jesus actually says is "love one another *as I have loved you.*" That vitally important clause, "as I have loved you," is the premise for everything that follows.

One of the things I like best about Jesus is that he always gives whatever he asks of us. His grace precedes any response on our part. And this is true of the entire biblical revelation where the heartbeat of God's grace pumps the blood we need to breath and do God's work in the world.

For example, God gives Adam and Eve the gift of the good earth and let's them romp and play upon it. Only then are they asked to care for this priceless planet we call "home."

And God liberates the Hebrew slaves from Egypt long before unveiling the Ten Commandments, a short-course in the fully human life.

And God *gifts us* with Jesus before asking us to *follow* Jesus. Only after Jesus gives everything he has to give, including his life, does he glance back over his shoulder, the hint of a grin visible in the Easter light, and tosses back the question, "Now would you care to follow?"

Charles Kingsley, the 19th-century English author and pastor, was asked by an admirer, "Sir, what is the secret of your beautiful life? Tell me, that mine can be beautiful too."

"Madam," Kingsley answered, "I had a friend."

Jesus says, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." But the roots of that friendship rest not in what we do for Jesus, but in what Jesus has done and is doing for us.

Immediately following Jesus' command to love one another as I have loved you, he adds the intriguing invitation, "Abide in me." And "abide" doesn't mean giving Jesus a cursory nod at church on Sunday morning. "Abide" means to put your busy, self-important self aside and opening yourself to real hospitality when you sit down, take your shoes off, and sit a spell with Jesus.

And then, still gently prodding us to recognize where our source is, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." When Jesus' first disciples heard that line, they couldn't fully fathom his meaning. They just nodded their assent to what seemed a poignant, if self-evident truth. But they couldn't imagine--and the gospels give us every indication they *didn't* imagine--Jesus would actually go out and *do* it.

My sister, not the one so easily outraged, but the other one--who learned early on to smile sweetly at my provocations, ignore me, and move on--was recently reading a Bible story book to her granddaughter, Hadley.

My sister showed Hadley a picture of Jesus on the cross and explained its meaning, as best she could, to a two-year-old.

She then turned the page to reveal a picture of the resurrected Jesus stretching out his hands to some children. Hadley noticed the big, red dot on each of Jesus' upturned palms. Looking up at her grandmother with big, sad eyes, she said, "O Bear Bear, Jesus has a boo-boo!"

Clearly, she was worried about him, even if she didn't yet fathom those boo boos were signs of God's great love . . . for *her*.

"Greater love has no one than this that he or she lay down one's life for one's friends." No, the disciples gathered around Jesus in the upper room didn't fathom his meaning any more

than little Hadley did, until the enemies of Jesus made a blood pack to eliminate him and his closest friends cut and run. But not even that could quench the holy life and love, coursing through Jesus' veins.

Then on Easter morning, the riveting truth was driven home: there is absolutely nothing you can do or *not* do to quench God's great love for you. Because that love is a sheer unadulterated gift. It is not a reward, but a given.

As the poet said it, "I asked Jesus how much he loved me."

He spread his arms open wide and said, "*This* much." And then he died for me.

"This is my commandment, that you love one another . . . *as I have loved you.*" Maybe now we can begin to grasp Jesus' meaning. Loving others flows out of Jesus' love for us. We don't generate the love; we rest in it and revel in it and only then, turn it loose. In loving others as we have been loved by God, we are catching a ride on the same wave, rafting down the same, mighty river. In fact, the Greek word, *philos* rendered "friend" in our text might be better translated "loved one." How might it change our understanding of discipleship to realize we are not just Jesus' followers, or even his friends, but his loved ones?

Then what we do for or with Jesus is no longer one more ought or expectation. No, this kind of caring is just what "loved ones" do.

Like the faithful spouse who walks with his/her loved one, as he or she descends ever deeper into dementia, or some other devastating illness, that nibbles away at one's loved one until he or she is gone.

Or what about the parent of a child with disability or difference, who absorbs the same blows and rebuffs her child does. Only the parent of such a child must also summon the love and courage to buffer the blows and put arms on God's love for that child. As one sometimes exhausted mom cried out, "What am I supposed to do? Quit?!"

Or what about the minister or volunteer at the homeless shelter who recognizes some weathered, beaten soul not as a problem to be solved, but as a person to be cherished.

When that kind of love wells up within you, that's when you know it's not just your love flowing through you, but Jesus' own. Because that kind of caring is what Jesus' loved ones do.

A family driving through the country crashed into a stalled vehicle. The youngest daughter was seriously injured and lost a great deal of blood. She needed an immediate transfusion, but supplies were limited in the rural hospital where she was taken.

The injured girl's little brother was the only immediate source. The father asked the boy if he'd be willing to give blood to save his sister. The brother readily agreed and he was wheeled away to a room where his blood was drawn.

After the procedure, the father went to his son, lying on a gurney, looking pale and frightened. "Son, I want to thank you for giving blood to your sister."

"My blood?" the boy answered, as color returned to his face. "I thought I was giving my *life*."

"Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his *loved ones*." As God's *Loved One* laid down his life for you.

And so, we take the bread and the cup this morning. Each is a tangible reminder we aren't called to follow Jesus in our strength, but in his. We aren't called to love and serve others on our own, but with the life and love of the risen Lord coursing through our hearts.

And we don't do what we are called to do because we are Jesus' servants, or even Jesus friends. We do what we are called to do because we are Jesus' loved ones; we are family. And in families, blood runs thicker than water, especially when that life-giving blood flows from a cross.

O crucified and risen One, we are tired of trying to make it on our own. So as we take this bread and cup, fill us anew with your life and love. Help us to do what we need to do and are called to do more and more out of your great love for us, and our great love for you.

In your name we ask it, of our loving heavenly Abba, Amen.