

*Acts 10:44-48**Psalm 98**1 John 5:1-6**John 15:9-17*

*The Homiletical Question: What does the Holy Spirit want the People of God to understand from these texts on this occasion?*

*“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”* These words are taken from our readings in John’s gospel from last week and from this morning.

Today we are faced with a command and with the question, “What is love?” We hear about love in song, read about it in romantic novels, and we are told that love makes the world go round. But what is it? I do not think love can be defined in total. Like God, love cannot be totally understood or boxed into a convenient definition. Like God, love remains mysterious but is manifest in specific times and instances that are recognizable. In the literature attributed to the Apostle John we are told that “God is love”; that love is our origin, our constant calling, and our fulfillment in eventual union with God.

If we pay close attention to Jesus’ words in today’s gospel reading, we discover that the love he is talking about has a two-fold dimension. First of all, it is a command, a charge laid upon us. It has ethical and behavioral implications. Jesus does not say, “Love one another if you’re feeling up to it.” He doesn’t say, “Love your neighbor if he or she is lovable.” He doesn’t say, “Love one another according to abilities and limitations you have identified in yourself.” No, the command is simple, direct, and absolute: “Love one another!” On our part, love should arise from a deliberate set of the will, should be spontaneous in responding to need, and should be shown without selfish motives.

Now you might be saying to yourself, “That’s a tall order. I don’t think I can live up to that.” This is where the second dimension of the command comes into play. Notice the language that Jesus uses. He uses language with organic and ontological connotations: “I am the vine; you are the branches,” “abide in me,” “bear fruit.” The strength, the grace, to be able to live into this kind of loving is to come from our lives lived in him, for “apart from me you can do nothing” he says. But, as Lauren told us so powerfully on Easter Day, *with him and in him anything is possible.*

The seeming impossibility of overcoming the selfishness that comes to us so naturally by human nature is transformed by God’s grace and we see it all around us in heroic actions great and small. Witness the heroic actions of those who speak up and take a stand for justice despite risks to their own personal safety. We see God’s grace at work in the many unsung heroes—some homebound, some cloistered, some suffering terribly themselves—who quietly and faithfully hold the rest of us gently in prayer day after day. We see it in the selfless sacrificial love shown by caring mothers. Love that is genuine and true loves the Beloved after the needs of the Beloved and not the needs of the Lover. All this is evidence of God’s grace at work among us, and for that we have ample reason to give thanks.