

# Sixth Sunday of Easter

## NO LONGER SLAVES, BUT FRIENDS

John 15: 9-17

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By Steven C. Kuhl

9) As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10) If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11) I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12) 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13) No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14) You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15) I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16) You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17) I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

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## DIAGNOSIS: "Slaves"

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Not bearing fruit that will last (cf. verse 16)*

The setting is the upper room on the night of Jesus' betrayal. In spite of Jesus' long and poignant exhortation about all that was to happen in the days to come, the disciples will be

revealed as people “not bearing fruit that will last,” the fruit of “love for one another,” that is. Rather, as we know from Maundy Thursday, when the going gets tough, they desert one another and Jesus. Indeed, in spite of how close their fellowship seemed at this moment in the upper room, the truth is the events of Jesus’ passion reveal them as people who ultimately live by the motto “every person for him or her self” (cf. Jn 16:32). Doesn’t that same inability to “bear fruit that will last” still lurk among those who gather in remembrance of Jesus’ death today?

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** : *Not knowing what the Master is doing (cf. verses 15)*

The reason why disciples-then as now-do not “bear fruit that will last” is that they don’t really “know” what the master is doing. To be sure, their “not knowing” has nothing to do with a lack of information. Jesus has informed them in great detail what was about to happen. He was going to “lay down his life for his friends” (v. 13) and he “said these things” so that “their joy might be complete” (v. 11). The problem was that they did not believe him, that is, they did not “abide in his love” (v. 9). Although they were with Jesus in the upper room, they didn’t really “know” him as friend (v. 13), that is, as one who really loved them (v. 9)-not yet, anyway. Does that same kind of “not knowing” or “not abiding” still lurk in the hearts of those who gather in remembrance of Jesus’ death today?

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** : *Not having what the Father will give (cf. verse 16)*

Worst of all, by not knowing (or trusting) in Jesus as friend, they do not have fellowship with the only One, namely, the Son, who can present them to God, his Father, sympathetically, that is, as true friends. On the contrary, they stand before God on their own recognizance, as slaves, “slaves to sin” (Jn 8:34) that is, who have “no permanent place in the household” (Jn 8:

35). As slaves they live in fear, and have a place only so long as they can commend themselves to God, which because of sin, they cannot. As slaves who don't know or believe the words of Jesus, they have no basis, no "name" in which to ask the Father for anything, and so have not what the Father can give "in the name" of Jesus (v. 16): a "place [in the household of God] forever" (Jn 8:35), the very love with which the Father loves the Son (v. 9). Does that same kind of "not asking" and, thus, "not having" still threaten those who gather in remembrance of Jesus' death today?

## **PROGNOSIS: "Friends"**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *You did not choose me, I chose you (v. 16)*

Slaves can't be choosers, but the Son can (v. 16). And that is precisely what the Son does: he chooses to love the unlovable; he chooses to befriend the slave; he chooses to become the Friend of sinners. With the very love that the Father has loved him, he now chooses to love us (v. 9). So deep, so thoroughgoing, so true, is this love for those he chooses to befriend that he will go to any length to make and keep them as his friends. Indeed, he goes to the cross for them, he chooses to "lay down [his] life for [his] friends" (v. 13) that they may have his life, the very kind of life that the Son has with the Father: "a permanent place in the household" (Jn 8: 35). As Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this." This is the kind of love that is proclaimed when people gather in remembrance of Jesus' death-not by their choice, but by Jesus'.

**Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution)** : *"Abiding in his love" (v. 9)*

While it is true that there is no greater love than that which is revealed in the One who "lays down his life for his friends," nevertheless, it is also true that there is no greater joy for

that One than to have his love received (v. 11). Love, like an electrical charge, is completed (i.e., effects its jolt) only when the circuit is completed. Otherwise, the charge exists in vain. For this reason, Jesus urges his disciples-then as well as now-to “abide in his love,” to trust in his love, to believe that we are truly friends by his choosing. To “abide in his love” is to complete the circuit and, thus, to receive the fruit of his act of laying his life down for his friends. To abide in his love and to be his friends is thus to “know” what the Father is up to in sending his Son into the world (v. 15). Nothing brings more joy to Jesus and his Friends than this mutual abiding in his love. This is the kind of love that people are exhorted to abide in whenever they gather joyfully in remembrance of Jesus’ death.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** : *“I am giving you these commandments so that you may love one another “(v. 17)*

The circuit of love that Jesus has established for those who “abide in his love” is expansive. There is no limit, no bounds, to its reach. The love with which he has chosen to love us is the very same love in which we now love one another. That is the “commandment” Jesus has given us. But a word is in order on that word “commandment.” Slaves are prone to hear it as word of compulsion: a “have to.” They hear it that way, because they don’t abide in love and friendship, but in sin and slavery. In the mouth of Jesus, the word “commandment” here has nothing to do with outward compulsion or law or judgment. He did not lay down his life as “a have to” but “as “want to.” Rather, the word “commandment” here has to do with the “concrete” way one naturally responds to the plea or “command” for help a friend might express at any given moment. It is a word used to explain the dynamic of the communion that is so central to faith understood as “abiding in love.” When disciples love one another, they concretely do what the other needs as though it

was what they need. They “lay down [their] life for [their] friend.” This is the dynamic of love that is celebrated every time the friends of the Lord gather to remember his death.