

## LOVE: FROM METAPHOR TO MANDATE

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, May 10, 2015*

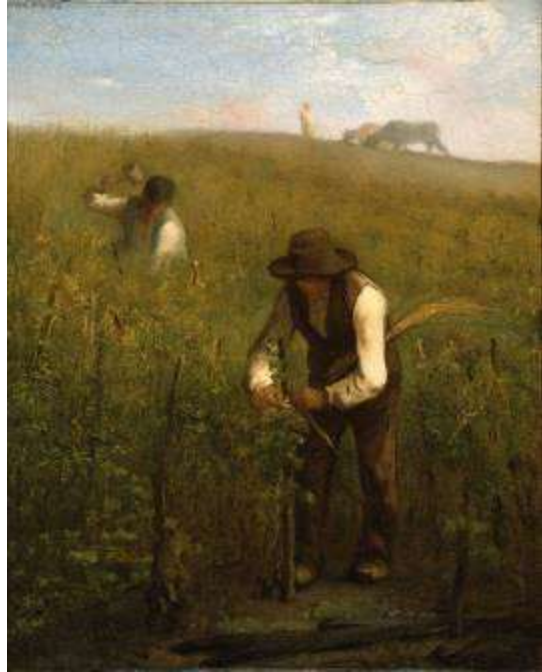
*Sixth Sunday of Easter – 10:00 a.m.*

*First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT*

*“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”*

### **Text: John 15:1-17**

[Jesus said to the disciples,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been pruned by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in



me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have

said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one



another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. 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. 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Last Sunday's scripture reading—which we heard again this morning—promises us that if we abide in Jesus, and Jesus abides in us, just as the branches abide in the vine, we will “bear much fruit” as his followers. This morning's scripture reading, which is a continuation of last Sunday's, moves from metaphor to mandate: from the metaphor of the vine and the branches to the mandate to love one another. Not only do we as Jesus' followers have the **opportunity** to abide in the vine: now we have the **obligation** to abide in the love with which Jesus has loved us. In this move from metaphor to mandate, we are given **both** the **opportunity** and the **obligation** to become not only Jesus' followers, but also Jesus' friends.

Jodi-Renee Adams is a pastor and a musician who lives in Denver.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the second half of our scripture reading from the Gospel of John, Jodi-Renee Adams writes:

“In one of the most familiar monologues given by [Jesus], John uncorks images of joy-giving love—love that makes [Jesus] our brother and no longer our Master.

“We hear [Jesus] repeat the word *love* nine times in eight verses. That's a lot of love. But the second most often repeated word? Command. This is also a text about following orders and making sacrificial choices.

“In other words, there's a lot of head nodding and then brow furrowing in this text.”<sup>2</sup>

The head-nodding is about the joy-giving love we receive from Jesus. The brow-furrowing is about being commanded to love. How can you command someone to love someone else? Any parent who has ever had to deal with sibling rivalry between or among their children knows the futility of saying, “I command you to love your brother.” “I order you to love your sister.” “I mandate that you love each other.”

This isn't the only place in the Gospels where Jesus issues a love commandment. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to his disciples, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

If we understand love as a complex emotion, then we understand that it's impossible to mandate, to order, to command someone to love someone else. Emotions cannot be mandated. Emotions can be managed (which is why we have such things as “anger management courses). Emotions can be managed, but they can't be mandated. Two people fall in love with each other because that's what happens. A parent gazes with awe and delight at their newborn infant and is awash in love because that's what happens.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/easter6gospel-2/>.

<sup>2</sup> Jodi-Renee Adams, “All You Need Is Love? Maybe,” <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/easter6gospel-2/>.

If we understand love as an attitude, however, then we understand how it is possible to mandate, to order, to command the attitude of love. (To put this another way, attitudes can be adjusted.) The Greek of the New Testament has a special word for the attitude of love: *agapé* (Gk ἀγαπή). In the New Testament, “ἀγαπή” is closer in meaning to “friendship” than it is to romantic or parental love. Not only is “ἀγαπή” an **attitude**: it is also an **action**. To love someone in this sense is to act toward that person as you would want that person to act toward you. It's the Golden Rule. It's “love your neighbor as yourself.”

In today's scripture reading, Jesus makes a connection between “ἀγαπή” and friendship (Gk “φιλία”). “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

When the Jesus of John's Gospel calls his disciples “friends,” he is evoking language that would have been familiar in the wider cultural context of the first century. Biblical scholar Gail O'Day observes that “two friendship motifs from the Greco-Roman world provide a promising framework for regarding Jesus as friend in John: Jesus' love for others that is embodied in his death and Jesus' boldness in speech and action.”<sup>3</sup> A true friend is someone who would be willing to lay down their life for me. A true friend is someone who will courageously speak the truth to us about us and our world.

The other day, when I was out and about in my car, listening to National Public Radio, I heard an inspiring story about genuine, authentic, life-giving friendship.<sup>4</sup> The story begins with a pen-pal project in a seventh-grade classroom.

“When Pennsylvania schoolgirl **Caitlin Alifirenka** was offered a pen pal in a foreign country, she chose Zimbabwe because she liked the sound of it. But as she began to correspond with Martin Ganda, who lived in Zimbabwe with his family, she had no idea the extent to which that correspondence would change both of their lives.

“As Alifirenka began to learn more about the extreme poverty that Martin faced on a daily basis, her perceptions of her own world began to change.

“He was actually dealing with real-life problems and poverty and my friends here were upset if they couldn't get the new Spice Girls CD,” Alifirenka told *Here & Now's* Robin Young.

“Alifirenka and her family ended up becoming deeply embroiled in the lives of Martin and his family.” After several years of her daughter's pen-pal friendship, Caitlin's mother spent many hours lobbying Villanova University to provide Martin with a full scholarship. Martin eventually went from extreme

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<sup>3</sup> Gail R. O'Day, “Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John,” *Interpretation* 58 no 2 April 2004, pp. 144-157. Accessed online on 05-06-15 at <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?sid=b8a3a329-a784-4cdb-ad3d-78bc40f21f15%40sessionmgr4005&vid=0&hid=4106&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001395639>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/2015/05/04/pen-pals-book-caitlin-martin>.

poverty in a nation that was disintegrating to receiving a dual degree in mathematics and economics from Villanova, along with an MBA from Duke University. He now works in the financial services industry. (Caitlin works as an emergency room nurse.)

Martin Ganda and Caitlin Alifirenka have remained friends to this day. She refers to him as her brother, her daughter's uncle. The two friends have just published a young adult book with the title *I Will Always Write Back – How One Letter Changed Two Lives*. Not only have Caitlin and Martin become best friends through their pen-pal friendship. They have also become better people.

It is said that the fluttering of a butterfly's wings in Mexico can set in motion a chain of events that will ultimately impact the weather in New England. When Caitlin Alifirenka raised her hand that day in her seventh-grade classroom in Pennsylvania because she was fascinated by the word “Zimbabwe,” she set in motion a chain of events that ultimately made a huge impact on the life of a seventh-grader in that distant nation. Caitlin and Martin's story is a story of true friendship, much like the friendship that Jesus commends to his followers, his disciples, his friends.

We can say that Jesus' metaphor of the branches abiding in the vine, and Jesus' mandate of loving one another, serve to instruct and inspire us in our vocation to build among ourselves a community of true friendship. This kind of community is quite different from, say, my Facebook friendship community. Even in this age of digital media, a community of true friendship is composed of embodied relationships. However much we communicate with one another through email or text messaging or Facebook or Twitter or Instagram (have I left any out?), we can only become a community of true friendship by getting together in person on a regular basis.

A prominent philosopher of science who is not himself a religious person, at least not in the traditional sense, made some fascinating comments about the value of “institutional religion” in a recent interview that was published online:

“To the extent that religions are very much engaged in enriching lives with meaning, with ceremony, and even with a sense of mystery and awe, that's all good,” said Daniel Dennett. Later in the interview, he added, “I think that over the centuries, one of the great things that churches of all varieties and religious groups have been able to do is to give people lives of importance, and provide love for people that otherwise don't get love, along with a sense of community and belonging. This is extraordinarily valuable and important. And I do think we want to preserve and enhance that function in society.”<sup>5</sup>

I have to admit that I was quite surprised, in a very positive way, when I first read these comments by a non-religious philosopher of science about the “extraordinarily valuable and important” role of religious congregations in today's post-modern, even in a way post--institutional-religion world. Although Daniel

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<sup>5</sup> [http://religiondispatches.org/churches-can-no-longer-hide-the-truth-daniel-dennett-on-the-new-transparency/?utm\\_source=Religion+Dispatches+Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=d44844990f-RD\\_Daily\\_Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_742d86f519-d44844990f-81967401](http://religiondispatches.org/churches-can-no-longer-hide-the-truth-daniel-dennett-on-the-new-transparency/?utm_source=Religion+Dispatches+Newsletter&utm_campaign=d44844990f-RD_Daily_Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_742d86f519-d44844990f-81967401).

Dennett and Jesus of Nazareth come at the role of religious communities from very different directions, they seem to be pointing to the same thing: the “extraordinarily valuable and important” social role of communities of true friendship.

When congregations like this one are at your best, you have a remarkable capacity to “enrich people's lives with meaning, with value, with ceremony, even with a sense of mystery and awe.” You have a profound ability to “provide love for people that otherwise don't get love, along with a sense of community and belonging.” When congregations like this one are communities of true friendship, you have an important social role to play, in whatever context you may find yourselves.

I believe that the context in which you and I find ourselves today is one that is largely indifferent to the contributions we have made, and continue to make, to the quality of life in the surrounding community. Fifteen years ago, Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam published a book with the intriguing title *Bowling Alone – The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Basing his analysis on data gathered from “nearly 500,000 interviews over the last quarter century,” Putnam claimed that we Americans “have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures [and religious institutions]...we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, [worship less frequently,] and even socialize with our families less often.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the bad news. The good news, from the point of view of Robert Putnam and his associates, is this: “We are persuaded by surveys and anecdotal evidence that, in an age of unbridled prosperity, many Americans feel a spiritual void and a cynicism about their fellow citizens. We believe that religious organizations are naturally suited to uplifting our national spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

Although I remain hopeful that religious congregations like this one are poised to make some significant contributions to the revival of American community, I'm not overly optimistic that I will see this happen in my lifetime. It seems to me that our “national spirit” is polarized and paralyzed by political rhetoric in the halls of Congress and on the presidential campaign trail.

On the other hand, it is said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. For congregations like this one, I believe that a very important first step in this journey is the work that it takes to gain clarity and consensus about your mission and vision.

Perhaps there is some truth to the “Field of Dreams” proverb, “If you build it, they will come.” If we continue to build up this community of true friendship, where people are genuinely welcomed, affirmed, included, befriended: if we build it, perhaps they will come. True friendship with Jesus and one another, I have come to believe, looks like this:

inspiring and equipping

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<sup>6</sup> <http://bowlingalone.com/>. Accessed on 05/09/2015.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bettertogether.org/pdfs/Religion.pdf>.

seekers and believers of all ages  
to follow Jesus  
by loving God and neighbor and one another