

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**  
**John 15:9-17**  
**May 16-17, 2009**

***“From the Father: Faith, Friends, and Fruit”***

Last month, my wife and I traveled to San Antonio, Texas for the annual conference of the Pastoral Leadership Institute, which was a marvelous experience of learning, encouragement, and growth. While there, a presentation was made by a woman, a Director of Christian Education by training, who now presides over her family’s vineyard in southern California. Her family has owned and operated this vineyard since the 1880s, and although most of their grapes go to larger vintners, they do produce a small number of bottles of their own label, which is called “Steinbeck,” the family name. Her presentation on the growing of grapes was based on John 15, and I learned much about rootstock, grafting, life cycles and seasons in the vineyard, and how the growing of grapes parallels growing in Christ. The first verses from John 15 we heard in last Sunday’s Gospel reading (John 15:1-8). In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus continues to speak about that close connection between himself, the true Vine, and his followers, the branches – that’s you and me, who are called to abide in him and so bear much fruit, the fruits of faith. The message for today, based on the Gospel lesson, is entitled “From the Father: Faith, Friends, and Fruit.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

One of the challenges in trying to wrap our minds around God is that we sometimes, maybe oftentimes, bring God into our finite world and make him so completely understandable and comprehensible that we have done both God and ourselves a disservice. The temptation is to try and make God fit into our convenient little boxes and categories. God is so much bigger than this; beyond all human reason. Teachings like the Holy Trinity – one God in three Persons; the Incarnation – God becoming flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ; Predestination – God ordaining to salvation those who will be saved; and other deep mysteries of the faith perplex and confound us. But another deep mystery of God that is awfully hard to comprehend is God’s *agape* love. This little word from the original language of the New Testament, *agape*, means that holy, sacrificial, and self-giving love found only in God, and which flows from God out to his people. This word Jesus uses repeatedly in today’s Gospel lesson. We often try to understand God’s love in terms of the various kinds of human love that we experience in this world: love of a parent, love for a spouse or children, love for a friend, etc. But even these examples fall short. Though Christ entered into our world to be the image and expression of God’s love for us, that love still remains a mystery. And so we have to stand in awe and reverence of what this holy love is. Jesus tells us this holy love originates not with sinful human beings, not even with himself as the Son of God, but with the Father: **“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you”** (John 15:9). And what is at the heart of the faith we share except love? The gift of the Father’s love in his own Son, Jesus, is the source and foundation of our faith and trust in God. **“We love because He first loved us”** (1 John 4:19). Now, how does the Father’s love for us in his beloved Son, Jesus, which is the cornerstone of our faith, manifest itself in our lives?

A college student came under the influence of a suspicious sect, and his worried parents called the campus chaplain. They were frantic to rescue their son from the influence of this separatist group, which was monopolizing and manipulating the young man. When the campus pastor met with this young man, he said that he had grown up in a Lutheran congregation, that his parents had been active members in the church all their lives. “Then why on earth did you become involved with this strange group?” the campus pastor asked. “Well, it all started on the first Sunday I visited them. When I walked into their church, I saw black people, white people,

people of every shade of the rainbow, and you could feel the love. Our church had always preached this sort of loving fellowship, but I had never seen it until I walked into that group. And I said to myself, ‘This is the church I’ve always heard about but never saw until now.’” Maybe you can relate to that young man. My friends, how is the love of Christ seen in our congregation? Do people, do you, see Christ’s love as just being preached, but never actually being lived in real life? Is it just talking the talk, but never walking the walk? In the post-modern world we live in, again and again this is the criticism that people outside the church have: they like Jesus and are very interested in him and what he has to say. They don’t so much like the church because so often it does not embody Jesus or his teachings. This is a call to repentance, for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus tells us, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you... 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”** (John 15:12, 14-15). Christ Jesus, who loved us not only in words, but in action, giving his life upon the cross for our lovelessness, for talking the talk but never walking the walk, for our sins. And he now calls us his friends. Now, we are called to live that love in word and deed. And that is what the world will notice – God’s *agape* love at work in the lives of his people.

Faith, friends – and *fruit*. Jesus tells us: **“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”** (John 15:16). The apple tree will naturally produce apples. That’s what apple trees do. The peach tree will naturally produce peaches. That’s what peach trees do. The Christian will naturally produce fruit also, not through our old sinful nature, but through the new person we have become in Christ’s death and resurrection. Like with apple and peach trees, sometimes there’s a lot of fruit on the branches; sometimes not so much. But there will be fruit. And so it is with those who are in Christ Jesus: there will be fruit. Scripture even tells us what this looks like: **“Now the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”** (Galatians 5:22-23). And these fruits come only because we have been grafted into the holy rootstock of the true Vine, Jesus Christ. These fruits come only as we abide in his love (John 15:9).

From the Father: faith, friends, and fruit. May the risen Savior grant these things to us for his glory and for the good of his kingdom. May God make it so for Jesus’ sake. Amen.