

Jesus lays down the law: Love

You're lying on your deathbed, conscious. Your family and closest friends have gathered round. You know this will be your last conversation with them. These people who loved you and respected you now hang on your words. What legacy will you leave them? What message do you most want to hear? How do you want them to behave?

Lying there, you reflect on your life. Have you faithfully lived the message you're giving your friends? Your words will gain power if your life has borne witness to them.

That dilemma resembles the one Jesus faces in next Sunday's Gospel. He's at table, not in bed, but this is his last supper. Tomorrow he dies.

What will his theme be? Church laws? Hierarchical structure? The gender of altar servers? The United Catholic Stewardship Appeal? Inclusive language? How to grant annulments? The choice of music for Mass?

People have left the church over these and other issues like them.

Which of these themes is most important to Jesus on the night before he dies? None of them.

And all of them.

His theme is love.

Today's text flows from Jesus' image of the vine and branches. We will have life if, like branches, we cling to the vine of Jesus.

Life-giving harmony makes us bear fruit. That harmony Jesus calls love.

Jesus never married. What does he know about love?

Jesus experienced love primarily in his relationship with the Father. Throughout John's Gospel we hear Jesus describe the remarkable unity he shares with the Father. In Chapter 8 his description so shocked his enemies that they motioned to pelt him with rocks.

Now he reveals a deeper mystery about that unity, and the news should take our breath away: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you." The glorious unity Jesus shares with the Father he now shares with the disciples.

He's a coach telling his team they've made it to the play-offs. He's a teacher telling his students they've passed. He's the morning paper announcing you've won the lottery. The disciples have entered a whole new way of relating with Jesus, and hence with God.

But, if you're a pro, you must act like a pro. So Jesus lays down the law, and the law is love. How strange is this law! Jesus seeks obedience, but not one that enslaves. The obedience Jesus seeks is one that brings joy. Love brings joy. We all know that. But what is love?

Love is doing what Jesus did, caring for others, even to the point of laying down your life for them. Doesn't sound like joy to you? Then you have not yet loved. Jesus can talk like this because he's modeling this love even as he speaks. His hour has come. He's on his way to the cross. And for him, this is love. This is joy.

At this point, some followers might want out of the bargain. Paradoxically, though, there is no exit. God has already loved us. Jesus has already set an example. He has drawn us into the same union he has with the Father. Joy cannot come from escape. Joy comes from living this union to the end. And that end is love, selfless love.

The Easter season offers us a seven week-long meditation on the mystery of the cross and resurrection. This week we come to a deeper realization of why Jesus succumbed to this death. In addition to winning us to redemption, he also gave us an example, a terrifying example of the demands of the Christian life.

On the eve of his death, with his closest friends gathered round him, Jesus gave the message he most wanted them to hear. That message had power because it lay consistent with the life Jesus lived and the example he was setting. "Love," he says.

Love.