

I John 5:1-6  
John 15:9-17

SGL  
NSCC

### Love Makes a . . . Family?

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (vv. 12-13)

Jeffrey Moses, in a book called *Oneness*, offers Jewish, Christian and Buddhist texts in the hope of showing that the three religions share the message: Love one another.

Then there is Lisa. Every minister and food pantry knows someone like Lisa who wore out her welcome a long time ago. Lisa lived in a tiny upstairs apartment with two bedrooms, a kitchen and a sort-of sitting room. The walls were grimy. Dirty pots and pans piled in the sink. Her level of pain meant she could stand long enough to cook – not enough to clean up.

She called the church with another story of woe. Don’t get me wrong, she had definite needs. But the things that happened to her, well, you just can’t make this stuff up. This time, she was facing possible eviction unless she got her place cleaned out. I could understand this as I’d seen the clean clothes in bags piled around her bed, making it tough to get around.

That day, cleaning was in order. I arranged to have another person come with me and we set out. We finished cleaning the kitchen, the living room walls, and taken out bags to the trash. I couldn’t wait to leave. I told Lisa we were done, that I hoped this helped, and we were out the door. I have to admit, my attitude wasn’t one of my better moments in ministry. I remember thinking that all I wanted to do was take a shower after that.

But I did feel better. I was glad that I could help in some way. As I look back, I figure that when I am judged, it will be by what I do for people like Lisa.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” (v. 9)

“Today’s scriptures don’t just advise us, they command us with the same force that Moses brought the law down from Sinai. Jesus himself says, “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” He calls us to love whether or not we feel love.” (Lawrence Wood, “Labors of Love”, *Christian Century*, May 17, 2003)

This is not a sentimental love. It is more than emotion. More like an act of will. Some might refer to it as “tough love” – I like to think of it as love with teeth.

Can you think of a time when you have experienced such a thing? Either as child or a parent or friend? The most obvious examples are found in the animal kingdom. My mom used to raise Persian cats. When it was time for the kittens to move to solid food, the mother cat would nip at the kittens who kept trying to nurse. It was as if to say, “time to grow up!” We see it in other species as well.

The juvenile birds pushed from the nest. Baby beavers nosed into the water over and over again until they finally take to swimming. To some it may seem cruel. Ultimately it is about the animal's survival.

What about our survival? Not everyone has had the same experience in our families. I remember a talk one woman gave on a retreat I attended. I am not sure of the exact topic other than it being about how faith gives us the strength to make difficult choices. Her son had been struggling with drug abuse. Time after time she would bail him out, take him back home, get him help. One night he got arrested. "It was the hardest, most painful thing I've ever done," she said, with tears streaming down her face. "All the prayers I said and the support from church - helped me finally decide to let him face the fruits of his own actions. I didn't bail him out this time. It broke my heart."

This is love with teeth. If you have ever been in a similar situation – as a parent, a friend, an employer or co-worker, you know the feeling. You know it seems like abandonment or betrayal, and guilt follows close its heels. If you have been on the receiving end of this sort of treatment, and maybe heard the words, "it's for your own good," you know how that feels, too. Granted, there are people in this world who are into control and "your own good" is an abuse of power. The love God has for us is not about power over us. Jesus was sent to us for another reason.

"<sup>4</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you." Jesus calls us friends – and this, again, is not sentimental. These words follow on Jesus being the vine, and we the branches that stem from his life. We are friends because we are those "who are loved by God" – that is what Jesus means. Jesus longs and promises that his joy might be complete in us. Only in such abiding love and joy is the wholeness of life that God's love has for us.

"Just as the power of this love for our lives comes when we draw power from the vine, so our joy comes from knowing that we have been chosen, called, and sent. The abiding power of that love in and through us has power to renew and transform us and the whole of creation." (James Boyce Professor of New Testament and Greek, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org))

Jesus, even from the cross, gave his mother Mary a son, and the disciple whom he loved a new mother. Jesus continues to call us together in new ways, creating a diverse family none of us would ever imagine. Vine and branches. Mother and son. Faith and community.

Oh, and the woman, whose son was arrested on drug charges? He has been to rehab. He found connections in the church. He is one of the people giving talks on retreats.

Not everyone gets up after so great a fall. We don't always know the fruits of OUR actions. Because we are part of the family of God, we trust the grace of God to step in, with a deep, biting love, that never lets us go.