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Acts 8:26-40; I John 4:74-21
John 15:1-8

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“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (I John 4:20-21)

The classic novel *Seventeenth Summer* traces the first love of a young girl named Angie, who meets a boy named Jack Duluth in a drug store. Together they ride in cars, eat, talk, and dream, tiptoeing around the awkward silences and hesitant words of young people who are trying to learn who they are, both alone and together. All goes well until, one day, Angie and Jack are eating dinner, and Angie notices that when Jack eats soup, his teeth click on the spoon. Suddenly, she is overcome by revulsion for his imperfect manners, wonders to what sort of person she is giving her heart. The tiny incident, itself trivial, raises to her consciousness all kinds of questions about their differing backgrounds, expectations, and how to love another who is flawed.

Scripture contains many verses which are difficult, obscure, and challenging, but for my money, this passage from First John is the one which has always seemed most likely to be wrong. My own experience suggests that it is very easy to love the God you have not seen, and rather more difficult to love the brother or sister whom you see every day. God does not smell bad, monopolize the telephone, or say irritating things at the dinner table. She does not demand that you do your chores, hurt you in a fit of anger, break your things, leave dirty dishes in the sink, share your deepest, darkest secret with the world, or betray you with another. God does not die and leave you alone. Those are human things, and they run the gamut from the trivial to the heart-breaking, driving us away from one another in irritation and impatience and pain. And yet, St. John says we cannot love God unless we love one another.

What he is asking is a dangerous thing: that we take on the full burden of flesh and blood, the burden of our own frailty and of the frailty of others. Many people speak as if Christianity were about making perfect people, being perfect people. It is not. “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect,” Christ commands, but he says in the same breath, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good,” (Matt 5:48, 45) The very way of perfection calls us to be gentle with imperfection, our own and that of other people. To be in right relationship with God is to acknowledge that we are created beings, finite, possessing great potential, and great limitations. Like Chinese painters of old, who employed all their art to create a thing of great beauty, and would then paint in one false stroke, so that they would not seem to be aiming at a perfection which was reserved for gods, so we are freed from the trap of our limitations only when we learn to live within them. At the age of a hundred and four, Bessie Delaney said, “I thought I could change the world. It took me a hundred years to figure out I can’t change the world. I can only change Bessie. And, honey, that ain’t easy either.”¹

But that does not mean we should not try. Acceptance of our true limitations does not excuse us from sloth in correcting those things within ourselves which limit us unnecessarily. Fear, distrust, graspingness, the need to own or control other people, gossip, envy, malice, the desire to make ourselves feel big by making other people seem small -- these have no place in properly-ordered lives. I will love imperfectly even if I am surrounded by spiritual giants; there is no reason for me to pretend they are pygmies in order to excuse my own failures.

¹ Cited in *The Sun*, April 2009, p.48.

Perhaps that is why, when Christ seeks a metaphor for our souls, he chooses the grapevine, a plant which requires intensive cultivation if it is to bear edible fruit at all. If you've ever driven through wine country in winter, you will see them: row upon row of wooden frames, each with a thick vine and almost no branches at all. Grapes bear fruit only on new wood, and so they have been pruned to the head, cut back to the trunk, to the part connected most closely to the source of life. In spring, those dead branches will send forth twining tendrils which fruit; the fruit will be thinned to concentrate the plant's energy on the most promising clusters; the fruit will be harvested; and eighty percent of the plant will be removed to begin again. Eighty percent.

Do you see what is happening? With grapes, there is no pretending that dead wood can become vital; that which does not yield life must go. There is no pretending that every immature cluster, every bit of potential or giftedness, can be developed to perfection together. Choices must be made, so that what is best can be fully matured, while what might distract energy from the best is pruned away. There is no pretending that a grape can stand without support; it needs the frame as we need God. And the grape does not contain life in itself. The new tendril is nourished only by the action of the sap which rises from the root; the root remains alive only because it is nourished by water and air and sunlight which are unearned graces, all the gentle bounty of the world which urges us to live.

The thing about pruning is that if we do not do it ourselves, it will come. Not because God is angry or mean or cruel, but because we are made to flourish only in certain ways. If the cellist does not practice, if the budding cellist chooses to try to master cello and painting and soccer and rock-climbing and *taekwondo*, the cellist may be good at any number of them, but greatness will not come to fruition. If the collector places her heart in owning things of great beauty, one or more of them will surely break. If a man chooses to control all those around him, there will be fewer people in his life. If you choose to cooperate with grace, to accept the work of Christ in yourself and in those around you, your harvest will be abundant, and you will know that it is not entirely yours.

The limitation we have to accept, the form of perfection we are called to endure, is this: to know that all we are is gift. The God and people whose love upholds us, the talents we develop or allow to be dormant, the food we eat and the air we breathe and the birdsong which gives joy to our heart... We did not make them; we do not control them. God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). We do not need to give birth to our own lives; we need only let life come.

The poet Louie Skipper writes,
Christ gazing up from a page in "Matthew"
meeting my eyes, telling me to look within,
for where your treasure is there will your heart be also.
What could I say to such endlessness spilling over me
from long before being human was ever considered?²

Just "thank you," Thank you. Thank you. And amen.

² Louie Skipper, *The Work Ethic of the Common Fly*, p.62.