

## “Make Yourself At Home”

Rev. David Gregory

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Easter 6



### Readings

John 15:9-15

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

From *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*  
by David Whyte

Through the eyes of a real friendship an individual is larger than their everyday actions, and through the eyes of another we receive a greater sense of our own personhood, one we can aspire to, the one in whom they have most faith. Friendship is a moving frontier of understanding not only of the self and the other but also of a possible and as yet un-lived future.

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“Make yourself at home!” Most of us have had the good fortune to be a guest of someone who has shared these kind words. They are meant to offer comfort, solace, a place of peace or respite, an opportunity to feel as relaxed or cared for as we would in our very own home. They are welcome words, especially when we find ourselves in distant and unfamiliar places. In the waning days of Jesus's life, he offered this same kindness to his friends, using the analogy of the vine and the branches. “Abide in me,” he said. He was speaking of an organic connection, one that they would find with him, with one another, and even with their Creator. If a branch gets cut off from the vine, it has no place of welcome, no place to find its roots, or its nourishment. It has no hope for the future. It cannot grow. It cannot be productive. It withers and dies and is cast aside. The illustration

could not more clear. “Stay here with me,” he said, “and I will stay with you and with God, and God will stay with you and with me.” How interesting and ironic that this is what he said to them just as he was preparing to leave them. The kind of abiding presence Jesus spoke of was of course not related to his physical presence. It had to do with the presence of love, something that would indeed never leave the disciples, because love is life itself. Love is all that there is, so as long as anything is, love is.

I cannot think of a better time to share these words than on Mother’s Day, a day when we celebrate the love that we have come to associate with mothering. This is not to say that everyone has experienced this kind of nurture in exactly the same way. For whatever reason, not all mothers have been particularly loving, and we need to acknowledge that fact on a day like today. Some people have grown up with no mother at all, and have been nurtured by their fathers, other family members or friends. We can celebrate the nurturing love present in a household with two dads, or two moms, for instance, or in an adoptive or foster home. The Mother Love that we celebrate today is present in many places and in many ways, though a lot of us will find it in the memory of those who have given us our birth into this world. Wherever that love has been present for you, I hope you will celebrate it with us today. It is not learned from a book or in a classroom, but rather from the time we have spent *being* loved. We often use the word “unconditional” to describe it.

Frederick William Robertson, the 19<sup>th</sup> century English preacher described the foundation of a loving home like this:

*Home is the one place in all this world where hearts are sure of each other. It is the place of confidence. It is the place where we tear off that mask of guarded and suspicious coldness which the world forces us to wear in self-defense, and where we pour out the unreserved communications of full and confiding hearts. It is the spot where expressions of tenderness gush out without any sensation of awkwardness and without any dread of ridicule.*

I would say that everyone needs to be loved like this, and if our work in the world is in any way modeled after Jesus, we will make certain that those around us can find this in their own experience. In the upper room during his last Passover, Jesus offered this nurturing presence to all of his friends, including the one who was about to betray him. This would suggest that his love for them was indeed without condition. He had given them a new command, “Love each other, just like I have loved you. If you do this, it means that you are my friends.”

To understand the language of this new command, we have to know that Jesus was the product of a system of laws, regulations, or commandments. The ancient Israelites had come to understand that divine favor was promised only to those who obeyed those commands. A person proved their loving loyalty to their one true God by doing the things they had been commanded to do. But some religious leaders of the first century had exploited that sense of loyalty, making God into a heartless taskmaster, requiring an ever-higher hoop to jump through. They made God’s love something that was impossible to attain, for the rules could never be fully kept. They had become the self-appointed, exacting keepers of the divine will. Jesus shattered that system by saying that every rule could be summed up in the one single command, “love each other.” This is why, in our day, we have taken to describing the church as a “school of love,” the laboratory or the practice field where an odd assortment of folks are called together into loving community, not just to learn how to get along and play nice, but to love each other fully even when they don’t.

Our purpose here is not to be keepers of the doctrine or the tradition, nor are we even here to create new traditions. We're not here to perpetuate an institution, or a denominational brand name. We're not here to "do church" in a way that will gather proselytes from the four corners of the world into some sort of mega church that will carry weight and influence in the general culture. We're not here to convince anyone that we are right. We're here to do one thing, and one thing only, and that is to facilitate the practice of love.

Those who serve on our Governing Board hear me speak often of Cameron Trimble, a colleague in ministry with the United Church of Christ, who has also become an important thought leader among progressive Protestants of many denominations. Through a leadership project called "Convergence," she brings us her insights and her questioning mind, along with the best historical, theological, and philosophical minds of our day. This is what she said in a blog post two days ago:

*Our religious traditions, at their best, are gifts that provide places and practices to draw us deeper into eternal wisdom. If they do not serve that purpose, we should abandon them in the heap of all else that we have let go of this past year. Our calling is to follow The Way of God, the Way of Love, wherever it leads us.*

As we move ever closer to a gathering of our new hybrid church, inclusive of those who can gather physically or virtually, we will need to fully practice a nurturing mother's love, inviting each other to make ourselves at home, finding a love that is broader than the conditions we might place upon it. It will call us to the Way of Love, wherever it leads us.

