

Readings

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-48

Ps 98:1, 2-3, 3-4

1 Jn 4:7-10

Jn 15:9-17

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The words of Jesus in the Gospel of St. John draw an affirmation of love profoundly human and divine. There is a beginning with a mysterious announcement that God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son to show us that in a way we would understand and believe in Him (Jn 3:16). Then follows a trajectory of surprising events that took place through years of preaching and encounters, along the road leading to Jerusalem. The teaching is offered at a measured pace, bringing up inspired sayings, prophecies, parables, and examples meant to explain the mysteries of the kingdom of God. The whole purpose was to convey a message of love, a reality both sublime and simple, like breathing, the creative gesture from God giving life to humans.

Yet, it is at the end of the story that we find this truly “sacred page” where Jesus, looking at his disciples, pronounces one of the most revealing and empathic words of the Gospel: ***“You are my friends”*** (Jn 15:14). In the best tradition of the Scriptures, the special mark of favor shown to humans would be not miracles or changes of fortune in the social, political, or domestic ambitions so attractive to the crowds, but the trustworthy reality of this bond between them. Here, Jesus unveiled all the mysteries of the kingdom of God to offer the treasure of his friendship.

The first disciples must have wondered how to react to such a distinction. It was easier in their minds to accept him in any of the glorious and ancestral images than as a friend. He clarified further, “I call you friends, not servants,” because I share with you the trust and words received from the Father (Jn 15:15). He also said that, as a true and unfailing friend, he was ready “to lay down even his life for the other.” He did it and all became witnesses that he loved his friends “to the end” (Jn 13:1).

Now, when we read this passage, we feel compelled to ponder how to reciprocate that friendship, considering the expectation that Jesus had of all his disciples, mainly “to love one another as I love you” (Jn 15:12) and to keep his words as a mark of loyalty (Jn 15:14). We realize that he calls us to a major task and knowing our limitations and disarray in many ways of living requires a serious commitment. We need to *learn how to love*, and that, from the Christian point of view, is the challenge of a lifetime.

Like the revered apostle Paul, St. Augustine is one of those converts who experienced the pains and joys of being chosen, as Jesus put it, and becoming a disciple. During his “years of ignorance” he was a man who loved many things: music, theater, nature and all the earthly beauty spread around. But above all, he loved people and friends. Augustine wrote a line saying he could not live without friends. It sounds fine, because most people experience a sense of fulfillment, whether psychological or spiritual, through their relationships. Unfortunately, in real life, this activity and its infinite representations are often distorted or reduced to forms of exchanges without a value of transcendence.

Reading book four of his *Confessions* we can understand the universality of his personal experience. The golden rule for Augustine was “to love and to be loved” without being selective on the matter. During these years he just followed the pleasure principle and became engulfed in

“furtive loves” exhausting his life “like water through the sand.” He admitted that he could not distinguish between the darkness of lust and the clarity of true friendship.

We can also see how his experience reflects the malaise of our modernity. It begins with our weakness for instant gratification. Love and friendship have been devalued in many ways, lost in a torrent of words and images, trivialized, and emptied of moral concerns and responsibilities. Our media-matic gadgets carry a deluge of that stuff every day. It is all too easy to talk, sing or act in a manner that looks like friendship or love. People become intoxicated to the point of living the illusion without examining the reality in their own lives. And it becomes difficult to sort out the good from the false and harmful elements that pervade like weeds our love and friendships. Our experience is often “a muddy river” running through our story. Nothing close to loving others the way Christ did love us.

It was only when Augustine took the *inward journey* from a state of dispersion following the “narrow road” of Christ that he realized the need to put in order his entire life. The kind of spiritual ordering which requires a delicate task of discernment. Reflecting on his own experience, he says, “My weight is my love, and wherever I am carried, it is this weight that carries me.”¹ Up or down, always in search of its place of rest. In that regard, he learned that indiscriminate attachments in love work against its own center of gravity, which is the love of God.

To love others as Jesus loved us is a tall order. Augustine realized he had to reorient his desires, his tendency to dominate and use others for selfish satisfactions. A difficult exercise, particularly building and holding friendship that requires accepting others as beings that exist not

¹*Confessions*, XIII, 9, 10.

to be “used” but to be “loved for their own sake.”² The balance in the gravity of human love that is maintained by mutuality which regulates the tension between “cupiditas” and “caritas,” between the lust to dominate and genuine caring for others.

Augustine also points out: “If sensuous beauty delights you, praise God for the beauty of humans, and channel the love you feel for them onto their Maker, lest the things that please you lead you to displease him.”³ To make progress in that direction, one needs to practice “looking more deeply into them” to see the image of God that must be preserved, and so connect with the source of their existence.⁴

That is the way Jesus used to see others, in their hearts.

We turn to the Gospel to learn how to love from Jesus’s words and deeds. What page in the gospel and what words in its sacred text would be more comforting, intimate and healing than these: “You are my friends [...] as my Father loves me, so I love you” (Jn 15:9) Our personal story takes a new turn from that assurance that becomes a perennial and transcendent reference as we work through the vicissitudes and challenges of loving others in life. Learning how to love well and orderly is the lasting wisdom of the human spirit.

Jesus’s “new commandment” (Jn 15:17) comes along with a promise: “Remain in Me and I will remain in you” (Jn 15:4). He chose us and loved us first. The only answer will be not only to be a disciple, but to show the courage to remain one in true friendship. We must spur our trust and faith, joining Augustine in prayer:

“I love you, Lord, with no doubtful mind but with absolute certainty. You pierced my heart with your word, and I fell in love with you.”⁵

²Ibid., VI, 16, 26.

³Ibid., IV, 12, 18.

⁴Ibid., VII, 7,11.

⁵Ibid., X, 6, 8.