

# JOHN 15:12–17

FRANCES TAYLOR GENCH  
*Professor of New Testament*  
*Union-PSCE*

RECENTLY I HEARD SOMEONE DESCRIBE Jesus in John this way: “Wordy is the Lamb”! It is not a bad description, for the Johannine Jesus is given to extended discourse, nowhere more so than in his farewell conversations with his disciples on the night before his death (John 13–17). Excerpts from these extraordinary conversations are appointed for the church’s reflection throughout the season of Easter, for they prepare disciples of every age for life after Easter and for a ministry in the world that is the continuation of Jesus’ own.

John 15:12–17 (Easter 6, Year B) stands at the very heart of the Farewell Discourse and speaks pointedly of love, the distinguishing mark of the community that continues to exist in the world in Jesus’ name. At the outset of the discourse, upon announcing his imminent departure, Jesus introduces a “new commandment”: “just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” he said, “if you have love for one another” (13:34–35). In John 15:12–17, the theme of love is resumed and receives its most extensive development in the Fourth Gospel. As one engages John’s particular contribution to the church’s reflection on this theme, three startling dimensions of it come into view.

First, the Gospel of John focuses the love commandment on the community of disciples, both here and in 13:34–35. While the other gospels exhort disciples to love their neighbors and even their enemies (Mark 12:28–34; Matt 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28; and Matt 5:43–48; Luke 6:27–36), John speaks of in-house love, calling Christians to “love one another.” We ought not to assume, however, that this makes John’s love commandment easier to follow. Indeed, Gail R. O’Day cautions against dismissing its ethical seriousness, noting that “the history of the church and of individual communities of faith suggests that to love one another may be the most difficult thing Jesus could have asked. There are many circumstances in which it is easier to love one’s enemies than it is to love those with whom one lives, works, and worships day after day” (“John,” *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992] 302). The intensity of the conflict in which many churches and denominations are presently (and perennially) engaged attests to the wisdom of this observation.

Moreover, mutual love, the heart of John’s vision of the Christian life, is crucial not only for the community’s life together but also for its public witness. The world is not likely to be impressed by Christian love for outsiders, however expansive, nor compelled to join

the company of believers, if those who call themselves Christian exhibit hatred for one another. Thus, throughout the Farewell Discourse, the believing community is given to understand that the quality of its life together is its most convincing witness to the truth and power of the gospel it proclaims (e.g., 13:35; 17:20–26).

A second startling dimension of John's love commandment appears on the heels of the first, as disciples learn what it means to love one another after the manner of Jesus: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). Love, in both the Old and New Testaments, is not confined to the realm of disposition or "feeling"—it is something one does. Love seeks the well-being of others and is expressed in concrete efforts on their behalf. But the Johannine Jesus' definition of love in 15:13 conveys the full extent to which love is willing to go, as he references his own impending death on behalf of his disciples, the manner in which he will love his own "to the end" (13:1). Jesus had spoken earlier of his own willingness, as the good shepherd, to lay down his life for the sheep (10:11, 15), but now disciples learn that the same quality of love is expected of them. It is worth noting, in fact, that disciples are not asked to love one another as they love *themselves* (Mark 12:28–34; Matt 22:34–40; Luke 10:25–28), but as *Jesus* loved them. In this respect, John's love commandment, which points to the cross as the paradigm of love, is more radical than its synoptic analogues.

It is also worth noting another respect in which John's language of love is "a different ethical language" from the language of discipleship explicated in the synoptic gospels. Gail O'Day provides incisive commentary on this point too, noting that John speaks of the fullness and abundance of love rather than of emptying self-denial and sacrifice: "Fullness and sharing of love characterize discipleship and faith. The Christian community is known by how much its members love one another, not by how much they deny themselves. The ultimate sign of this love remains the giving of one's life, but it will be given in fullness of self, not in denial" (O'Day, 302–303). There is, to be sure, an important difference between "laying down" one's life and having it "taken," between self-gift and self-sacrifice or self-denial. As Jesus affirms in John 10:18, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." It is the same kind of self-giving love that Jesus prescribes for his disciples—love inspired by the one who came that we might "have life, and have it abundantly" (10:10)—love that spills out of the "fullness we have all received" from him, "grace upon grace" (1:16).

A third remarkable dimension of love appears in 15:12–17 when, for the first time, Jesus describes the love that constitutes the bond of discipleship as the love of friendship: "You are my friends if you do what I command you. . . . I do not call you servants any longer, . . . but I have called you friends" (vv. 14–15). In the Greco-Roman world, friendship was a much-discussed and highly-esteemed relationship. Our own, often quite casual use of the language of friendship (e.g., "he's just a friend") does not do justice to it, or to John's distinctive vision. What does it mean for Jesus to call his disciples "friends"? A "friend," (*philos* in Greek, from the Greek verb *phileō*), is literally "one who is loved." (John uses two Greek verbs for "love," *phileō* and *agapaō*, interchangeably, making no distinction between

them; cf. 13:23 and 20:2; 5:20 and 10:17; 14:23 and 16:27). Friendship is the very essence of the love Christ has for us. It is, in fact, how John explicates redemption, Jesus' death on our behalf: "no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13). The cross demonstrates the extent to which God's reconciling love in Christ is willing to go. It is a love without limits, a love "to the end" (13:1). To John's way of thinking, the power of such love is utterly compelling, drawing us to Christ like a magnet (12:32) and overcoming our alienation from God (see R. Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, rev. ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993] 53–54.). A new relationship with God in Christ is thus established at the cross, with the result that disciples are "no longer" servants but "friends" (15:15). It is a breath-taking announcement, unique to John: Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the very revelation of God's own self, calls us friends!

Thus, for Jesus to call his disciples friends means, above all, that believers are drawn into a chain of love, into the intimacy and oneness that characterizes Jesus' own relationship with his heavenly Father. In the immediately preceding verses, Jesus declares "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (15:9). The chain is complete in 15:12 when disciples learn that the love that binds God to Jesus, and Jesus to his followers, is also to be manifest in their relationship with each other: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." By loving one another, in obedience to Jesus' command, disciples become channels of the divine love that is God's gift to the whole world in Christ.

Jesus' "friends" are thus also partners in the divine mission. For this reason, they are "in the know," privy to the plan and intention of God revealed in Jesus Christ: "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father" (15:15). Indeed, they have been befriended for a purpose, solely at Jesus' initiative: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (15:16). In short, the church, the community of Jesus' friends, is elected not for privilege but for a mission in the world that is a continuation of Jesus' own—a mission to bear the fruit of love in the world. Such love keeps the spirit of Jesus alive in the world, for as long as Christian love is in the world, the world is still encountering Jesus. It is an awesome vocation, one in which believers are supported and sustained by the one who loved them and chose them and who promises that prayers in his name in behalf of their mission will be answered by his Father (15:16).

The Fourth Gospel's distinctive reflection on the theme of love, and in particular, on the love of friendship, spoke to the deepest needs of the dislocated Christians to whom it was first addressed. Recently evicted from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2), their need for accompaniment, security and solidarity in a community of friends willing to be there for each other, even at great cost, was great. In fact, it is not coincidental that John's words on love in 15:12–17 are followed immediately by words about the hate that disciples will experience in the world as the result of their identification with Jesus (15:18–25). In our own day, the Johannine themes of mutual, self-giving love and the love of friendship are no less

profound, with power to address our own deep hunger for community amidst the individualism, isolation, and transience that characterize much of modern, Western life. The church has a worthy vocation in such a world as it receives the friendship that is God's gift to us in Christ and embodies it in the world that others, too, may be drawn to the cross and embraced as friends by the divine love revealed there in Jesus Christ.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.