**Gospel**: John 15:1-8

”I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

**Message**: Not that We Loved God

My mother was NOT June Cleaver (Mom in a 1950’s TV series, who wore a dress, heels, an organza apron and pearls as she did housework—the role model of a proper homemaker). She did not make our beds in the morning, nor did she take the dust mop (pre-Roomba) under our beds, of which mine also served as my personal hamper for dirty clothing. At an early age my brother and I were impressed into washing/drying dishes. “Emergency” bathroom excursions were no excuse. Dishes will wait until you come back downstairs. We were taught how to cook, with or without a recipe. Creamed chipped beef on toast or bacon and eggs the night before payday were cheap meals. Now, not so much. We helped with laundry using the old-fashioned wringer washer and hung the clothing outside on the line in good weather and on drying racks over the heat vents in winter. We learned to iron clothing, starting with handkerchiefs and pillow cases, gradually working our way to dress shirts, slacks and dresses. By the time I was big enough to push the non-motorized lawn mower, Dad, fortunately, bought a power mower. My maternal grandparents lived with us from the time I was 2 until I graduated high school. We learned how to work together with love, patience, and respect—not that Tom and I **always** displayed those characteristics toward each other. The point is, Mom and Dad did not do everything for us; they worked with us, teaching us how to do things. We learned how to live in community, beginning at home, working together, helping to make life comfortable for all to enjoy.

God does not do everything for us either. 1st John says “Beloved, let us love one another.” Learning to love one another, any one or other, doesn’t just happen. It must be taught. Love must be seen, and to be seen, love must be enacted. Love, as **we** know, is from God. A concept, however, of how we **think** God should display that love is often misconstrued. As insecure (or lazy) humans, we want God to protect us, control nature, prevent illness or violence, cure diseases, uphold the law, catch all the cheaters and hold them accountable, dispensing appropriate discipline, reward the faithful, and bring prosperity to all who obey, and, while at it, make the beds and wash the dishes. Whew! God is definitely not June Cleaver.

In many ways over many centuries, God has **led** humanity, and indeed, all creation, to do good, resist evil, have good thoughts, good words and good deeds. The concept of God and God’s goodness is in our DNA. Prophets, who have had personal experiences and revelations of the Divine Being, have arisen to share the insights and wisdom that have been revealed to them as to how humans are to dwell in harmony with each other, with creation, and with God. Intricate laws and commandments have been written in various cultures trying to define all the “what if’s” in life. All of this transpired from the beginning when we were lovingly created in God’s image. *We love because God first loved us*. Love is an act of God. God created all that is for God’s good pleasure out of love. We, then, demonstrate **our** love for God in the way we love one another and the way we treat God’s creation. It’s not always easy. In fact, loving one another is often difficult. It requires thoughts, effort and immediate response in some difficult situations. We’re not always successful.

While on vacation, we had taken my granddaughter to this fabulous new neighborhood playground. We were standing near one of those climbing things that leads to platforms and ultimately to those tunnel slides. A young girl (10 or 12) came out of the chute crying, running for her father’s protective embrace, immediately, almost simultaneously, followed by an older boy whose first words were “I didn’t touch her!” He then proceeded to foul-mouth the girl’s father and roughly slap/shove him on the shoulder as he ran passed. The dad loudly questioned the boy’s up-bringing. In a few moments the boy returned with friends (?) who were also yelling and screaming as they went toward the exit. It all happened very quickly. My family and I had no time to pick our jaws up from the ground, before they were gone. In a situation like this filled with bullying, anger, hatred, disrespect, how do I “love one another”? There was nothing any of us could do at the moment, but pray. Pray that God places someone or someones in the lives of the aggressors to be instruments of transformation of their hearts. Pray that God strengthens the love in the dad and his daughter that they may be healed. Pray for forgiveness.

We look around and see what God has done for us. In this magnificent creation, God has given us the means to care and protect one another, to provide for one another, to prevent or cure illnesses, to be prosperous. Caring within a family or community does not happen without *agape*—love that is self-sacrificing—a giving of one’s self and one’s time. Agape, sacrificial love, is the heart of God’s truth. If we need to see how this Love all comes together, we look to Jesus, who was sent to live and teach love, who demonstrated love by sacrificing his innocent self on a cross, and to **rise again** to new life. To rise from death of body and spirit, resurrection, is both literal and figurative. God does this for us. But seeing love is not enough. Love must **flow** through us—not a trickle, but surging through us; it must be lived concretely even in those sketchy, dodgy times that we all have experienced. When bad things happen, we want/need more than a weak platitude of “hang in there.” I want more than a thin thread that may break at any moment. God’s love does not take away the difficult times; Love does strengthen us as we move forward through those times. God loves us even though we are unworthy, unresponsive, and unsavory. In Jesus Christ we have seen transformational love, and **we** are to do what we have seen to the unlovely, unresponsive, hateful others.

God’s love initiates, motivates, creates and overflows resulting in mercy and redemption. We may not see the results of our love toward the unlovely, but someone will. We do, however, continue in faith and trust that God’s love is active. Jesus was brilliant with the analogy of the vine and the grower. Jesus is the vine; through the power of the Holy Spirit, God makes the branches grow from that vine. Being in grape country, we know that the best grapes grow close to the vine. The grapes grow in dense clusters (like a productive community) because most of the nourishment is closer to the main vine. Those that develop farther from the trunk are smaller and less dense, nevertheless are connected to the vine. We are called and encouraged to abide in Christ as Christ abides in us as we care for those who may be on the outskirts of community. This abiding is a profound, intimate relationship that assures us of God’s greatest power: Not by our own strength, but by God’s Love that sustains us, we are strengthened and encouraged. By abiding, dwelling close to Jesus, we are nourished into wholeness, completeness, and health. As we remain close to the vine, learning from Jesus, we realize that what we want is what God wants. We are, therefore, equipped to love.

**Prayers of the People/the Lord’s Prayer**: Loving God, we pray for your Church that we draw our life from Christ that we may bear fruit. Give us grace to surrender to God who helps us let go of things that distract us from the Divine. Be close to those who feel cut off from the love of God and show them how we are all connected and draw life from You. Encourage those in transition for strength, direction, courage, and guidance. Help us to end violence and the quest for power, to turn hearts from destructive deeds to pathways of dialogue and knowledge of you. Protect the innocent. For all these and more we ask in Jesus’ name who continues to teach us to pray, “Our Father. . . “

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: For this day and the promise of tomorrow, we give thanks to you, O God. To be able to see, touch, smell, hear and taste all the beauty of your Creation, we are truly grateful. For the many blessings you pour on us we ask that you also pour on these gifts that others may be blessed, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Benediction**: If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.

**New Testament**: Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) 27So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” 30So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. 33In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” 34The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” 38He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

**Epistle**: 1 John 4:7-21

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

14And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

17Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20Those 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. 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.