My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

What is a Gospel? What does the word mean? “Good News”. But there are four Gospels, right? And they seem to record the same events a lot of the time, so much so that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the “synoptic” gospels. “Synoptic” means “with one eye”. Note that each spring, after Easter has arrived, we spend some time in the Gospel of John. John’s Gospel is not part of that previous grouping of Gospels. And so while his Gospel was also canonized as “Good News”, John has a very different take on Jesus and his time here on earth.

The community that wrote John’s Gospel believed in Jesus’ absolute divinity early on. But they were also Jewish, and they knew that while they had certain beliefs that put them squarely in this new Jesus movement, whatever that represented, they wanted the other Jesus -believing Jews that they weren’t denying the basic tenets of Judaism. They particularly wanted the ones who were direct descendants of the eyewitnesses to Jesus—the Jerusalem church of Peter and James—that they were with them, not against them.

This mattered for a couple of reasons. First, in the pantheon of religions of the day, the gods of Egypt, of Rome, and of the various Ba’als in the Empire, none dared follow a man who was also God. That designation was reserved for the Emperor of Rome, and the temples of the major cities were testament to that fact. Only the strange religions beyond Persia followed teachers, but they too never claimed to be God. Second, Jesus had forewarned that people would have to risk everything, including their family loyalties, to understand and follow him.

So the setting we have here is a coming-of-age setting in Jesus’ discourse. “Just as” is a key phrase in John’s “theology” (used 31 times in this Gospel) for what it reveals about the mutual relationship of God, Son, and disciple community. As God has loved, so the Son loves. The Son’s love imitates and mirrors God’s love. Remember John 3:16: “For God so loved the world…”? In these chapters, love takes precedence and center stage. But it’s a shift that keeps John’s Gospel still in the mainstream of Judaism, because Jesus says, as Moses and Elijah before him, that what he says is from and of God. And yet, there is a newness, a closeness, revealed, as Jesus is here. Not in the cloud. Jesus is right here, having dinner with them. And he defines for us God’s love.

Jesus asks nothing of his disciple community that he has not already modeled in the abiding love which he has with the Father. In this way abiding, loving, and keeping commandments are all bound up together in a mutual relationship. The commandments of Jesus are not general or scattered but focused and specific: “This is my commandment, that you love one another”. It’s said twice—and just like in the neighbor parable, it takes on a universal quality. But now it’s looking at each other around the table. “Love one another, as I have loved you”, it says in verse 12.

It’s reminiscent of the Lord’s prayer, “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us.” But in verse 17, it just says, “love each other”. There is no conditional. The fruit of the vine is God’s abiding love. Jesus now speaks of the power of that life-giving love to transform the disciples’ relationship and calling into a new status. These disciples are no longer to be counted as “servants” but as “friends.” In the cross and resurrection, they have come to know what this “greater love” has power to accomplish in them through their unity in the abiding relationship with Jesus and God. It has to be shared. We have to get shared purpose for that greater love to build the Kingdom of God, right here, right now. It’s in our unity that we begin to see how love can change the world.

But what does that really mean, in a world with so many divisions? Even in religion we are seemingly hopelessly divided into over 200 types of pursuit of Christ and God, so much so that in a recent PRRI study about 2/3 of folks in New Hampshire rarely or never come to church. But that also depends on the promises of what they might find here.

Coming out of the pandemic studies suggest that the #1 public health crises is loneliness. People crave not just social interaction like in a bar or dance club, but they seek and want acquaintances and friends with whom they can talk to. Not ABOUT. Talk to. People want listeners, not problem solvers. There are lots of folks with lots of bright ideas about how to live your life, right? But do any of them understand your circumstances, truly know what informs your life and life choices?

That’s the loneliness conundrum. We seek connection, but our attention spans are so short that rather than get to know one another we are all too eager to live their life for them and offer advice. Unsolicited, perhaps unwelcome advice. And that doesn’t create intimacy. That creates distance.

The same studies that say that people seek connection and people that they can talk to also say that church folks can be judgmental and self-righteous, taking the moral high ground on just about any and all issues. It isn’t the lack of a belief in God that’s killing religion. 51% of New Hampshire folks believe that churches are a necessary part of a community. 77% believe in something that is beyond themselves that helps organize their souls purposefully. What’s killing religion is us—the ones who promised to love one another, and that God’s joy should be with us and complete. ***Do we do this***?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Jesus came so that we might experience an overflowing life. Jesus expresses here the longing and the promise that his joy might be in us and that only in such abiding love and joy is the wholeness of life in its purview and promise. And just as the power of this love for our lives comes when we draw power from the vine, so our joy comes from knowing that we have been chosen, called, and sent.

Together. With one another. With one purpose: loving the person who drives us crazy most. The one who tells us a tale we know we can solve. The one with whom we cannot bear to sit at worship or coffee hour. The one whom we would not talk to because of what they said. The one for whom we hold a grudge and it feeds us to the point we won’t forgive.

Abide in God’s love. Love each other. Not because I said it just now; God said it first and best. Thanks be to God, Amen.