

1 John 5:1-9 New International Version (NIV)

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. ²This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

⁶This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. ⁹We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son.

John 15:9-17 New International Version (NIV)

⁹"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other.

“As I Have Loved You”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In Northern California and southern Oregon live some of the oldest living things on our planet. Sequoia trees, often called California Redwoods live 1200-1800 years or more! Up to almost 400 feet (without the roots), and up to nearly 30 feet in diameter, in a word, they're huge. It is sad, though, to know that an estimated 95% of them have been cut down, beginning in the late 1800s.

Remarkably, though the wildfires of last year did wreak havoc on the parks in which they grow, there was not the total devastation of the forest that many feared. Still, there are a lot of elements that have contributed to the trees' endangered status, with human beings responsible for all of them. Of course cutting them down is one of the ways they have been extinguished, but the slower death for many of them has been air pollution. Also, because of the thinning of the trees, what might be called their own natural weakness works against them. There is now more room for the wind to gust against them, and their very shallow though long, laterally growing roots are pulled up with the mass of the trees themselves acting as a kind of a sail. Without the roots of the neighboring trees winding in and through any individual trees roots, they are not strong enough to withstand the wind.

Left to their own devices, sequoias would still be abundant in our northwest, and while we can celebrate their being planted in other areas of the globe, many mourn what has happened to them. Trees, of course, don't cry except in fairy stories, but they do work together.

Thinking of roots and support systems, I remember digging a hole with friends when I was in elementary school. We would walk each day to the site of what had been a landmark home of the previous century, now burned and removed. Small trees had grown up to fill the space, but nothing towered above us except on the

perimeter of the lot, which was enough to make our space private. We had one small hatchet that my friend Sean had snuck from their garage, and with it we struggled to cut down the small trees in an area about 2 and a half by 5 and a half feet. We dug down with that hatchet, just one small trowel and a lot of sticks we sharpened with pen knives. We had decided to dig a fort instead of build one, for some crazy reason. What made it difficult to dig after the arduous labor of cutting down the trees whose insides thankfully were soft like cork, was that all the roots of the little trees were wound together like the vines that hung from the bigger, older trees at the edge of the property. For every one root that had extended from a tree, it seemed like three were wound into it. Maybe these little trees imitate their larger sequoia cousins in supporting each other. The thing of it was that the roots that supported the little trees weren't all alike. There were little ones from small flowering plants that had come up after the burn; there were larger ones that extended from bigger trees tens of feet away. Woven together into a frustrating fabric below the soil's top layers was a collaborative enemy of roots. Well, it was our ten-year-old enemy. The trees themselves were *united* below the surface, supporting each other against the likes of hatchets, trowels and sticks.

“My command to you is this: love each other as I have loved you.” Jesus is a good speaker, you know. He makes sure that if any of the disciples didn't hear him the first time he said this, they would the next time. “This is my command: love each other.” Just in case any of us wonder what loving each other looks like, Jesus makes quite clear the extent to which his own love will go. He has laid down his life for his friends, and *we* are his friends if we keep the command to love each other as he loved us. John knows that we all need reminding of the important things, so he tells those to whom he ministered very similar things to what he recounts in his Gospel. “²This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. ³In fact, this is love for God: to keep God's commands.” Are you getting the picture?

As I have been remembering the joy of lying invisibly in a hole just bigger than my body, with little holes on the side in which I could hide the snack-sized box of 'Nilla wafers that went perfectly with an RC cola, I have also been wondering

about what loving like Jesus looks like. I want to be clear, too, that I have been wondering, because I know that I don't want to lay down my life for anyone. Sorry, but it's true. I recently tried calling our former fire chief here in Blue Hill, Denny Robertson, about other subjects, but in reaching out to him and looking forward to talking with Matt Dennison in person now that vaccination is a reality, I have been thinking of the fire chiefs I knew in Massachusetts. Some of them became members of the MA Corps of Fire *Chaplains* after they left active duty. They know best the challenges of living and doing for others, and they want to be supportive in any way that they can. I don't have to wonder if, for them, this is part of living their faith. Still, having talked with chaplains whose work has always been to support those who go first into the flame, I know that I value this gift of life a great deal, and I don't want to lose it. I imagine I am not alone in this; I think many of you probably share the feeling. Still, our discipleship to Christ *does* ask that we love sacrificially. Maybe it looks a bit like trees' root systems.

Not all the roots that support one another look alike. They are from different species and have different ecological requirements. Without each other, though, human beings could wipe them out when they pay little attention to the value of each one. We do this to each other, too. Instead of winding in and through all of others' lives, we sometimes try to go it alone; we attempt either to plant our own roots deep in singularity, or we try to tie ourselves in only to those who look or act like us. The supporting systems that God has given us look different from what we attempt to do with them, though, and when we are honest with ourselves, we can say that we don't want to make any sacrifices. We like our plenty, even when we know that others want. We like our safety, even when we know that others fear. Yes, we like our sense of security, when worldwide we are sometimes the persons whom others fear. How do we become intertwined roots of love, sacrificially giving of ourselves in order that others may live?

“And his commands are not burdensome, ⁴for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.” So, do you believe it? If Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection has saved the world by giving us eternal life, then we do not need to fear. We can

love God and our neighbor wholeheartedly, because Jesus loves us first. Jesus' sacrificial loving and living teaches us how to love—so that we will not die. So, what is the result of loving well, even sacrificially so that others know wholeness in the way that we do? Jesus told us: “I have told you this *so that* my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”

What do you say? Do you want your joy to be complete? I know that I do, and so we may pray that God will give us the strength we gain from loving each other—with the other being all of humanity into whose roots we are meant to be entwined. May it be so for us.