

Abide In My Love

John 15:1-11

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the
Bellbrook Presbyterian Church on May 6, 2012]

I

In John 15, Jesus is speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper.

His arrest, trial, and execution are looming.

It is his valedictory address...

his final words to them...

to encourage them and prepare them for what is to come.

In this crucial hour Jesus tells his followers,

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Abide in me as I abide in you.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.

Abide in my love.

Today we ask: What does it mean for Christians to abide in the love of Jesus?

II

“Abide” is a wonderful verb that no one is accustomed to using.

We find the word “abide” eleven times in this morning’s gospel lesson.

That is probably eleven times more than you’ve heard it in the last ten years.

“Abide” is an old fashioned word.

Of the 17 uses of abide listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, eight are obsolete.

Hotel advertisements read “stay with us,”
not “abide with us.”

Baseball announcers don’t sum up an inning with
“one hit, one walk, and two abiding on base;”
they say “two left on base.”

Mike Jagger never sang, “Let’s abide the night together.”

The word “abide” belongs to another era.

Abiding has to do with things that persevere and are long-lasting.

No wonder the word is so rare these days.

Long-term relationships are increasingly uncommon.

Marriages are short-lived.

Friendships break up.

Treaties between nations are cancelled.

Business contracts are tissue thin.

Abiding is so difficult, many people give up trying.

How ironic that Jesus is speaking to the 12 men who would fail to abide with him
in his hour of greatest need.

For Christians to abide with God is both necessary and hard.

Jesus uses the metaphor of the vine and the branches to remind us how important it
is that we stay connected to God’s Spirit.

III

Our epistle lesson from the First Letter of John echoes the same thought.

*God is love and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.*

New Testament scholars have suggested that the author, possibly John the Apostle, is an old man at the time he is writing (according to tradition, John lived to be nearly 100 years old).

If it is John the Apostle, he is perhaps the last person alive actually to have known Jesus, talked with him, received the bread and wine from his own hands.

So he writes to sum up the message and ministry of Jesus and point his followers to the future.

God is love, he says, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

There is a radical new theology being expressed here: **God is love.**

There were, and are, plenty of other theologies:

God, the unknowable power behind the cosmos,
God, the righteous judge,
God, the aloof and distant creator,
God, the stern lord of all.

All of these are attempts to capture in human words, categories, metaphors the ultimate and inexplicable reality of God.

And now there is this powerful new thought: **God is love.**

And since God is love, God lives in us as we love others.

There is always a danger of treating such a profound theological statement in a glib manner,

to hear the words without attempting to understand them,
without them having any impact on the way we think and act.

The temptation whenever we think about love is to limit its meaning to sentimental feelings of affection:

such as, “I just love the Ohio State Buckeyes,”
or “I just love carrot cake.”

But the love the New Testament speaks of is not sentimental at all.

It is not ethereal...it is not even an emotion.

So if it's not sentimental or an emotion, what is it?

IV

Simply this: love in the New Testament is an action, a gift, a person—
God's only Son, Jesus Christ.

When the New Testament talks about love (Greek: *agape*—unconditional love, love with no strings attached),
it means Jesus Christ,
and it is symbolized not by hearts and flowers,
but by a cross.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with hearts and flowers.

It's just not the totality of what Christians mean by love.

Frederick Buechner writes that real love in marriage is not the feelings we have during the marriage ceremony or at a romantic candlelight dinner for two.

Real love comes into play when the sink is full of dirty dishes and the bills haven't been paid and it's 2:00 am and the baby starts crying and someone has to get up and change a diaper and your spouse is sick with the flu and you really don't want to get out of bed.

In the thought of both the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John,
love is at the heart of reality,
the center of the universe.

Peel back all the layers and at the heart of reality is not a powerful, angry judge,
not a vacuum or a void or a distant, unfeeling deity,
but, says John, a God of love.

And that God abides in you as you allow the love that God is to live in you and through you.

V

There's one line in this passage that always gets to me when I read it, and I'll bet it gets to you too:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. . . . Abide in me as I abide in you."

And then this: **"Apart from me you can do nothing."**

Did Jesus really say that?

Did he really mean that apart from him we can't do anything?

Well, in our better moments, we must recognize
that he does mean that.

Apart from his connecting you and me to the heart of the universe,
the ultimate reality which is the God who is love,
you and I really aren't living the full and abundant life God offers.

We are forced to conclude that people who do abide in love and therefore abide in God, whether they name it or not, are really living the fullness of life.

This is not something we can do on our own.

We might try to fool ourselves on this point.

Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood said, "We are a cut-flower civilization."

Cut off from our roots in God's love,
our good intentions wither and die.

But by the grace of God, we always have the possibility of being connected to Christ even when we are not mindful of it.

Yes, our lives have roots in Jesus.

But if we are honest, we are forced to admit that in fact we don't come close to loving everyone God wants us to love,
not to mention people we don't much like.

So, yes, we can't do anything—
at least not anything of lasting consequence—
apart from Jesus

We need to be connected to the vine.

We need the nutrients and energy and power of God's love.

Most of all, we need the God who is love to empower
our own feeble efforts at love.

And I know that for you and me and every person,
there will come a day when everything else is failing...
when this human existence that we have known is coming to its end.

Then we will need powerfully and urgently to know that at the center of the universe there is a loving heart,
that God is love and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them...
not just now,
but through all eternity.

Catherine of Sienna wrote:

*And you, high eternal Trinity,
acted as if you were drunk with love,
infatuated with your creature.
When you saw that this tree could bear no fruit
but the fruit of death
because it was cut off from you who are life,
you came to its rescue
with the same love
with which you had created it:
you engrafted your divinity
into the dead tree of our humanity.
O sweet tender engrafting!*

*You, sweetness itself,
stooped to join yourself
with our bitterness.*

VI

Cornelius Ryan's book, *A Bridge Too Far*, tells of one of the most difficult and disastrous engagements of the Second World War.

It was a mission that ultimately failed at a terrible cost in Allied casualties.

A British division had been decimated, almost wiped out.

The wounded and dying and soon-to-be captured soldiers were surrounded and waiting for the end—

either death, surrender, or a humiliating and precarious retreat.

The chaplain struggled for something to say or do to convey to his men something of God's comfort and peace.

All he could think of was to sing an old hymn:

*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide;*

At first the demoralized men just listened.

Then they began to hum and sing softly themselves.

Against the thunderous barrage, hundreds of wounded and dying men took up the song—

*When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

*I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.*

*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies;
Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

I am the vine; you are the branches.

**God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them**

Abide in my love.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Sources:

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