

Abide
Mark 3:31 – 35; John 15:1 – 13
Sunday, July 1, 2018

On the television show *Lost*, an airplane crashes on a remote deserted island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. For the first few days, everyone is convinced that someone will be showing up any time to rescue them. So this group of strangers is just trying to get by until they are rescued. But by the sixth day, they start to get anxious that no one is coming. So they start arguing and fighting over the little food and water and supplies that were on the plane. Tensions are running really high and they are at each other's throats, literally fighting on the beach, when a man named Jack stands up and says, "We can't do this! Every man for himself is not going to work. If we can't live together, then we're going to die alone." It's a turning point on the show, and this group of strangers starts to pull together. They start sharing food and water and working together to build shelters. They do more than just *survive*. They *live* there, *together*.

I don't know about you, but when I watch the news and look at the world around us, I feel like as a country, we're on that island, fighting over *everything*. This week is the 4th of July, when we will celebrate the 242nd anniversary of our independence from Great Britain. That independence is a part of our DNA as a country and a people; it runs *deep* in us. But the problem is, that spirit of independence has turned into *individualism*, where it's all about *me* and *my* rights and preferences and what *I* want or need or think is right. We're a bunch of strangers living with each other, but we don't even know our neighbors. And like the people on that island, we need to be reminded that every man for himself is not going to work, because if we can't live together, then we're going to die alone. We need to be reminded that our faith, at its core, is not about *independence*. It's about *interdependence*. That I depend on *you*, you depend on *me*, and we *all* depend on *God*.

Jesus talks about that dependence when he talks about himself as a *vine*, and we are the *branches* that grow out of the vine, and God is the *vinegrower*. Jesus depends on God, and we depend on Jesus, and we are all connected to God in and through him. He says that just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it's connected to the vine, neither can *we* bear fruit unless we are connected to God in Christ. When he talks about "bearing fruit," it's all about the *good things* that our lives produce; the evidence of our connection to God. Paul talks about the "fruit of the Spirit" as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we abide with God, living in dependence upon God, then those are the kind of things that our lives will produce. Apart from Christ, disconnected from him, we can do nothing. But if we abide in him, live with him, trust in him, depend on him, we can bear fruit that will nourish the world.

A life of faith is all about dependence on God. Theologian Scott Haggley says that people don't just need to be *enlightened* – taught information or knowledge about God – we need to *admit our need*. To live mindful of the ways that we depend on God, each moment of each day; that everything we are, every good gift comes from God. It's this daily recognition that, apart from you, O Lord, I can do nothing. But *with* you, if I abide with you, live with you, trust in you, depend on you, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Phil. 4:13).

How do we do that? How do we abide with God like that and live in that constant state of mindfulness and dependence upon God? For one of the classes in my doctoral program, I was introduced to a book called *Practicing His Presence*. It was written by two men, over 200 years apart – a monk named Brother Lawrence in the 1600s and a missionary named Frank Laubach in the 1900s. They write about the practice of turning our thoughts to God all throughout our day.

It's this incredibly simple thing. It's not about thinking about nothing but God every moment of every day. Both writers admit that's impossible.

But Laubach writes about "trying to line up [his] actions with the will of God about every fifteen minutes or every half hour" or "to call Christ to mind at least one second of each minute." He says it's as simple as whispering inside yourself, "Lord, you are my life," or, "You are my thought." Or even just once each hour, saying, "Lord Jesus Christ," and calling Christ into your thoughts and into that moment. Reminding yourself of God's presence by saying, "You are with me."

Laubach says when you're eating a meal, whisper Jesus' words, "Eat this in remembrance of me," so that every mouthful is his body broken for you. He says, "When you're reading, keep a running conversation with Him about the pages you are reading." Ask, "What are you saying to me here, God?" Instead of talking to *yourself*, form the habit of talking to Christ. Instead of just saying, "What am I going to do," say, "What am I going to do, *Lord*?" If you start having thoughts that aren't fruitful or faithful, stop yourself and say, "Lord, draw me back to you."

It's just some small, simple phrase or way of turning your thoughts back to Christ once every hour, so that as you go about your day, you are having this continual conversation with God. You're mindful of Christ's presence with you. Laubach writes, "Can I bring the Lord back in my mind-flow every few seconds so that God shall always be in my mind?" When you're faced with a decision, ask, "God, what are you calling me to do?" Quaker author Thomas Kelly writes about "a life of little whispered words of adoration, of praise, of prayer, of worship [that] can be

breathed all throughout the day.”¹ In this way we are living *with God*, abiding with God, and practicing *dependence* on God in each moment and each decision.

Jesus says here that if we abide with him and abide in his love, then we will bear fruit, and we will love one another. If we are connected to the vine of Christ, we aren't *just* connected to God, we are *also* connected to *each other*. Our abiding with God turns into our abiding with one another. Our dependence on God turns into depending on one another. Our love for God turns into loving one another. And Jesus says here, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” The question then becomes, “Who *are* our friends?”

So in the show *Lost*, the survivors of this plane crash come together and find a way to live life together on this island. But eventually they discover that they aren't the *only ones* living on the island. There is this mysterious group they refer to as “The Others.” And what happens is, the survivors of the crash come together and love one another and depend on one another as they fight *against* The Others (who it turns out aren't all that different from them). They form *tribes* – the Survivors and the Others, *us* and *them*. They fight each other and kill each other. But as the show goes on, they come to realize that if they are going to make it off this island, they have to find a way to work together *with* the Others.

In the same way, *we* come out of our individualism, but we tend to do so with people who are *like us*. People who *look* like us, *think* like us, *believe* like us, share common interests with us. We form tribes. And we define ourselves in opposition to *other* tribes. Conservative and liberal, Christian and Muslim, Presbyterian and Catholic, black and white, American and foreigner, citizen and immigrant, rich and poor. There are any number of ways that we practice tribalism.

¹ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, pg. 97

But in our reading from Mark's gospel, Jesus has been going around teaching and preaching and healing people, and one day his family shows up. Someone says to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you." And Jesus says, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" He looks at the people around him and says, "*Here* are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus resists defining himself in terms of his family, his literal tribe, and defines himself in terms of something much larger. He says, "Whoever abides with God, loves God, and does God's will, *that* is my family."

In the same way, *we* are called to overcome tribalism by recognizing that we are a part of something much larger. Can conservatives *and* liberals do God's will? Yes. Can American *and* foreigner, citizen *and* immigrant do God's will? Yes. Can Presbyterians and Catholics and Christians and Muslims and Jews bear the fruit of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control? Yes. And if we can't recognize that and find a way to live together, then we're going to die alone in our tribes.

Jesus says that no one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. We usually hear that call to "lay down one's life" as meaning to *die*. No one has greater love than to *die* for one's friends. Because that's what *Jesus* did. But to lay down your life can *also* mean *set aside* your life. That I'm going to take my life, my needs and desires and preferences and set them aside to live life with you. Because that's *also* what Jesus did. He didn't just die for us. He lived with us. And Christ is calling us to live in love with God and with each other. You can't separate the two. They are as connected as the branches on a vine. Our love for God is made manifest and real in the ways that we love our neighbors. Not just the ones who are like *us*, but especially the ones who are *not*.

This past week author Shane Claiborne quoted Mother Teresa, saying, “So often the problem is simply this – that we make the circle we put around our family too small...We are to love as big as God loves. And God’s love is higher and deeper and broader and fiercer than we can ever imagine.” Abide in that love. Bear fruit that glorifies God. Love one another and make that circle bigger. In this way, Jesus says, you will become my disciples, and you will find *joy*.