

Abiding in Christ  
John 15:1-8  
Sunday, May 2, 2021 (Easter 5)

Like last week, the lectionary has us looking back to *before* Jesus' death and resurrection, hearing the things that he said and taught with our post-Easter ears, in an attempt to better understand who he is and who he calls us to be. Last week we looked at John 10, where Jesus talks about himself as the Good Shepherd. This week, we are looking at a section of what is referred to as the "Farewell Discourse," Jesus' final teaching to his disciples before he is arrested and crucified. He is trying here to prepare his disciples for life *without* him. He is risen from the dead, but in just 11 days he will ascend into heaven, leaving Earth to take his place at the right hand of God. And so *we* read his words here in an attempt to understand how to follow Christ when he is no longer physically with us.

Jesus compares himself to a vine and his disciples to the branches that grow off of the main vine. And he calls his disciples to stay connected to him after he is gone – like a branch is connected to the vine – so that they may bear good fruit. Now, there is a *lot* that we could dig into here, especially these parts about God *pruning* the branches and throwing them into the fire; that tends to grab our attention. But what really drew me into this reading was Jesus' simple command to *abide in me*. How do we stay connected to Christ after he is gone? By *abiding* in him. That sounds simple, but there is so much here that runs *counter* to the way that we are taught to live in the world today.

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I don't know about you, but lately my life has been starting to return more to "normal" (if we can call it that). With more and more people getting vaccinated, we're starting to hopefully see an end to this year of pandemic restrictions, and that has led in recent weeks to a return to the pre-Covid busyness of life that I had forgotten about. Our son Ryan is playing baseball again, and I

am helping coach his team, so I have been spending 3 or 4 nights each week at the ballfield; running home from work, eating something real quick, picking him up, and turning right back around for a 2 hour game. At the same time, I have finally been able to schedule the physicals and dentist and eye doctor appointments that had to be put off for the past year. And between our kids and our parents, there have been other family medical issues that we have had to attend to. Now that spring has come, I have to find time to mow the lawn and work in the yard again. And I *have* time to do all of this, but it's like life is starting to get back into a busy rhythm for the first time in a year.

So when I was looking at the lectionary, trying to figure out what to preach on this week, *this* text from John jumped out at me because it *felt* peaceful. It felt relaxed and calming. *Abide with me*. It almost felt like a *sabbath* text, calling us to *rest*. There was something about this thought of *abiding with Christ* that spoke to me.

The disciples had spent three years following Jesus, reordering the everyday routine of their lives around him, and now they were moving into a time when he was *not* going to be there anymore, and life was going to return to some sense of pre-Jesus normalcy. Their lives would undoubtedly be forever changed, and they would never look exactly like they did before. But they were at least going to have to figure out how to stay connected with him and abide with him, how to live these new lives of faith, while simultaneously moving back into the normal rhythms and routines of life. And like them, we have to answer this question of *how do we abide with Christ* once we return to the “normal” rhythms and routines of life.

That word *abide* is a Greek word that means, “to dwell, to remain, to wait for, to live with.” One Greek definition says, “to be held or kept continually.” I like that, the thought of Jesus saying,

“Be held and kept continually by me.” And there are a lot of ways that we can *do* that – abide with Christ, dwell with him, live with him, be held and kept continually by him. One of the ways that he mentions here is through scripture. He talks about how his followers have been *cleansed* by the word he has spoken to them, and he says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you....” For us, the way that we hear the words that he has spoken and his words abide in us is by reading them in scripture. As we listen to Jesus’ words here, reflecting and meditating on them, it is like we are right there *with him*, dwelling with him, abiding with him. So we can *abide with Christ* by reading his words in scripture; spending time with him there.

Communion, this meal that we are going to share today, is another way that we abide with Christ. As we come to this table and picture ourselves sitting at table *with him*. As we share in his body and blood, he becomes a *part* of us. It’s this mystical communion that binds us to him. We share in the body of Christ, and he *lives* in us, *dwells* in us. And it’s not just *this* meal. We talked the other week about how *every* meal that we eat can be a time in which we abide with Christ. When we are mindful of the ways that God provides the food we eat and of the ways that God nourishes and sustains our lives. When we sit down to a meal and picture Christ sitting at that table with us. It changes the way we eat, and every meal can become a sacred act of communion with God and with each other.

And speaking of that, as we share in this meal *together*, we are bound to the Body of Christ, the church. That is another way of abiding with Christ, by living life together with a community of faith, sharing life together, joining in worship and prayer and study and fellowship together. It’s interesting that when Jesus says here, “Abide in me,” that word *abide* is used in the *plural* tense. It’s not a *singular* directive. Jesus is not just saying to you or me individually, “Abide in me,” he is saying, “*You all* abide in me.” The command to abide is to *all* of us. So when we live our

lives together with a community of faith, we are abiding in the Body of Christ, and Christ is abiding in our corporate life together. *Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

Prayer is another obvious way that we can abide with Christ. Whether that takes the form of a daily devotional or saying the Lord's Prayer or some other set liturgy of prayer or just a conversation with God in the course of your day, there are so many ways that the practice of prayer can allow us to abide in Christ.

But what I specifically want to focus on is a practice that has become very meaningful to me over the past couple of years. Each day when I do my morning prayers, I take anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes to just sit and be still and quiet and close my eyes and breathe and just *be* with God. Sometimes I will imagine that Jesus is sitting in the room, right across from me, and I will try to *feel* his presence. But I don't worry about *saying* anything. I don't *do* anything. I just sit with Jesus. I allow myself to be in the presence of our Lord. To just sit there and love him and let myself feel his love. And it doesn't have to be 10 or 20 minutes for you. It can be *five* minutes. It can be *one* minute! But it is the best way I have found to truly *abide* with Christ. Because that's all you're doing, just *dwelling* with him, being kept and held by him.

And it's surprisingly hard to do. It doesn't come naturally to us. Because we are taught by this culture that we live in that we have to *do*. We have to be *productive*. We have to be *busy*. We have to be *saying* something or *doing* something, and this feels like doing *nothing*. But I talked last week about the reimagining of the movie *The Karate Kid*. And there is a scene where the teacher is teaching the young boy about the need to be still and calm and centered, and the boy says, "That's just doing *nothing*!" He's upset because he's there to learn kung fu – he's there to

*do something* – and this is not that. And the teacher says, “Being still and doing nothing are two very different things.”

Being still, sitting with Jesus, abiding with Christ and *doing nothing* are two very different things.

But the world around us talks in terms of *doing*. If you *do this*, then you will *have this*, and then you will *be this*. If you do well in school, study hard, then you will have good grades and a good education, and you will be successful. If you *work hard*, then you will *have money*, and then you will *be happy*. If you read scripture or pray more, then you will *have* a connection with God, and you will *be* more spiritual or faithful. If you do for others, then you will have something to show for your faith and you will be fulfilled. This culture of *do, have, be* is how we are taught to think about everything. It’s why we constantly feel the need to *do*, and any kind of rest or inactivity or contemplation seems unproductive or lazy. Our busyness is like a badge of honor that shows how hard working and productive we are, because our *worth* as human beings has come to be based on our *productivity*.

But what Jesus calls us to here is not about *doing*, it’s about *being*. It’s not about working harder or the need to read more scripture or pray more or produce more. It’s about *abiding*. Just *being with* God, being *connected* to God, *living life with God*. And it’s not about *having*. It’s about *bearing*.

This is where the image of the vine becomes so helpful. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. The branches don’t have to *do* anything to be connected to the vine. They just have to *be*. Be *fed* by the vine. Be *tended* and *pruned* by the vinegrower. All the branch has to do is *be*,

and it *grows*. Our culture is so focused on *doing* and *having*, but abiding in Christ is about *being* and *bearing fruit*. And those things happen, not by our *own* effort, but by *God's*. The vine doesn't have to *try* to grow fruit. It just happens naturally. All we have to do is be connected, and God will produce the results.

It's so easy to think that it's up to us; that *life* and the *spiritual life* is all up to us and dependent on *our doing*. But theologian Nancy Blakely writes, "As Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples, he invites them to stay close to him by placing their trust in him. He warns them that they cannot go it alone, trusting in their own strength. On their own they would be cut off from their life source. They would bear no fruit...The temptation to go it in our own is great. We live in a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself...It becomes very easy to think that it is all up to us and our own resources as we try to solve problems and meet challenges...But God as master gardener offers a better plan for our lives."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus does not call us to *do*. He calls us to *abide*, to *be*. And the result of that being is not that we will *have* or *possess*. It is that we will *bear fruit* that nourishes others and feeds the world, just as we are fed, in Christ.

I want to invite you now to practice this. To take a few minutes to just *be* in the presence of Christ. Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and breathe. Don't worry about *doing* anything or *thinking* about anything. Just sit with Jesus. Picture him sitting there with you. If your thoughts wander, don't beat yourself up or admonish yourself over it. Just gently bring them back to Christ. Let us abide in him.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy R. Blakely in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Volume 2, Lent through Eastertide (pg. 475-476).