

Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8
Psalm 22:24-30

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
May 2, 2021
The Rev. Karen Haig

Abiding

Here on this 5th Sunday in Easter, we are taken back to maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus died. We'll spend three weeks on this last night of Jesus' life. It's interesting that we're not hearing more of the resurrection stories –fishermen casting their nets on the other side of the boat, breakfast on the beach, Paul's experience of Jesus on the Damascus road... no. These last three Sundays of Easter, we return to the night before Jesus died, the night he tried to say goodbye, the night he gave the new commandment to love one another as he loves us.

I'm actually grateful for the return to that night, because on that one single night, Jesus gave us pretty much everything we need, to live as his followers in the world today. Yes, his three years of life and ministry were very important for our learning and for creating the pattern for our own lives, but on that last night, when there was so little time left, when Jesus knew he was about to die, he poured his heart out even as he prepared his disciples for life without him, even as he said his last goodbyes. Many of us have been in that place – saying goodbye to someone we know will soon die. It is the tenderest of times, holy really. All pretense falls away and only love remains. And so we say the things that matter most. And what matters most always seems to be about love, about relationship. *Abide in me as I abide in you.* What do those words mean to you – *Abide in me as I abide in you?* What would it mean for you to abide in Jesus as he abides in you?

Some of you have heard me tell of an experience I had in the Berkeley Rose Garden many years ago. My mother had recently died and I was missing her terribly. A wise woman once told me that losing one's mother is an umbilical event – that when our mother dies, regardless of the relationship we've had with her, we're left floating around in the universe, untethered in a way we never could have imagined. And that's precisely how I felt on that warm afternoon in the rose garden. I was all alone and praying one of those ineloquent but deeply meaningful and honest prayers... I'm so sad, I miss my mom.

As I sat there alone, the warm breeze blowing and the fragrance of a thousand roses wafting over me, I felt the presence of the divine. Though my eyes were closed, I could see Jesus sitting on the bench next to me. He sat, leaning forward a little with his elbows resting on his thighs, hands folded, thumbs pointing upward, his head tilted toward me, as though he was listening very, very carefully. "I am so sad." I prayed. And then Jesus just slid over on the bench – not right up next to me, but right into me. "*Abide in me as I abide in you*" he said.

I think of that afternoon each time I hear Jesus say *Abide in me as I abide in you.* Live in me as I live in you. There is something so intimate in those words, something beautifully conveyed in the way Jesus talks about the vine grower, the vine and the branches. All are intertwined. All

deeply relational. And all making very clear our absolute dependence on Jesus the vine, and the Father, the vine grower. It's all so close, intimate, really. And it is very important for us to sink into that intimacy as we hear the words of this passage, because without the intimate, abiding, loving relationship Jesus speaks of and wants with us, some of his words can sound harsh, even threatening. *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. ... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."* That's a scary thought! You see, without that sense of intimacy, without the experience of God's boundless love for us, it would be easy to hear those words as prescriptive rather than descriptive.

But Jesus isn't saying the Father will cut us off and throw us into the fire to die. He is describing what we feel like, what we experience when we are out of relationship with him, out of relationship with the Father. He is describing our experience when we won't abide in him as he abides in us. He is not saying if you don't abide in me you'll be thrown into the fire to die. While others have used those words to threaten and intimidate, Jesus doesn't use those, or any other words to threaten or intimidate. The truth is, we do wither and fade and maybe even die a little when we don't take in the boundless love Jesus offers, when we distance ourselves from his forgiveness and grace, when we don't allow ourselves to abide in him as he abides in us.

This abiding is what allows us to bring God's reconciling love into the world – to bear the fruits of God's kingdom. Jesus tells us God will prune the fruit bearing branches – that would be us – so that we will bear more fruit. That sounds a bit intimidating too. Pruning is hard, not just because it takes skill and understanding to know what to prune when and how much and how often, but because it means cutting off things that are alive and still growing. I am a terrible pruner. I don't mind weeding or clearing out the dead stuff, but it is nearly impossible for me to cut back growing, living things. Still, I am learning that careful pruning – pruning that takes into account the particularity and uniqueness of each rose or shrub or fruit tree – that sort of pruning really does make things stronger, really does result in more and better fruit. I've seen it in my own garden and in my own life... which makes the pruning God would do in my life more desirable even when it's hard. I have come to understand that when Jesus talks about pruning, he's talking about loving and growing and abiding ever more deeply in God, because, he says, apart from him we can do nothing.

I've thought a lot about that this week – apart from Jesus we can do nothing. There are a lot of good people doing great good in the world who are not Christians or people of any sort of faith at all. So how can it be that apart from Jesus one can do nothing? We need to remember that Jesus is talking to his followers, and these particular followers were feeling pretty beaten down. For Jesus to say that apart from him they could do nothing was to remind them that with him, they could do everything. For those of us who are Christians, acknowledging God as the source of our everything is a profound confession of faith. And while we don't always behave as though we believe that apart from Jesus we can do nothing, I believe our desire to live that way is real. Living as though we can do nothing apart from Jesus isn't just counter-cultural, it is very difficult. In part because we tend to forget who and whose we are – beloved children of God – and in part because we live in a world where being in control of our own destiny, being a self-made woman

or man is the highest goal. But nobody is self-made and the people who clamor and climb and step on anyone in their way to get to the top, couldn't get there without the help and support of others, even others they've hurt.

If we've learned nothing else in this time of pandemic, of racial injustices, of divisive rhetoric and unabashed violence and hate, we have learned that we really are all interconnected, we really are all in this together. Which is just another way of saying that to love our neighbor – knowing everyone is our neighbor – to love our neighbors as ourselves, is to recognize that our neighbor is ourself, to recognize that we really are all one. And what makes us one is God's abiding love in us and for us, and our abiding in God who is that love. When we hear it that way, we begin to see how every good thing we are and every good thing we do really does depend on God living and loving through us. When we hear it that way, we can be sure that because everything we do really does depend on Jesus, everything we do will bear the fruit of love which is God's desire for us and for God's beautiful, broken and beloved world. Amen.