

May 10, 2009
Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Abiding”

Text: John 15:1-8

We don't really do much “abiding” in our lives, at least in the manner that Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson today. We don't often use the word “abide” except in the sense of enduring or bearing something as in, “I can't abide that type of behavior!” But “abiding” in the sense of living and dwelling and remaining permanently, we don't really use the word much outside of the biblical context.

We don't say we abide in our house. We say we live in our house, and that's with the understanding that it's not all the time and that, given the right set of circumstances, we might chuck it for a different house someplace else. We don't even say that we abide in our families. We say we “have” a family, because it is an ongoing relationship. But that relationship may be stronger in some places and weaker in others and family is always a growing and changing entity with births and deaths and marriages and feuds. Our family relationship today won't be the same relationship ten years from now. I can't even say that I abide as a Cubs fan, because it's not something I do all the time. I'm loyal, but I really only practice my fandom during the baseball season and usually most of that is spent looking ahead to next season. “Abiding” as remaining permanently and practicing and living continually; it's not our nature.

This is why we often tend to hear Jesus words here as law. *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”* This need to abide in Jesus gets a whole lot more law-sounding as Jesus then says what happens to those who fail to abide. *“If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”*

That's downright scary. We look at our lives and we don't really abide in any of the good things that are right before our eyes, much less the divine Lord Jesus Christ who we don't see. The fact is, if we had to find something in which we truly abide, something in which we constantly remain, sin is probably the only thing we could name. It's real easy for us to hear these words and see ourselves as separate from God, not abiding with Christ, and heading toward the fire.

That view is common, because we in our sin are so self centered. We need to open our ears and hear more completely. *“Abide in me and I in you.” “I am the true vine...” “Whoever abides in me and I in him...” “I am the vine; you are the branches.”* There are two entities involved in this deal and one of them is the almighty Son of God. Christ Jesus is speaking these words in the context of promising His Holy Spirit to the disciples. Christ Jesus is speaking these words in the context of traveling to the cross to die for those sins we all seem to abide in. Christ Jesus is speaking these words in the midst of telling the disciples of His love for mankind and of how they have been chosen by God to be disciples of Christ.

Abiding in God's favor is only made possible by Christ. It was abiding in faith in God's promise of Messiah by which Abraham was counted as righteous and it is by that same Messiah we abide in God's favor. Jesus gives this Gospel command to abide in Him and Jesus makes the doing of this abiding possible through His suffering, death and resurrection which purchases us out of the sin in which we were enslaved.

Jesus told His disciples, “*Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.*” We are clean by that same Word. We abide in Christ because of His Word of forgiveness which I spoke earlier in the service. We abide in Christ because of His Word and promise to wash you clean of sin in your baptism. We abide in Christ through His Word and promise of forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper. We abide in Christ because of Christ. Hallelujah!

(Pause)

So then why this command and threat of fire and burning? Because there is so much temptation in this world to abide not in Christ, but in the sinful nature we know so well. Christ speaks of the reality He is creating in us through His death, resurrection and the gift of His Holy Spirit. But He makes clear that this is not the only reality before us. We who are in Christ must constantly beware of letting ourselves wither in the faith by focusing not on abiding in Christ, but on abiding in the sinful world.

I say “abiding in the sinful world” and we may think of falling into open heinous sin and outright rebellion against God. Sure, we run that risk. But there is a much more sneaky and insidious pitfall for believers in Christ. Satan and our own evil inclinations work a lot more subtly in ways that we who openly profess our faith really need to watch out for. Hymn number 878 is one of my favorites and one I often sing in hospitals when somebody is going through a tough time and needs the comfort of Christ. If you ask me the name of the hymn, I most often will tell you it is named, “Abide in Me.” The fact is that the name of the hymn is really “Abide *with* Me.”

This is more than a Freudian slip. I think this is a reflection of the way Satan and our sinful self wants us to think and live. The truth is that we are self-centered and we like the idea of Christ abiding *in* us. We like the comfort of having Christ dwelling in us somewhere, as if we can go ahead and pull Him out when we need Him and then put Him back again. We prefer to act like we are in control, able to play and revel in the sin of the world and then whip out our Christ in a crisis.

This is not the picture Jesus paints. He is the vine. We are the branches. If we are abiding in Him, we are constantly receiving from Him, thriving because of the gifts we receive through Him. He is not something that is only there when we want. Abiding in Christ is Him being the source of our very existence and the one we look to in every need. This is the relationship that Jesus urges the disciples to aspire to. Jesus urges all of us to focus on this reality He gives us through His sacrifice, lest we become distracted by the wiles and temptations of the sin which remains around us each and every day and drop ourselves from the vine of His salvation.

I want you to take time this week and think about this. Before you say your prayers I want you to consider if you’ve been striving to get Jesus to abide in you someplace where you can keep Him until you need Him, or if you’ve been struggling to abide in Him as the source and font of every good in your life. If you aren’t saying your prayer regularly, shame on you. When you are brushing your teeth I want you to consider how firmly rooted you are in Christ Jesus the vine from whence eternal life flows. Amid all this introspection I want you to remember the warning Jesus gives of the branches falling away and being burned and feel no small amount of fear.

Then I want you to ponder the reality of the words Jesus speaks. “*I am the vine. You are the branches.*” Let these words of Jesus abide in you, reassure you that you have been saved through His blood. Let the fact that He has claimed you as His own in Holy Baptism, sustained you with His Word of forgiveness and nourishes you with His very body and blood in the Holy Supper confirm that you do abide in Him by His power and not your own. Take comfort in the

Easter truth that Christ in supreme majesty and glory rose from the dead and abides in you not as an accessory to your earthly life, but as the Lord of all that is.

The simple reality is this; God has chosen to abide in you and to have you abide in Him. It is a wonderful and underserved reality. Strive to live it each and every day. Abiding in His mercy and grace, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.