

Year B, Easter 5  
May 2, 2021  
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Abide. Abide is one of those great church words. It is like firmament. Smite. Hoarfrost. Those are just words not in common, at least, secular usage much, anymore at least. There are some exceptions. Abiding is an important part of *The Big Lebowski*, Joel and Ethan Coen’s cinematic opus, but it is nearly Biblical in the way they use it. We do sometimes hear “If there is one thing I can’t abide...” That is about tolerating something or someone, bearing patiently. Or “I will abide in the decision of the court.” That is to accept, or act in accordance with. We hear that on occasion, too. But that is not quite what Jesus was getting at.

The way Jesus uses “abide” is as in a feeling or memory, that it continues without fading or being lost. Synonyms include remain, survive, persist. “Persist in me as I persist in you.” “Who ever does not remain in me is thrown away like a branch and withers.” *The Message* translation of the Bible reads, “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you.” That is getting towards it, but that doesn’t quite make my soul sing. “Live in me.”

“Persist in me.” Those don’t quite capture the depth St. John’s *Abide*.

This is poetry, St. John’s gospel, the poetry of faith. It lifts us high, up from the firmament towards the heavenly hosts. It uses language and images to put into words the inexpressible, in ways that have survived the millennia. Poetry doesn’t always make a lot of sense, not in the front of the brain. “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people.” The best of religious texts rarely make lasting sense in a direct, logical way. They make sense in our hearts, in the center of gravity in our being. Because that is where the Word persists, where it abides, in our hearts; our souls.

Jesus knows this, so He uses allegory, metaphor, symbolic language to express The Word, because The Word is *not* just words, it is a deeper-than-words. This is Him in us and us in Him. So, He tells us that to abide in Him is akin to the relationship between the fruit, the branch and the vine. The branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine. Apart from the vine, it is fruitless, the branch; apart from Jesus, we are without fruit, our life is fruitless. And this is not fruitful as in our productivity, of *any* value that our society assigns. It is fruitful in terms of the love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that defines our lives and relationships. You know, the fruits of the spirit. Those are the measures of our worth in God's economy. And all of it happens all under the gentle hand (and razor-sharp pruning shears) of God.

This is where we miss it sometimes as Christians. We have these towering verses, "In the beginning was the Word..." and we all know what it means, somewhere within. Human beings are hardwired for understanding truth, beauty and goodness in all its abstractness, we are hardwired to love. But life gets in the way of our true nature. Often. Sometimes we feel trapped and frustrated by our responsibilities to the children, parents, or spouses who are in our care as they grow up or decline. Sometimes we need to navigate a relationship with the neighbor with the branches (speaking of branches) hanging over onto your side of the fence. How does Jesus abide with you, in you when you finally realize which of those things about your spouse that drive you crazy will never change, that's just who they are; or the test results that weren't at all what you hoped for? Or that leering co-worker, greedy landlord, armed insurgent, or people flaunting the very pandemic safety measures that will make it end sooner for all of

us? How do we abide in anything the way things can get in this life?

Today we hear one of the brass rings of all of the epistles, this little excerpt from the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of St. John; “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...” Attributed to St. John the Evangelist, no one really thinks he himself wrote it, but rather it was a disciple of the Johannine school, someone writing in the tradition of John to the community that grew up around that tradition.

Today’s passage from 1 John opens up Jesus’ instruction to abide in Him. It is almost like spiritually engineering what it means to abide, how to be in abiding relationship with God in Christ as intimately as the fruit is with the branch and the branch is with the vine. The grape comes by living seamlessly, root all the way to cluster, one energy, one spirit flowing from part to part, connected in the most intimate of relationship. What flows from vine to branch to fruit that makes the whole whole and holy? Love.

“God is love...” You all know that statement. Well, this is where it comes from, 1<sup>st</sup> John, Chapter 4, the only place those words occur in scripture. “God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” We abide, we

continue without fading or being lost, in love. Love is the blood of Christian abiding, that which binds us one to another, and in that bond, in the connect of love itself, God is there.

“God is love...” We really can’t say anything more profound than that, but it just kinds of sits there, doesn’t it? It’s a bumper sticker at the Common Ground Fair. But the implication of those words, their application, “...those who abide in love abide in God...” that is what got people in line to meet the lions, maybe not happy about it, but dedicated, and willing to follow through. Or maybe a better, or more contemporary visual is standing up to a line of riot police, think Gandhi’s *satyagrahis* on the Salt March or Dr. King and Mr. Lewis on the Pettis Bridge, or the hundreds of thousands that risked COVID to proclaim the message that Black Lives Matter as much as all other lives, and doing it all in love, not in contentment, but not in resentment either: in love. When that happens, when the kind of love that binds the root to the branch happens between and amongst humans, the force of a tsunami can be released. It is the might of the tides. Love, in the way that Jesus means and John interprets, is the force that not only gives life meaning, but *is* the meaning of life, is life itself. God is love.

The whole nature of existence is relationship. Everything, everyone starts in relationship with God the Creator; we are creatures, the created, we have a relationship with the Creator. The Christian understanding of existence is relational. Nothing exists on its own, we exist only in relationship with something else. The relationship that the Creator has with us, the created, is perfect, seamless, infinitely giving, root to vine to branch (at least from God's side). Perfect relationship. Could we have a better definition of perfect relationship than love?.

In His life and death, Jesus shows that life flows from the heart of God, and He calls that flow Love. We know God, we exist in God, we Abide in God when we love. When we feel loved. We don't even need to love God back, not directly. We need to feel God's love, and through that and with that, we need to love others.

Here's the Tuesday morning brass tacks. Don't worry about loving God. Worry about feeling loved by God. That is the first step. Like Simon Weil teaches, it is not so much that we say yes to God, we just need to stop saying no. You are loved by God. You. Specifically you. (And everyone else, but it is big love, enough to go around for everyone). That is the first step in participating in

the life of God: allow yourself to be loved by God. Now how to do that is the subject of a separate 10 part sermon series. For now, try to relax into it; soak it in like you did the three days of sun last week before the black flies arrived. God's love always shines for you.

The second step is hard, too: love one another. That's the primary practice of Christianity, because as Jesus tells us, in loving another, God exists in you. God so loved the world that Jesus, God came in to it. If you love, anyone, God comes into it, into your life, that relationship, the very world. It is that clear. That direct. God is even perfected, comes to full fruition in *your* act of love. That is the epitome of "to abide."

That is easier for some of us than for others, and surely it is easier to love some people than it is to love others, but we are called to love everyone.

I used to have a therapist who had me do experiments; to try something and reflect on it. I'm going to ask you to make a love experiment. (As things normalize and we get back to our rich lives in the wider world we'll have regular homework. During COVID I didn't want to subject spouses or pets to too much spiritual investigation. The assignment is to think of someone hard to love.

Not public figure, someone, but someone you are in relationship with. Not an enemy, we'll start basic, not someone dangerous to you, but just someone who maybe doesn't bring a smile to your face when they walk in the door. Have an idea about someone? Now I want you to practice loving them. This week. One week only. Practice.

What does that mean to love someone? It means giving the benefit of the doubt. Assume good intentions. It means trying to see the world from their perspective and having a heaping helping of forgiveness in what you find. Not excuses, not tolerance of bad behavior, but forgiveness of the person. Love means caring about what happens to them, concern for their well-being. And seeing them as God does, for who they are as a beloved creature.

The more I have gotten to know people, really gotten to see them, fully, the easier they are to love. Seeing not just the person they want the world to see, but the full them, the good, the bad and the ugly bits; that's from where real love springs. It arises in the fullness of truth, of a whole self revealed in her brokenness, in his fear, in their poverty of body, mind and/or spirit. As well as in their joy, and the love they feel. That's how God manages to love

us. Knowing us fully, truly, love flows and God is there, here.  
That is grace.

So I ask you to try it out this week; practice loving someone.  
Don't change your life, just try it out. Sound hard? Don't rely on  
yourself to love the hard to love, rely on God, who loves you even,  
especially when you are hard to love. That is what it means to  
abide. Abide in that love. Abide in God and God will abide in  
you. AMEN