

Abiding in Christ's Love: The Secret to Joy

As I mentioned this week in our newsletter, during this Easter season we are given three weeks of scriptures that emphasize abiding. We are called to abide. The texts we read on Sundays are determined by a lectionary that works on a three-year cycle, so we don't always get this many references to abiding. However, when we look at the readings prescribed for other years there are some similarities. There will always be a story about Jesus revealing himself to his disciples after he returns from the dead. There will always be at least one meal with his disciples. There will always be a passage about Jesus as a shepherd, there will always be several passages that have to do with loving God and others, and at least one passage about experiencing union with God.

In other words, as we journey with Jesus through the season of Easter, we are repeatedly invited to let Jesus reveal himself to us, to let ourselves be guided and fed by him, and, through Jesus, to experience union and love in a way that transforms our relationships. This, the Church proclaims, is what life can and ought to look like on the other side of the resurrection.

Jesus's words about abiding in his love were spoken to his disciples as part of a goodbye speech. He was anticipating his arrest and death, but also the eventual end to his with them in the flesh. He said, "As the Father has loved me,

so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."¹ Christie spoke with us last week about the way in which abiding in God connects us with the very source of life and wellness that enables us to be fruitful. In the words we read today, Jesus returns to this crucial issue of love. Jesus brought his disciples an experience of love that mirrors the love Jesus himself experiences within the trinity. And it's like he's saying, "Join us in this circle of complete and infinite love. Whether you see me or not, this is available to you."

He goes on to make a connection between keeping his commandments and abiding in his love. Please, please note, that he does not say, "Keep my commandments and I will love you, or, I will let you into the circle of divine love only if you are perfect." He says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." His love is assured. His love is always there, and we always have a place within that divine circle. What I believe deeply is that abiding is about acknowledging the reality of that love; it is about seeing and knowing his love as something that does, indeed, enfold us. Always. No matter what we think or do. What are his commandments?

¹ John 15:9-10

His summary of scripture's instructions are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.² Therefore, when we love God and our neighbor we find ourselves able to abide, or remain and rest, in the love that already enfolds us. Loving doesn't earn us God's love. God's love isn't absent until we choose to love; God's love is like a giant armchair we are already sitting in. Yet sometimes we forget that we are in that chair, held by that chair, safe and secure. Some of our actions reveal a distrust of that reality. So, what helps us stay aware of that giant armchair and the way it holds us? What protects us from believing that we have to sustain our own weight? The answer seems to be: loving God and loving our neighbor. When we do this, as counterintuitive as that may feel, we sink into that delightful armchair, and we experience more deeply the benefits it conveys to us. We are able to abide with a deep consciousness of that reality. And that sustains us in a profound way.

Jesus goes on to say, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." To abide in that awareness of the love that does not disappear or fail us, to love as we are loved, is to encounter profound joy. A joy that is not dependent upon external circumstances, upon the absence of suffering, or upon the way others treat us. Abiding in that divine circle

² Matthew 22:37-40

of love allows us to hold pain by the hand and still...find...deep...joy. This is the gift Jesus offers us, a gift that surpasses, perhaps, our understanding.

Our collect, or prayer, for the day entreats,

“O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises which exceed all that we can desire...”

There seem to be limits to what we can imagine about the extent of the lavishness of God’s intended gifts for us, the kind of joy Jesus wishes to make complete in us. This prayer suggests that in loving God, and loving God as revealed in all people and created things, the beautiful gifts prepared in advance for us become known to us. Abiding in Christ’s love helps us to recognize them as they enter our life, to recognize how much they exceed what we generally desire.

Our ability to see and experience this love and the gifts that come with it, frequently gets obscured. I think of two big lies that sometimes feel really true and blind us to love. The first lie, is the lie of scarcity. The idea that there are limits to how much love and goodness God is able and willing to offer. This lie results in competing for that love and goodness. It results in a practice of declaring some people favored by God and some people sitting outside that favor.

The second lie is the voice of shame. Shame tells us that we don’t deserve love, that what is broken or wounded in us, must prevent God from fully loving or

enjoying us as we already are. This results in efforts to earn that love, or sometimes, to perform in such a way that will convince others that we are worthy of that love. It forces us into ways of compensating for the things we do not know how to love within ourselves.

Scarcity and shame tell us that there is no giant armchair to hold us.

Scarcity and shame tell us that loving God and others from a place of blessed assurance is foolish and risky. We will fall down, and without a safety net to catch us.

And Jesus says, “Abide in my love.” Forget the lies of scarcity and shame and abide in my love. Which is not to say that the love we are invited into is always cozy and comforting. Jesus is speaking within the context of his impending death. He says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” We are asked to love as Jesus loved – and that actually leads to joy, even if suffering also comes.

In their daily interactions with Jesus, the disciples likely had moments of deep happiness and unexpected, miraculous surprises. There were lots of good stuff to experience in being with Jesus. But when Jesus died and then returned from the dead that introduced a whole other level of awe and wonder – and joy.

Happiness results from good experiences; joy arises as we hold the hand of suffering and realize that there is something even bigger than the suffering. Joy arises when our suffering softens our hearts in such a way as to deepen the love we are able to give others. In this way, we lay down our lives for our friends and, at times, our joy becomes complete.

I don't like to preach about love and suffering without being clear that if you are partnered with someone who is abusive or manipulative, God's call to love does not mean enabling or ignoring their behavior. As anyone who has left an abusive relationship, or set boundaries with a family member can tell you, to do so is to love in a profound way. Putting an end to the harm may itself feel like a form of dying. It is a deeply meaningful way of claiming the power of God's love for us and for our loved ones.

So, with that important caveat, let us abide, let us remain in Christ's love, basking in that giant armchair that holds us so perfectly as we love God and love God in our neighbor. May suffering soften our hearts and may our joy be made complete.