

Easter 6 2023  
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John 15:1-17

The air is filled with tension. Jesus has been talking with the disciples about going away. Judas left the meal abruptly and Jesus spoke of betrayal. Peter, their bold leader, was told he would deny Jesus. The disciples are confused and troubled. Jesus is saying things the disciples cannot fully grasp. Twice He tells the disciples to not let their hearts be troubled. He also tells them he will not leave them as orphans. Then He says that the ruler of this world is coming.

It's time to go. Jesus leads them, out of the upper room and toward the garden of Gethsemane. The city is filled with tension as well. It is Passover, and pilgrims have come to the city from all over. The chief priests and the Pharisees have been making plans to kill Jesus. He no longer walks openly among the Jews. The disciples could feel this dread hanging in the air.

As they walk to the garden, Jesus speaks of vines. But He also talks about a threat facing the disciples: persecution and death. "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser." Branches that do not bear fruit will be taken away and burned. Others will be pruned to make them even more fruitful.

Jesus continues to focus on this image of Himself as the vine and the disciples as the branches. He is speaking of the deep interconnection between His life and the life of the disciples. Abide in me and I in you. Remain in me and I in you. In this relationship of abiding, this communion of lives, the very fruitfulness of God will be made known.

Even as Jesus speaks of the mystery of the Him abiding in the disciples and them abiding in Him, He commands them to love one another as He has loved them. This mystery of abiding love must also exist between the disciples. As Jesus is telling them these things, he calls them friends for now He is making known to them all that He has heard from the Father in heaven.

This little story changed my whole understanding of calling and ministry. When I was in college, I read Andrew Murray's little book "Abide in Christ." It consisted of 31 meditations on the same theme: abiding in Christ. Murray said that he hoped that by reinforcing the same theme over the course of a month, readers would begin to see a way of faith that is rooted in a trusting faith in Christ.

Even as reading his book, I still felt like I didn't grasp what it meant to abide in Christ. I began to read John 15. I would read today's passage day after day. Then I would go back and read the passages surrounding today's passage: John 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. For three years, I followed this pattern: reading and soaking in John 15 and then rereading the entire last supper narrative from John 13 through John 17.

I was searching for something to help me understand this notion of abiding better. As it turned out, I didn't discover some new and innovative insight. Yet, I was changed. Sitting with these

last words of Jesus day after day, year after year changed me. I believe the Holy Spirit was reshaping me, reorienting me in the communion of love.

What was the secret of abiding in Christ? Well, it seemed there was no secret. This language of abiding seems rooted in the idea of tabernacle, which is a dwelling place for God and man. In the Old Testament, the Tabernacle and later the Temple were the very place where heaven and earth meet. Where man and God dwell together. Now, this tabernacle is Jesus. He is the dwelling place, the abiding place for God and man.

To abide in Christ is simply to rest in Him. We trust His Words, we trust His life, we trust His absolute faithfulness. Resting in Him gives us this picture of letting go. Think of resting in the embrace of someone you love. A child rests in the arms of her father or mother. A husband rests in the embrace of his wife.

When I was sick as a child, my mother would hold me and rub my back. I could relax. This was as much a part of the healing as any medicine. When I can't sleep at night, Kelly will sometimes embrace me. In that place of peace, I often drift off to sleep. When Jesus tells His disciples to abide in me, He is calling them to rest.

He is also calling them to live in Him: to let His words dwell in them, fill them, guide them. The Holy Spirit will come as part of this abiding. He will lead the disciples and us into this place of abiding. The Holy Spirit will be communicating God's love and ways in words and beyond words: heart to heart, deep to deep. He will be speaking to the imagination, bringing timely words and thoughts to memory. Like the embrace of a loved one, He will comfort our weary souls.

I grew up hearing the Gospel as a personal decision between me and God. Most of the sermons of my youth came to a climax with a call for a personal confession of faith. This is part of our inheritance from the Reformation. It is also part of our heritage as Americans. We are individuals, and we have the freedom to believe. This is all good, but it tends to leave out something. We are individuals with a personal faith in Jesus Christ, but at the same time we are called into a community of faith.

The extreme individualized understanding of the Gospel can be seen all across our culture where people substitute participation in the community of faith with television or Internet church. In the 1980s, Robert Bellah published an intensive study of faith in America called, "Habits of the Heart." He determined that Americans were a very religious people and this religion was by and large a form of individualism. In other words, it was another form of self-reliance, self-improvement, self-fulfillment.

We contrast that with the words of Jesus. In the midst of the distressing environment in Jerusalem, in the middle of the difficult words that Jesus speaks to His disciples, He speaks a word of peace and comfort. Abide in me. All fruitfulness will be rooted in this communion of love. Then He tells the disciples love one another as I have loved you. In other words, even as you abide in Christ, abide in one another.

Love God, love one another. The two are inseparable. In the tabernacle of love, you are bound to Christ and to one another.

This morning I included a quote from the Romanian theologian Dumitru Staniloae in the bulletin. He writes, "It is not isolated individuals whom God wishes to save through supernatural revelation, but the great multitudes of believers in a mutual and common responsibility towards himself, for all must help one another on the way of progress towards the goal of perfection and eternal life, and help strengthen their own communion based on communion with God. In fact, the communion among them is a constitutive part of their own perfection and of their progress towards that perfection."<sup>1</sup>

He is speaking about the other side of individualism: the communion of saints. The Eastern Orthodox use the term "sobornost" to speak of this great communion. This beautiful word extends to all the cosmos. All creation is called into the great communion of love between Father, Son, and Spirit. Before we try to tackle all creation, let's simply return to the text at hand.

Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you."<sup>2</sup> The disciples will face great challenges: rejection, persecution, and even death. Even as they are called to abide in Christ, they are called to abide in one another. The two are intertwined. They will face the challenges before them together as a community. We might use Jesus's language and speak of this calling as friendship. As friends of God, we become friends with one another.

This kind of love takes all sorts of shapes in the New Testament. In Philippians two, it takes the shape of a humility that allows us to pour out our lives for one another.

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself..."<sup>3</sup>

In Acts, it takes the form of feeding the widows or sharing resources with one another or praying for Peter when he is in prison. In all these situations, we are seeing the very life of Christ taking shape in the community of faith. It takes the form of Paul and Barnabas serving together. It takes the form of Paul mentoring Timothy and Titus. It takes the form of showing respect to older men and woman in a congregation and treating them as elders.

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<sup>1</sup> Dumitru Staniloae, *The Experience of God: Volume One, The Holy Trinity*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Reprinted 2022, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Jn 15:12–14.

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Php 2:3–7.

We need one another. We need the local community of faith right here around us. We need the great communion of faith that extends beyond our walls to the greater community, across the world, and even across time.

As we face the challenges of our world, let us abide in Christ, rest in Christ. Let us also rest in His family: in friendships with one another, in prayer and service toward one another, in time spent cultivating life with one another.