

## Season after Pentecost - First John (Week 3)

July 28/29, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church, Hagerstown, MD

Readings: John 10: 11-18; I John 3:16-24

*Grace and peace to you from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.*

A young girl came home one day bursting with news. “Mom. Mom, I know why we had to learn grammar!” she exclaimed. “Why?” her mother asked. “It’s so we can understand God.”

Her mother gave her a puzzled look. The girl explained, “God is love, and love can be a noun, an adjective, an adverb, or a verb.” From the mouth of babes. Love isn’t just a noun, a vague feeling. Love is an action, an attitude, a spirit, and a character trait<sup>1</sup>. The love of God that filled Jesus directed his every thought, word, attitude and deed. The other-centered love of the Creator was the source, the force and set the course for Jesus’ own powerful and sacrificial love for us. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.” (I John 3:16)

You may have noticed that isn’t the end of the verse from First John. “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” Lay down *our* lives? Is that about physically dying to save another? Throwing yourself over the hand grenade, pushing someone out of the way of the bus, professing your faith even when it could get you killed? When the Elder, the writer of First John, speaks about Jesus laying down his life, he is speaking of the ultimate sacrifice at the cross. But Jesus didn’t only die for us. He lived for us, too. His life — what he said, did, how he lived in simplicity and trust, what he taught — they, too, show the love that lays down its life for another. Laying down one’s life for most of us will not likely mean dying a martyr of the faith. Laying down our life for another means to live loving like God loves, with generosity, compassion, sacrifice and selflessness. “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (1John 3: 16-24) This is our cross to bear — to love and live like Jesus.

How is that even possible? If you are anything like me, I don’t see how I will ever get close to loving and living like Jesus with all my faults, weaknesses, fears, flaws and weirdness. First John’s Elder answers: “Obey God’s commandments and do what pleases him“ and ”believe in Jesus Christ as God’s own Son, the full revelation of God’s own self”<sup>2</sup> and love another.” Well, thank you, but if I could do that, I wouldn’t be asking how it is possible.” Did you notice all the “I” pronouns in that grumbling statement? I’m like the toddler who keeps saying, “Me do . . . me do” rather than letting mom or dad help. We CAN’T obey, please, believe and love by our own human will. Jesus could live and love as he did because he abided in God and God in him. It was the very power, strength and love of God working in Jesus because Jesus did nothing apart from God.

“Abide” is not a commonly used word. Jesus described *abiding* with the analogy of grapevines and branches. Branches will only stay alive and bear fruit if

they remain attached to the main vine with a root. Jesus stayed attached to God the Father and the life, power and love of God the Father flowed in and through him. Jesus tells us we need to be attached to him so his life, power and love can flow in and through us. That's the only way we will be able to believe in Jesus and love one another. "I used to think that abiding in Christ meant being passive, simply '*resting* in Christ.' That's halfway true, since we are dependent on Christ and can't change in our strength. At the same time, [abide is a verb, an action word and] we are commanded to *abide* in Christ."<sup>3</sup> We can't earn the love of God. It is freely given us by the grace of God. But grace doesn't oppose effort on our part.<sup>4</sup>

To abide in Christ and let Christ abide in me takes more than carrying the label "Christian." Abiding in Christ is intentionally keeping ourselves connected to Jesus, the vine, so he can draw upon his grace and strength. It's like keeping the appliance or charger plugged in so it can receive the electrical power need to function. We can want to be good and do good things — and there are many people in and outside the church who strive and succeed at doing just that. But we believe that we can only go so far on our own flawed, human will. It is God's love through Christ, still revealed and gifted by the Holy Spirit, that makes it even possible for us to love one another and bring God's saving grace to the world.

We actively abide in Christ and "draw upon his grace and strength through the ordinary means of grace given to us by God for our growth and renewal."<sup>5</sup> Freely given and available, there *is* some effort on our part. That plug or charger doesn't get attached to the electrical socket on its own. Similarly, we need to participate and engage these abiding sources. What are these means of grace? God's Holy Word, prayer, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper and Christian fellowship. That is how we abide, how we let God dwell in us, fill us, transform and empower us. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." "The peace of the Lord be with you." "May the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen us and keep us in God's grace." In all these ways — on Sunday and during the week — we expose ourselves to God's love and power and let it seep down into our deeps, fortifying our attachment to the life of Christ. Attending to God's Word, praying, partaking in Holy Communion and participating in Christian community ---- This is how we abide and God abides in us. And THAT is how it is possible to believe in Christ and love one another in truth and action.

Abiding in Jesus, attached to the vine of life, we bear fruit that nourishes others. We've seen the fruit. It looks like food in Micah's backpacks and holiday food baskets. It looks like school supplies, throws a free Block Party and Vacation Bible School. The fruit of God abiding in us and God shows up in visits to the homebound, cards and meals to the sick, listening to the lonely or frazzled, extending a genuine welcome to the visitor and offering a smile to the stranger.

When we find ourselves putting love into action, even when we may not feel we have the heart or energy, that is the love of God giving us the strength we need to be God's love to another.

Milt had attended his church and been active in it for decades. When his pastor approached him to be trained in visitation ministry, Milt thought his pastor had gone around the bend. Him? So he continued to read his daily devotional book, worship, commune and pray to God about his pastor's suggestion. Finally, Milt hesitantly accepted and began his training.

One day Milt was visiting a parishioner at the local hospital, he happened to know one of the nurses working on the floor. "Do you see that man in the room across the hall," she said pointing to a door. "His name is Walter. He has been here for two weeks and no one has visited him." "No one?" "No one. I shouldn't tell you this but Walter is dying of cancer. Could you visit him?" "Sure, I can." As he turned to go, the nurse added, "I have to warn you, Milt, Walter is a very bitter man."

Milt took a breath, asked God for help and knocked on Walter's door. "Hello, my name is Milt. I work with the chaplain's staff." He said, "You do? Well, I don't need a chaplain, and I certainly don't need God! Can't you see I'm dying?" Not knowing how, Milt stayed put and found himself saying, "So you don't need a chaplain. You don't need God. How about a friend?" Walter retorted, "Milt, I don't need anyone. Just leave me alone!" So Milt proceeded to the door with his tail tucked between his legs. Yet before he could leave the room, Walter said, "I have not always been this way, you know. There was a time when I grabbed hold of life with both hands and could do anything . . . I was good at my job. I was good at my marriage . . ."

It was obvious that Walter DID want to talk, but truthfully, Milt didn't know if he had the patience or compassion to listen to this brusque curmudgeon. He really wanted to bolt. "However, like Jonah and Peter, God had something different in mind." Milt stayed. Walter talked for the next thirty minutes "about the joy of his life before cancer and the anger and bitterness he felt toward God because of his cancer."

After they had talked, Milt asked if he could have a prayer. Walter said, "I don't think it will do any good, but if you want to, go ahead." So Milt took the man's fragile hands and began to pray. At the end of his prayer, Milt said, "Lord, wrap your arms around Walter like a warm blanket. Amen." When Milt opened his eyes, he saw tears streaming down Walter's face and his arms were up in the air, waiting for a hug. Milt knelt down, leaned over and hugged him. Walter began to rock him back and forth, whispering over and over again, "Yes, Lord, cover me like a blanket . . . Yes, Lord, cover me like a blanket . . . Yes, Lord, cover me like a blanket."

Milt later wrote, “I had no control over what happened that day. God moved in me and went through me into Walter, making that a day I’ll never forget. As I embraced Walter, I felt so intimately connect to Christ. I was so keenly aware that we are all God’s children; and all of us need prayer, and all of us need each other; and all of us need the radical, life changing, world changing, barrier breaking, boundary busting love of Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

“Love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” Abiding in the love of God — through Scripture prayer, communion and Christian fellowship — will join us with the divine and provide the direction and the power for a meaningful, fulfilling life. Abiding in God will fill us with divine purpose and the strength and love to fulfill it. Believe, abide and love one another. “It’s that simple but it can take time. It takes a lot of time to grow juicy [grapes]. Don’t expect instant change, instant fruit, instant growth.”<sup>7</sup> We can help each other to persevere through the setbacks and disappointments. Don’t give up when the bible reading, prayer and worship become difficult. “Stay engaged with the means of grace, however imperfectly, and give it time.”<sup>8</sup> Abide in God. God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit — will not fail. Believe, abide and love one another. It’s our challenge and it’s our joy. Amen

Linda M Alessandri 7/27/18

## ENDNOTES

- 
1. Adapted from King Duncan, “What Love Looks Like” Dynamic Preaching, 2001, 0-000-0000-20
  2. David Bartlett, “Commentary on 1 John 3: 16-24” as posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  3. Mike Tilley “3 Questions About Abiding in Christ” July 21, 2017 posted at <http://lakebaldwinchurch.com/pastors-blog/2017/7/21/abiding-in-christ>
  4. The actual quote is “As Dallas Willard said, ‘Grace is opposed to earning, not effort.’” from Mike Tilley “3 Questions About Abiding in Christ” July 21, 2017 posted at <http://lakebaldwinchurch.com/pastors-blog/2017/7/21/abiding-in-christ>
  5. Ibid
  6. Adapted from a story told by John K. Bergland, “Love Without Limits,” One Heaven of a Party, Year C Sermons on the First Readings, CSS Publishing Company, 2003, 0-7880-1967-b
  7. Mike Tilley “3 Questions About Abiding in Christ” July 21, 2017 posted at <http://lakebaldwinchurch.com/pastors-blog/2017/7/21/abiding-in-christ>
  8. Mike Tilley “3 Questions About Abiding in Christ” July 21, 2017 posted at <http://lakebaldwinchurch.com/pastors-blog/2017/7/21/abiding-in-christ>