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“Love: Abiding in Christ”

August 23, 2020

John 15:1-8

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Imagine with me for a moment. If you knew you were approaching the end of your life, what would you want to impart to those you loved the most? What words would you say to them? What encouragement would you give them? What do you hope that they would remember after you have passed from this life? I ask because our verses for today comes from a portion of scripture often known as the “farewell discourse.” These are words spoken by Jesus to His disciples within the context of the Last Supper, his final night of life in human form. This final teaching comes on the heels of Jesus washing His disciple’s feet (pun not intended), foretelling that Judas Iscariot would be his betrayer and that Peter would deny Him. Jesus also gives his disciples a new commandment “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35) In John 14-16 we see Jesus offering final words for his disciples. What did he want them to know?

In the context of the new commandment to love, we see that Jesus wants love to be a defining characteristic of His disciples. All that we do should be infused with love. But where exactly does this love come from? In our human experiences we recognize that love fails, love falls short, love is difficult. Our earthly, fleshly love has limits. We have probably experienced that in one way or another. But there is a different kind of love available to us, the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. This is the love we need. This is the love that will get us to our goal when we say “love is the goal.”

So where does this love come from? We have access to this love through abiding in Christ. The Greek word here is μένω (menō), meaning “to stay, remain, live, dwell, or abide. It is understood as being in a state that begins and continues, yet may or may not end or stop.”¹ And throughout this sermon you will hear me using “abide” and “remain” interchangeably. In John 15:1 Jesus refers to himself as “the true vine” and the Father as “the vinegrower.” In verses 4-5 Jesus says “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” We are going to look at this bit by bit, because these words of Jesus are crucial to our goal of love.

First, when Jesus says, “abide in me,” this is not a suggestion. It is a command. Jesus knows us. Jesus lived as one of us. He knows firsthand the limitations of humanity and how important His connection to the Father was during His time on earth. Jesus wants the same for us. In this scenario Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. Just as in the natural world the vine imparts nutrients to the branch, so Jesus imparts and infuses into us His own divine life, strength, and grace. We are continually sustained and nourished by our relationship with Christ, but we need to remain connected to Jesus in order to receive it.

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior we are united with Him and thus become a branch. We recognize that this happens in our baptism, a grace-filled participation in the dying to our old self with Christ and being risen to new life in Christ. This new life in Christ allows us to be fruitful, but it requires action on our part. We cannot sit back and let Jesus do all of the work, even if He is the One doing the heavy lifting. God calls us to participate in God’s mission for the world, a mission of redemption, salvation, and love. When we remain in Christ, the love that eternally exists between the Three Persons of the Trinity is poured out into our hearts. We see in Romans 5:5 “the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” There is an eternal, unending wellspring of love available for those who abide in Christ. This is where the love comes from. This is the love we can rely on when Jesus says to love your enemies, when Jesus commands us to love one another. This is love that does, love that lasts.

¹ <https://www.stepbible.org/?q=version=ESV|reference=John.15&options=VHNUG>

Jesus tells his disciples to “remain in me as I remain in you.” Remaining in Jesus and Jesus remaining in the disciples are the two parts of the whole. One relationship does not exist without the other because Jesus does not abide where He is not welcome, but Jesus freely abides with those who love Him. This indicates a personal relationship between Jesus and his disciples, one that exists if we abide with Jesus through faith. In return, Jesus abides in us through love. This is why Jesus insists that in order to bear fruit, we must remain in Him. Jesus said “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” A branch that separates itself from the vine cuts itself off from the nutrients, strength, and nourishment that it needs to survive and thrive. Such a branch would be good for nothing.

And you might think it harsh that Jesus would say “apart from me you can do nothing.” But if Jesus only told us the things we wanted to hear, that would be akin to having a small god that fits nicely in the box of our choosing and can sit nicely on the shelf in our living room. Jesus says things that are challenging and provocative, but they are intended for our benefit and our growth. Do not lose sight of eternity. As Christians we do not live for the here and now. Our actions do not impact this moment in time alone. The things we do and say have eternal impact, Kingdom impact. We cannot bear the fruit God desires without abiding in Christ.

Those who abide in Christ will bear much fruit. This is a promise. Abiding in Christ implies that we are continually growing and transforming into the likeness of Christ and becoming who God created us to be. Remaining in Christ necessitates that we are continually coming into alignment with God’s will and growing in our obedience to God. However, this requires a process of refinement, or pruning. Admittedly, I am not a gardener. Nearly everything I have planted has died, mainly out of neglect. Succulents are really my type of plant, something that is hardy and thrives in desert terrain. I pruned rosebushes one time at my previous appointment and boy were they trusting to give me pruning shears! But I digress. For my own edification, I researched what exactly pruning means. Regular pruning keeps plants healthy and encourages growth. In addition, it involves targeted removal of diseased, damaged, dead, non-productive, structurally unsound, or otherwise unwanted plant tissue. The process of pruning leads to improved and sustained health of the plant, as well as increased yield or quality of the flowers or fruits.

Pruning is a necessary action in order for the plant to be as fruitful and healthy as it can be. Since we are branches in God’s vineyard, we too, must go through a pruning process. Jesus said “[The Father] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” (15:2) If Jesus says that even He was pruned to bear more fruit, you can be sure that we will be, too. The pruning process can be difficult, painful, even. It is a process of letting go of the things that are not honoring to God, that which prevents you from living into the fullness of who God has called you to be. It could be an attitude, a bias, a prejudice, a relationship, a job, a particular sin. Whatever it is, allow God to tend to it and shape you. If you listen close and give God the space to speak, the Holy Spirit will reveal these places to you. Pruning is a targeted process intended for your growth and spiritual health. God is a kind, compassionate, and faithful gardener. Do not fear letting go of what is in order to become who you were created to be and live into what God has planned for you. That plan is a fruitful life, connected to Christ.

Pruning is a continual process, something done every year. Just as for plants, we will be continually refined and pruned along the Christian journey. However, as we grow in Christ, hopefully that process becomes less painful and more joyful as we seek to be obedient to God and God’s will. As we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us, we are pruned and this results in bearing more fruit. What exactly is this fruit? To be honest, the fruit we bear has little to do with outward success. The goal is not to be the biggest, the best, the most popular, and so on. Rather, scripture defines fruit in spiritual terms, such as the fruit of the Spirit. According to Galatians 5:22-23 “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” As we remain connected to Christ this fruit will increasingly develop and be evident in our lives. And you notice that “love” is the first fruit of the Spirit. Love is our defining mark as disciples of Christ and this fruit is demonstrated in the lives of those through whom Christ’s life flows.

The praise that we offer to God is also fruit. The author of Hebrews wrote “Through Him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.” (Hebrews 13:15). The more connected we are to Christ, the more readily and often we will lift God in praise and worship. In addition, giving to meet the needs of others is fruit. Supporting others in need is a tangible expression of love and generosity, both fruit of the Spirit. In its most basic sense, fruit can be thought of as anything that is holy, righteous, and honors God. It is the things we do to show our love of God and our neighbors. Fruit is the outpouring of the heart and life connected to Christ that can be

seen in every aspect of our lives. The fruit we bear can be seen in our thoughts, words, and actions. A fruitful life glorifies God and so reveals that we living as disciples of Jesus.

The question that remains is how do we live this out in our day to day life? What does it look like to abide in Christ on a daily basis? It is deliberate, intentional action each day, and what it looks like for me might not be the same as what it looks like for someone else. On the most basic level, it is keeping in contact with Jesus. It looks like arranging our daily life in such a way that we can connect and spend time with God each and every day. This can be through prayer, reading scripture and/or devotional materials, spiritual books, time out in nature, or time in silence, listening for the voice of God. If you are like me, you will randomly speak to God throughout the day, as if God were there in physical form before you, just like you would a friend. It is acknowledging Christ's presence with you as you go throughout your day. When we order our lives in such a way as this, there will never be a day that we forget about Jesus. Abiding in Christ is mystical, in a sense, this union that words cannot fully articulate but that the heart can fully feel. At some point you will realize deep down in your soul that you are perpetually connected to Christ, that you are truly abiding in Christ. And from this connection to Christ we are empowered, strengthened, and given all that we need to follow his commands. When we know the love we have in Christ, we are compelled to share that love with others.

Jesus' commandment to love one another must be followed in our lives again and again. For when we stop loving one another, we are no longer fruitful. We become the branch that withers on the vine. Jesus is our source of life, our source of love, but we must abide in Him. We must remain connected to Him. We cannot do this on our own, but thankfully we do not have to. Love is the goal, and we need Jesus to help us get there. We need each other, but mostly importantly, we need Jesus. Let's journey toward our goal, abiding in Christ as we go. Amen.