Abide in Love

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John 15:1-5, 9-11 (NRSVUE)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. **2** He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. **3** You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. **4** 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. **5** 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.

9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. **10** 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. **11** I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

There is a house that I pass on the way to the lake, a neighbor who is, let's just say, rather *emphatic* about their political opinions. It began during the run-up to the 2020 election. One day their yard looked like any other; the next, there were oversized signs, banners, and flags declaring their intention to vote for their preferred candidate…who just so happens not to be a candidate I supported. Over the next several months, some of those signs remained, while others changed or were added, including some that prominently displayed expletives to underscore their expression. That paraphernalia has largely remained in place ever since, sometimes updated to reflect a new year or new campaigns, but always with a similar message and accompanying degree of aggression.

Now, I have never met these people. To the best of my knowledge, I have never interacted with them, though one never really knows which of our anonymous neighbors we may have encountered in public environments. But I have often *imagined* the kind of interactions I might have with them if I did. I might ask why they feel it is so important to continue to express themselves outside an active campaign season. I might inquire about their repeated provocation of differently-minded neighbors. I might point out that the profanity displayed on their materials could be considered offensive and whether they are aware that school buses regularly pass by their property. Of course, in these imagined conversations, I am always thoughtful, measured, and non-reactive. It's probably for the best that I have never been in a situation to practice those well-rehearsed interactions.

Over the last couple of weeks, we have been reflecting on Jesus's final moments with his disciples and his commandment to love one another. We remember what he said: that we will be known as his followers not by what we believe or how we worship, but by the way that we love. During this highly polarized campaign season, we are running our own *campaign for kindness,* advocating for a posture of patience and grace with those around us. And we remind ourselves that we are to love one another not just in spite of our differences of opinion, but across boundaries of politics, ideology, worldview, religious conviction, and behavior.

Following the sermons in this series, I have had conversations with a number of you about this campaign for kindness. If I were to condense those interactions into a single conversation, it might be something like this. "I hear what you're saying about loving our neighbors, and I believe it is desperately needed right now. But I just don't feel it. I don't know if I have it in me to be kind to some of those people."

First of all, let me say that I hear you. This isn't easy. I share your frustration with people who not only support candidates whose conduct runs counter to what I believe to be right, just, and fair; but who seem to take delight

in being mean-spirited about it. You should know that preachers preach not just to our congregations, but first to ourselves.

Let me also be clear that I'm not saying that our differences don't matter or that all opinions are created equally. As followers of Jesus, we follow a baptismal covenant "to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." We are called to stand in solidarity with those who have been left out and left behind by policies, systems, economics, and attitudes. We support that which brings life and health and wholeness for all people, not just for some. We are not asking each other or anyone else to accept as legitimate a vision for our society that promotes hatred, that glorifies violence, or that treats people as having less value than others because of who they are. And we are unequivocal in our opposition to promoting falsehoods or misrepresenting facts in order to win elections. Loving your neighbor does not require you to sacrifice your principles or your convictions.

What we *are* saying with our campaign for kindness is that *the way we live our convictions* matters. Everyone, even those who profoundly disagree with us, are children of God we are called to love. Faithful discipleship requires loving not just when it is easy, but when it costs us something. We relate in love by being more curious than judgmental. In our conversations, it is less instructive to know *what* someone believes than *why* they believe it.

If you question whether you have the capacity to love that way, good. You probably don't. If we were capable of loving that way on our own, we wouldn't need Jesus. But we *do* need Jesus. And it is vitally important for us to *remember* that we need him.

In today's scripture, Jesus urges the disciples to remain connected to him. "I am the vine, you are the branches." A branch that is not connected to the vine lacks the support and the nutrients it needs to live; it cannot survive on its own. But if it remains connected, it bears much fruit.

Becoming a Christian doesn't make you instantaneously a better person any more than putting a sign in your yard makes you loving and kind. Choosing to follow Jesus is an acknowledgement that we can't do this on our own. Luckily, we don't have to. Jesus is the source of our strength, empowering us to love and to serve far beyond our own capacity.

"Abide in me as I abide in you." Note that Jesus didn't say, "*If* you abide in me, *then* I will abide in you." He said, "Abide in me *as* I abide in you." Jesus's presence isn't conditional; it's a promise. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

The word for this abiding relationship in Greek is *ménō*, and it is a favorite word of John's, appearing some 40 times in the fourth gospel. It signifies an inward, enduring, personal communion that enables deep and abiding fellowship with one another. Jesus uses it to describe his relationship with the disciples, but he also uses it to describe his relationship to God. And a few verses later, he will use it to describe the presence of the Holy Spirit that he will soon send to empower them to carry on his work.

This presence is a promise, not a pursuit. Our task is to *practice* Jesus's presence, to become more aware of it. We do that by paying attention and by being intentional about creating space to increase our awareness. Worship, prayer, even silence can tune our senses to be more mindful of the ways the presence of Jesus is moving within us and shaping us in love.

Jesus promised to be with us always, and we need to hold fast to that promise. In Jesus we have a source of strength greater than ourselves. His presence transforms us, shaping us into the people we were made to be. We don't instantaneously become better people, but by practicing the presence of Christ, we grow in grace to become more like him. Remaining connected to Jesus and remembering that he is the source of our strength

makes us more Christlike. Or, as we like to say in the Methodist tradition, through him we experience *the grace that moves us on to perfection*. And by perfection, we mean being made perfect *in love*.

But that's not easy. Even as we are growing in our connection to God, we're called to practice love with people who can be very hard to love. How do we love people who look at the world in vastly different ways than we do? How do we even talk to them? Author Lauryn Higgins, writing for the Huffington Post, explored how to have difficult conversations, particularly with those whose views are deeply entrenched. To do that, she consulted experts in recovering from cults and other high-control groups. Much of her advice will sound familiar[1]:

Ask good questions. As David Brooks suggested, don't ask a person *what* they believe, but *why* they believe it. And be patient and listen genuinely as they respond.

Reflect what you hear. Reflective listening lets the person know you're actually paying attention, and it can help you to gain clarity. "What I heard you say was… Is that right?"

Rebut gently. If you feel you need to respond, do it with grace and care, not judgment. Judgment pushes people away and causes them to dig in their heels.

Know your triggers. Be self-aware enough to know when you're becoming angry, and be attentive enough to know when you're making them angry. Pause. Breathe. Let it go.

Be prepared to safely disengage. Sometimes the moment isn't right. Sometimes it's not working. Focus on your connection, not the argument. It is better to be loving than right.

Keep tethered to the relationship. If it is someone you know and love, remember who they are, not just their opinions. People can, and do, change. Leave space for that to happen.

Author Daniella Mistyanek Young writes:

> We're living through a time of spiritual intoxication, where misinformation is more than a problem — it's a path to belonging for some people. And so the most radical thing you can do might be the quiet, grounded choice: not to argue, but to refuse to play the game. Remember: The goal isn't always to win the argument. Sometimes the goal is just to stay whole in the face of it.[2]

And always remember the source of your strength, especially in the midst of navigating difficult conversations. Jesus demonstrated radical, unconditional love, and he directed us to follow his example. He didn't tell us to figure it out for ourselves; he gave us the gift of his presence. He promised to abide in us as we abide in him.

Jesus said that he was the vine and we are the branches. The vine is the source of the water and nutrients that sustain life. *We* are not the vine; Jesus is. Neither are we the fruit, the outcome of the energy and time invested in growing. We are the branches through which the love of Christ flows, producing fruit.

Or we might think of this relationship like a lamp. The purpose of a lamp is to produce light. Power passes from an outlet through the cord to the lamp and to the bulb in that lamp. Now, sometimes, we're like the bulb, called to shine our light. But more often, we're like the cord, a conduit for the power to pass through us so that light can be produced. But the only way that happens is by connecting to the source of that power itself. We can't do it on our own. Jesus said that apart from him, we can do nothing.

Unlike electric lamps, branches are living, growing things, always changing and responding to the environment. The same is true of us. People change. *We* change. Nothing about this moment is carved in stone. By God's grace we are all in the process of becoming.

Branches sometimes need to be pruned. The parts that are dead and unhealthy need to be cut away. Though we might be inclined to focus on the things that need to be cut out in the people around us, this lesson isn't about fixing others. It is about us. What parts of us need to be pruned in order for the love of Christ to flow more freely through us? Bitterness? Sarcasm? Arrogance? Insularity? Hubris?

We are living in a highly contentious and challenging time. And challenging times have a way of revealing character. As we make our way through this season of heightened division and polarization, what will be revealed about us? Remember the words of Jesus: we will be known as his disciples by the way we love. Alone we can't. With Christ, we will. Stay connected to the source of your strength. Abide in Christ as he abides in you. Amen.

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