

## ***Put Your Feet Up and Stay Awhile***

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
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1 John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

There's a lot of "abiding" going on in today's scriptures! Maybe like me, the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "abide" is that wonderful old hymn that opens with these words, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me." It's in the "Evening Hymns" section of the Presbyterian hymnal, but it's almost always chosen as a funeral hymn. And no wonder, with words like, "Where is death's sting, where, grave thy victory?" or "In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me." It may not be one we choose for its uplifting sentiment, although it might be one we choose for its comforting images and familiar tune. And I have to admit that I would put it on my list of favorite hymns for those very reasons.

Perhaps part of the problem is trying to sort out the implications of that word "abide." It's just not a word that we throw into conversation very often, at least not in the way it's used here. We abide by the rules, shepherds abide in fields keeping watch over their flocks by night, but you wouldn't necessarily invite anybody to "abide" for a while – as in "why don't you come on over and abide?" You might suggest that they put their feet up and stay awhile. But that's about as far as we're willing to go, because "abide" somehow implies a much deeper sense of belonging or a much more intimate relationship than we're used to having with someone who isn't actually related to us in some way.

And, indeed, a careful look at the text reveals that the use of the word "abide" in much of the Gospel of John has more to do with relationship than it does with simply being invited to put your feet up and stay awhile. First of all, it appears eight times in the eight verses we just read, and I didn't count the times it's in the epistle lesson, so perhaps it means that we should spend some time this morning with that idea of abiding in God.

It's always been fascinating to me that the writer of John uses a variation of the same Greek word to describe both the concept of "abiding" in God, and the "place" that is prepared for us when we die. We all know and love the passage in the fourteenth chapter of John, the lovely and familiar words about the many dwelling places in God's house that have been prepared for us, and it's often chosen as the scripture reading for funeral or memorial services. Whenever I'm asked to preach on that passage, and you've heard this if you've been to a memorial service and John 14 is read, I always note that the Greek word for rooms, or dwelling places, literally mean(s) temporary shelters used by travelers.

The noun – “rooms” – comes from the verb “to abide” or “to remain,” so that in John, “rooms (or “dwelling places”) can mean the condition or state of living in relationship” with God. As one commentator writes, “The thought is then that there is a condition of intimacy with (God) awaiting the believer. It has to do more with a relationship than with a place.”<sup>1</sup> It is the same word used in the passage following this one that talks about keeping the commandments and abiding in God’s love, and includes the commandment to love one another as God as loved us.

And how appropriate that it happens to be the Gospel lesson for the day that we celebrate Mother’s Day in this country. There is something about the parent-child relationship, whether between a mother and child or father and child, that speaks to this idea of abiding in love, for everything we know about love, we learn first from being beloved of God, who is mother and father of us all.

Throughout the Gospel of John, this language of abiding is used to describe and reinforce the relationship between Jesus and the beloved community. One preacher has put it this way: it is “our abiding one-in-the-other that makes it possible to stay in community when we are tempted to disconnect as current sociology predicts; when we would rather guard and preserve at all costs our autonomy and independence.”<sup>2</sup>

That same writer goes on to say, “All this gospel talk of abiding, of being rooted in Christ and rooted in community, threatens our ability to walk away; challenges our freedom to cut off from others when they don’t please us or don’t view the world as we do or when they seem to ask too much of us. One can’t ultimately, nor with integrity walk away or cut off in this abiding business.”<sup>3</sup>

It seems particularly appropriate that the Gospel writer uses the beautiful imagery of the vine and branches. You don’t have to be much of a gardener to understand the concept of branches drawing sustenance from the vine. It is a powerful reminder of just how intertwined our lives are, when we take seriously the reality of abiding in God’s love.

When we first to Minnesota, we lived in a house that didn’t have much garden space – which was fine, since we didn’t know much about gardening. So when my father gave the children some of those “silly seeds” that were popular twenty years ago, we planted the long, curly Chinese cucumbers under the lilac bush in the little garden patch, along with everything else that was growing there. For the longest time, we couldn’t imagine why we weren’t getting any cucumbers. Every morning, I’d go out and search the ground, hoping to find some curly cucumbers for the salad. And every morning, I’d come in empty-handed. Until the one morning, when I lifted my eyes to the lilac bush and saw dozens and dozens of very long – and very straight – Chinese cucumbers hanging from the branches

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kysar, *John: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Linda C. Loving, *A Bid for Abiding*,” sermon at The House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, MN, May 18, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

of the lilac bush. Being novice gardeners, we hadn't given them anything to climb, so they simply climbed to the top of the lilac bush.

I'm always reminded of those Chinese cucumbers when I read this passage about the vine and the branches. Although the Chinese cucumbers and the lilac bush had absolutely nothing in common except common ground, one had the ability to provide for the other. It's an interesting place to begin to think about what it means to be rooted in community, to be in relationship, to be interdependent on so many levels; what it means to abide in God as we abide with one another.

Here's the thing about this whole abiding business, about being rooted in community: it takes work. A lot of hard work in fact. Whether you're talking about the community you call family, or the community you find in the church, or the global community that we all call home. It's always easier to leave when things aren't going our way, when there are problems or conflicts. It takes work to stay at the table when what we most want to do is bolt for the door. And it takes work to keep everybody at the table when what we most want to do is slam the door behind the ones who are leaving.

Some of you may have read the article in the paper a week or so ago reporting on the results of the latest survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which estimated that somewhere between 47 to 59 percent of adults in this country have changed religious affiliation at least once. The report also noted that the ranks of those "unaffiliated with any religion . . . are growing not so much because of a lack of religious belief but because of disenchantment with religious leaders and institutions."<sup>4</sup>

Commenting on the survey, one pastor wondered, "What does such come-and-go say about Christ's body? What does it testify regarding the given and abiding word? It all seems deviantly sacramental, an outward and visible sign of an inward and unspiritual malady."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, given the North American tendency towards consumerism, the unfortunate result is more church-hopping than we've ever witnessed. Perhaps the even more unfortunate result is that pastors and congregations end up thinking that they have to channel most of their energy towards finding new ways to attract the unsettled, and keep the restless from slipping out the back door. And we all know that trying to keep everybody happy usually ends up in a watered-down commitment to the Gospel to love and care for the least among us.

Gil Rendle is a consultant with the Alban Institute, who works with congregations in transition. I've done a couple of continuing education courses with him and always have at least one "a-ha" moment. Here's one I want to share with you. In an article entitled, "The Illusion of Congregational 'Happiness,'" Rendle writes that the risk of congregational happiness as a criterion for decision making assumes that the only appropriate decisions for our faith community are those that will affirm what we already do and already appreciate, which constrains the movement of the Spirit of God. He says, "that Spirit may want to

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<sup>4</sup> "Spiritual Drift in the U.S." *Star Tribune/Associated Press*, April 28, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Tom Steagald, "The Idolatry of Church-Jumping," *Theolog* online, April 28, 2009.

call us to, and discipline us for, some greater maturity or purpose.”<sup>6</sup> And that’s where we begin to learn the importance of pruning, not just the branches that are not bearing fruit, but also those that could bear more fruit if they were cut back close to the vine. Jesus said, “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

The hard work of abiding means reliance on the One who is the holy vine if we are to be healthy and whole, if we are to stay connected with each other. That’s a staggering truth for most of us to come to terms with, both personally and certainly as a congregation.

Transitions always test our ability to abide, and this next transition for Oak Grove will be no exception. Just as it took us a while to settle down and settle in when I began a year and a half ago, it will take a while for the dust to settle once Bill is here. You have invited him to put his feet up and stay a while, and that means that together with him, you will be asking questions like, “What does bearing fruit mean for this church? Who are we and what are we called to be and do in this chapter of our history as a congregation? Where do we need pruning? What does it mean to abide in God? What does it mean to abide with each other?”

You’re invited to put your feet up and stay a while too. But don’t imagine for a minute that either you or your new pastor has the luxury of lolling about eating bonbons for too long. I may have that luxury, but you do not! The talk about abiding, about the indwelling between Jesus and his disciples – and that includes us – is not meant for a community at rest, a community that has settled for business as usual, but for a community that is engaged in the Gospel commandment to love and serve, a community that understands what it means to abide. And the only way that we can do that faithfully, lovingly, and joyfully is to abide in God and with one another, because apart from God we can do nothing. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Gil Rendle, “The Illusion of Congregational ‘Happiness,’”  
[www.congregationalresources.org](http://www.congregationalresources.org).