

To Abide in Love
Acts 8:8:26-40
John 15:1-11

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

“Abide in my love,” Jesus said to his disciples on the night when they would do everything but. “Abide in my love,” John wrote in his Gospel to a community just beginning to gather and grow and bear fruit. “Abide in my love,” we read on a Sunday that has followed another week of division at home and devastation abroad. How in the world are we as his church to abide in his love?

Because we are only a few weeks out from Easter, I need only remind you that the love Jesus speaks of is not a feeling or a sentiment but an act of complete self-giving without cost or condition. The word that instead begs definition this morning is the word “abide.” You do not hear the Phillies announcer sum up an inning with “Three hits, one run and two abiding on base.” Of the four definitions that pop up on the right side of my computer, apparently only one is still in use. To abide is to tolerate something, to put up with something. It is a transitive verb, an action that has a direct object. Think, for a moment, about the things you abide, the conditions you tolerate. We often abide the things we believe we cannot change, especially in those we love; we sometimes abide the things we can change, especially the things in society that do not appear to affect us. Moreover, what we abide often depends on where we abide, to use an archaic definition of the word.

If your social location includes being black and poor in North Philadelphia, you might say that you abide, tolerate, put up with violence, with racism and injustice, with a broken educational system and lack of access to health care because you are bowed down and powerless in the face of these things. If your social location includes being white and economically secure

in the suburbs, you may live abiding the same things because you can, because you are above the fray and live at a distance from these things. If your social location is somewhere in the middle, as most of us think we are, we abide the current state of the world because we are too busy trying to stay in the middle to do otherwise.

Clearly this is not the definition of abide Jesus had in mind, yet our lives are defined by this sort of abiding, of tolerating, of putting up with a social order that diminishes us all. What, then, of the other three definitions? All three are identified as archaic—ancient, antiquated, outdated. To abide, in the first archaic definition, is to dwell—an intransitive verb, a verb with no object, a verb that expresses a way of being, a verb that sends me back to John’s prologue where he tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus dwelt in, inhabited our mortal lives. When Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you,” his abiding was his assuming the human condition of us all.

To abide in him as he abides in us has something to do, then, with actively taking on the human condition of another. When you drive through North Philadelphia to get from here to there, do you ever find yourself, for a moment, trying to imagine yourself into the life of the youth on the street corner who ought to be in school or the older woman waiting for a bus who may be on her way to work long after she should have laid her burden down? When the light turns red, do you ever stop being yourself and imagine dwelling in one of those dilapidated row houses, where real people do their living and their dying? Yet the archaic meaning of abide includes remaining, enduring, staying. Imagine that, with the snap of an almighty finger, your white flesh traded places for the rest of your life with the black flesh of the youth on the street corner. “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

Around this table, in a very real sense, God's almighty finger does snap sacramentally when, through Christ's dwelling with us in bread and wine, we dwell in him and, through him, we dwell in the humanity of one another. It is what Martin Luther called the "miracle of authentic transubstantiation": not that, in this meal, the bread and the wine are being changed literally into Christ's body and blood, but that we are "through love being changed into each other": taking on the life of the other, assuming the burdens of the other, standing in the place of the shame of the other, accepting the utter difference of the other as our own. (I think of this last Thursday when I was in the city about to cross Broad Street at Sansom to wait for a friend at the Union League. Suddenly sirens filled the air and about ten police cars raced down Broad Street toward the demonstration at City Hall. I could see in the cars, see the men and women, young and old, black and white; and I found myself wondering what it was for them to be going into a crowd not knowing what awaited them. How do we begin to take into our imaginations the life of the other?) Whether the other be poor or rich, male or female, leaping or lame, sighted or blind, gay or straight, Arab or Jew, Christian or Muslim, black or white, free or imprisoned, in Christ we are being changed into the very one we might never know or notice, the very one whom we have learned to fear, the very one we have chosen to turn our backs upon, ironically, the one we can barely tolerate, put up with, abide. Therefore, said John Calvin of the community gathered and fed at Christ's table, "It is impossible for us to wound, despise, reject, injure or in any way offend one of our [brothers or our sisters] but we, at the same time, wound, despise, reject, injure and offend Christ in him," in her. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

The second archaic definition of abide tells us that those who abide are those who await something or someone. We are back to a transitive verb, a verb that is an act and has an object.

In the context of John's fifteenth chapter, those who abide are actively awaiting the gift of God's Spirit. Jesus has just said to the disciples that God will give them another Advocate, another Helper, who will be with them forever. That helper, he says, is the Spirit of truth whom they will know as God's Spirit abides with them. It is the same Spirit of truth that created understanding among an ethnically divided crowd on Pentecost, giving them the sort of mutual understanding that transcended and still transcends the barriers that divide people and destroy community.

What would it mean and matter that a community of faith on Germantown Avenue actively awaited the Spirit of truth and understanding in a society that majors in barely tolerating, putting up with, abiding each other? I imagine active awaiting such a Spirit by creating occasions for divisions to be overcome, meetings where fear just might be cast out by love, conversations in which scapegoating and blaming turn into understanding and mutual care. What if we partnered with First Presbyterian Church in Germantown to broker a series of conversations between various neighborhoods in Northwest Philadelphia and the police of the 14th District? What if we initiated an evening where Muslim women dressed in Burkas and Christian women dressed in leggings could talk about our faith, our identity as women, our experience of living in this society after 9/11? What if our youth committed themselves to "Walking the Walk," a year-long exploration of faith with Muslim and Jewish youth through the Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia? "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

Finally, abiding once was understood to be the act of withstanding something—another transitive verb. "Poor naked wretches," King Lear cried, "That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm" (an archaic use of the word meaning withstand!). "How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,/Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you/From seasons such as these?" How shall the early church withstand the depraved hearts of a world that could not abide God's

love made manifest? And how shall we withstand, shall we abide, shall we defend ourselves from seasons of division and fear such as these? It sounds like we are back to the abiding that tolerates what is too overwhelming to change, but not!

In her *Memoir of a Modernist's Daughter*, Eleanor Munro remembers her grandfather as a "...a knobby, sour-faced Scot" who had given her the first intimation she had of "an exile's lament, the pain of separation and the impossibility of finding one's way back to the place of beginning." At parties in her home, he would lift a finger to a circle of guests, intoning in an impassioned brogue, "What is maan? A wind tha' passeth awee an cometh naw agin." Munro's father would dismiss these outbursts: "He believes in things people no longer do. Don't hurt him by arguing, but remember there's no truth to them."

Her grandfather died while Munro was away at college, leaving his essay-prone granddaughter a black notebook. Years later, she picked it up and therein found inscribed one hymn twice, first in his youth; and then, on the last, unfinished page, trembling, he had written, "Help of the helpless, O Lord, abide with me...." He believed in things people no longer do: "Help of the helpless, O Lord, abide with me. Only nine words they were," Munro writes, "but placed just before the silence of the book's end, they sank deep into my mind, evoking the thoughts even a young person has of the dark distance into which all things are swept. And as life goes on, other deaths and losses add to this store of darkness, so it deepens, until the smallest natural happening--a roll of thunder, the edge of a wind lifting the hair, an animal cry at night--can open...the sluiceway behind which awaits one's own death ahead."

"What, then, is your only comfort, in life and in death?" the Heidelberg Catechism asks of us all. What is the only "provisional but effective and promising help given you in a difficult situation?" ask the theologians, "help...which becomes good reason, despite the fact that you

have serious and even urgent reasons to the contrary, *nevertheless* to endure, *nevertheless* to take courage, *nevertheless* to be joyful?" And what is our warrant for that *nevertheless* by which we withstand, by which we abide seasons such as this?

"That I belong," answers the catechism, "--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ." To abide in his love is to be enabled to withstand, to endure, to take courage, to be joyful, no matter what comes, for our lives and our deaths are in his hands and not our own; our anxious fears and comfortlessness in this world, our misery and our longings and our doubts belong to him. He bears them even now so that, freed of them, we may more and more become a community of faith on Germantown Avenue that dwells in his love, that actively awaits the Spirit of Truth in all things, and that withstands seasons such as these, bearing witness to the love that is stronger than death, until God shall reign.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Amen.