**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Abide In My Love”*

John 15

May 6, 2018

Jesus tells his disciples to “abide in my love.” Several times he says this: “Abide in my love.” At first glance, it’s not the most dramatic thing he ever said. The word abide is sometimes translated as “remain” or “stay.” It might say to us to abide in a place and not depart. In reference to time, abide can mean to continue, or endure, and not give up; in reference to an identity it can mean to remain as you are, not change or become something different.

Abide in my love: live in my love, stay in my love, remain in my love. What at first looks like one of those lines you might just blow past when reading scripture becomes a full stop when you consider the implication of such a commandment. What looks a little bit at first like a line we might skip, wakes us up that we have found ourselves face to face with something at the center of our lives, though few of us know really what it means to abide in Christ. Someone recently said, “I do pretty well for short periods but then have to come back,” which is pretty much the exact opposite of truly abiding.

John’s gospel uses this word a lot, much more than the other three gospels combined. Our reading this morning is from chapter 15, in the middle of a speech by Jesus that is four chapters long. Chapter 13 is the last supper, breaking of bread, washing of feet. In chapter 18 they leave the upper room to go to Gethsemane where he is arrested. From chapters 14-17, Jesus is speaking with the disciples. The other gospels move directly from the supper to the garden. John lingers and we linger with him, to hear what we now know are the final words of Jesus to his friends in peace.

Last words always take on added meaning, and the gospel of John gives us four chapters of final words to the disciples. They are intimate and personal. This is not Jesus on top of a mountain preaching to thousands with words of thunder and lightning. This is Jesus speaking in whispers to friends whose faces flicker in the candlelight. “I call you friends,” he tells them, “servants no longer. I’ve told you everything.”

Love one another. This is my command to you. Love one another. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. Nice idea, they may have thought, and then he went out and did it and the last words took on extra meaning. No greater love than to lay down your life for your friends. And you are my friends. How could they not see? But surely they didn’t, yet. But they would and we do. We see that Jesus’ talk about love isn’t just airy-fairy fleeting feelings of warmth and affection. Love’s just not that easy.

We might know what it means to abide, but we seem to know little about true love. It’s really quite a shame that love language is so mundane. I don’t know if it always was. Maybe it always was and always is in every language. Our *love* talk is just amplified *like* talk. If I really like something, at some point I say I love something. It’s just a magnification of like, but doesn’t have any real difference to its meaning. Yet I suspect that’s wrong somehow. I suspect that love is qualitatively different from like. How did we lose our way? We’re a lot like Forest Gump’s Jenny running around chasing an elusive something to fill the emptiness inside, while even a simple man like Forest knows what love is.

It meant more than the disciples could know then; it meant Jesus would lay down his life for his friends. Love isn’t just emotional warm feelings, and it’s also not abstract philosophical treatise. When Jesus speaks of love, it is intimate, personal. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Love one another as I have loved you.” How had they experienced Jesus’ love to that point? In so many ways: by his words and actions, his compassion and generosity. They could feel his love exactly in the way they felt his hands hold their calloused feet and wash them as a servant. The way he cleansed calloused feet and calloused hearts. They never forgot.

So these were the instructions given to the little group of disciples. Love one another as I have loved you. Abide in my love. This little group would face all kinds of challenges in the days to come. There would be some sharp disagreements between them. Through it all, they kept remembering these words and kept trying to live them. They spread the message of Jesus and as they did, this is what they were telling the world: God is love. God loves you. You are the beloved of God. Whatever else was the message of Christianity, this was at the heart of it.

The world’s population had been accustomed to thinking of divine entities as just magnifications of ourselves. If we’re strong, the gods are stronger. If we’re wise, the gods are wiser. If farmers have something to do with our crops growing, the gods control the weather. If soldiers have something to do with winning in battle, the gods of war control the outcome. People had this in mind. Along come the disciples of Jesus saying, Listen, we have good news for you: God is not just some kind of better, bigger version of yourself. God is love. God’s love was incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth who showed us that God’s love has no fear and is powerless before nothing, including death. And now we are sent to share this news. God loves you. Love one another into the new world that began when Christ rose from the grave.

Maybe that’s ho-hum news for you this morning. You’ve heard that sort of thing before. Been there, got the bumper sticker, and the t-shirt, and the numbness that comes from hearing something over and over you’re not sure you believe. It wasn’t ho hum for them. It was radical and attractional to think of a divine being whose nature is the essence and definition of Love and whose Love takes the shape and sacrifice of a cross. Lives get changed by this.

Communities do for sure. That’s not to say that Christians have always lived out these last words of Jesus to his people. Far from it. We all know that. We have all lived that. We could not begin to count the ways we have failed to live out this command, all the while forgetting its not just a suggestion, but actually a command, “Love one another as I have loved you.”

C.S. Lewis wrote: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one... Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell. (*The Four Loves*)

“I was part of the problem”. Those words of confession were spoken by Pope Francis recently. Yes, the actual Pope, admitting he was in error. He was meeting with three men who years ago suffered abuse at the hands of their priest in Chile. When Francis was in Chile earlier this year he defended the priest and the bishop accused of covering up the abuse. Afterward Francis realized he had bad information, invited the abuse victims to come to Rome, to meet with him personally in his residence, and the most powerful man in western Christianity spoke those words, “I was part of the problem. I caused this. I am very sorry, and I ask your forgiveness.” One of the men later reflected, “I have never, never seen someone being so contrite about what he was telling me. The Pope was truly sorry about what he told me. I felt he was also hurting. That for me was a very solemn moment.” Confessing our failures and asking forgiveness. This is holy work. This is what it means to love too, not always getting everything right, confessing when we fail. Christians are not made a perfect people, but commanded, even in their imperfectness, to be a people who love, abiding in Christ, who makes possible the vulnerable truth-telling necessary for true love to flourish.

Love spoken of like this is intimate and personal, compassionate. John takes us right there into the upper room, by candlelight. Love is easy by candlelight with friends; it’s more difficult by the bonfire of accusation as Peter will learn that night, and even more challenging in the bright hot light of day, as we all learn when we try to love those who challenge us in more ways than one, our enemies and sometimes our friends. The elder John writes that Jesus’ commands are not burdensome. Love is not burdensome? What does John know that we do not?

He knows something important. John knows this love, intimate and personal and compassionate is not the exception to the world, but the grain of the universe. John’s gospel is at the same time intimate and personal, cosmic and grand. Whereas the other gospels begin with stories about the man Jesus of Nazareth, John’s gospel paints on a cosmic canvas, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Everything that was created was created through him.” When God loves in Christ, God so loves the world, the cosmos.

In creation Love is not just the paint on the walls of the house to make it look pretty. Love is the foundation, the studs in the walls, the roof over head. Love is the plumbing and the electricity, the fresh air, the nails that hold it together and the windows that let in light. Creation is not just cold scientific flinging of stars and star dust through the galaxy. “All things were created through him.” The energy by which creation exploded into being was Love and it is Love that still binds it together.

God is dynamic, trinitarian love which means love is the source, meaning, and goal of creation (Ilia Delio, *Emergent Christ*, 46). So when Jesus invites us intimately, compassionately, personally to abide in his love, this love of which he speaks is not an exception, drawing us away from the world as it is made to be, but is inviting us to live truly in the world as it is created to be.

This world is created by Love, in love, and for love. But we have drifted far, far from who we were made to be. We have drifted and decided to pursue our own ways of self-love rather than the love of God that enables love of self to flourish. In the gardens of life, we still over and over taste fruit from forbidden trees.

We humans have gone so far from love that nothing less and nothing other than a God-man could restore creation to its purpose and meaning. By him, we are called to participate fully in the unfolding love that is the creation of God. As cosmic and grand as that is, love is always personal, intimate, always about the person next to you and the moment you are in right now.

Love is the alpha from the beginning and the omega, the end to which this is all headed. As the Easter season begins to draw to an end, this is where our eyes and hearts are turned. To love. To the cross by which God’s love was manifest, to the community of those who sacrificially love one another, and to the new creation come to being by the resurrection.

Abide in my love. Abide sounds a lot like abode. An abode is a house. Love is a house we were made to inhabit, a house as big and wide as all creation, as big and wide as the human heart.

In the cross and resurrection of Christ we are embraced by the Trinity of love, who loves us with the same love with which the persons of the Trinity love one another (Delio, 67). We have the freedom to walk away, to leave this love behind, shake a clenched fist at him or one another, reject the cross as foolish and weak, and seek our own ways. We can do this, but the joy of life, the joy for which we were created, is in this love, abiding in this love, discovering the truth of our true selves slowly come to new life in the faithfulness of the One who is our creator, sustainer, and redeemer. The one who makes us whole.

May we abide in the love of Christ with all our heart, all our strength, all our mind that we may love one another as he has loved us.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/05/02/i-was-part-problem-francis-tells-chilean-abuse-victims>

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