

April 28, 2024
Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Abiding”

John 15:1-8

Have you ever been in a situation like this: Some good friend out of the blue says to you, “I’m throwing a birthday party (or anniversary or retirement or whatever) for so-and-so Saturday afternoon. I’m pulling out all the stops—it’s going to be great. I’ll see you there!” And you smile and nod and say that you’re coming but on the inside you’re like, “I really just wanted to go fishing Saturday morning and spend the rest of the day doing my yard work and gardening and relaxing. Why do I have to go to this blooming party?”

We’ve all been there...especially you introverts out there. It’s going to be a great event and a good time is pretty much guaranteed. But you’ve got other plans and, quite frankly, you find your plans more attractive.

“*Abide in me, and I in you,*” invites Jesus. And that’s the first point here—this is not a command of the law. This is an invitation of the Gospel. Jesus is inviting us to remain in Him and that He will remain in us and thus guarantee our eternal salvation; there is really no downside to this offer.

Yet we manage to manufacture a downside because we have other plans...and according to our fallen nature those plans are worldly and sinful and remaining in Christ, abiding in Christ, just doesn’t work with that. So even here in church we might catch ourselves hearing His Word, but at certain points we’re kind of like “Really? Okay, I guess. But that doesn’t really mesh with what I want to do...or say...or think.” This is most certainly true.

And thus we make the mistake of hearing what is all Gospel invitation as a demand of the law—God being a type of nasty tyrant forcing us to His will. We hear Him saying, “Bear some fruit!” instead of hearing the call to abide in Him and His love.

I do not want to get lost in contemplation of what exactly the fruit is that Jesus says we branches are bearing. It might be faith. It might be good works. It might be genuine love. It might even be obedience to that law of God. Frankly, it’s probably all of the above and more. Bearing fruit isn’t the point. Abiding in Christ is the point.

Notice that Jesus says His disciples are already cleansed. They are in the vine. They are bearing or at least shall be bearing fruit. Jesus isn’t commanding them to bear fruit. He is inviting them: “*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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*”

So abiding in Christ and He in you is the point; the fruit, whatever it might be, shall indeed follow because Christ is abiding in you. So this isn’t law. It’s promise. It’s invitation.

So, that point made, how is it that we go about abiding in Christ?

Well, you may not like this answer but—work at it. Get abiding. Accept the gracious invitation to forgiveness and life everlasting and live in that blessed truth.

Here is an idea; pray! Praying is abiding in Jesus Christ the vine. It is communication and connection with the vine. I know some of you stink at it. For some of you, here this morning is the only place you’ve prayed all week. Others try, but struggle mightily to stay focused. Others struggle over what to pray. Others think their prayers sound greedy or stupid.

If that’s you, here’s an idea: pray God’s Word. Jesus says, “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*” We’ve got 150 Psalms

in the Bible. Pray some of those. The hymns in your hymnal make great prayers—and they're even indexed by topic! You can read of God's will throughout the Bible. Read some and then pray that will of God revealed there be done in your life. Pray the Lord's Prayer Jesus gave us and slow down and ponder each part in prayer. Use Luther's Small Catechism to flush out the meaning of that prayer for yourself. Pray for big things. Pray for little things. Pray for others. Pray for yourself. Seek to pray in God's will and God's Word, acknowledging that His ways, the ways of the true vine, are always best.

Knowing that to be true, seek to conform your life to Jesus, not the other way around.

Going back to my Saturday party metaphor, once I receive and accept the invitation I have two ways I can take it. I can lament the loss of my Saturday plans and resent the fabulous promised party, whining and bickering about it and counting it as a burden. Or, I can accept it for what it is, a joyous celebration with sumptuous banquet of the finest fare offered me at no cost. I can anticipate it and look forward to it with longing, planning and preparing for its arrival.

We very often take the former attitude toward Christ. Rather than abiding in Him, the true vine, with our hearts set toward the blessed life to come and reacting in love to God and neighbor here, we instead kind of lament the much, much lesser things of this world we think we're losing, counting life here and now as the precious commodity we dare not miss out on. Thus we risk conforming ourselves to the world and its passing joys, its values and its thinking. But then where are we abiding? The world, not Christ.

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." I didn't say there wasn't any law here at all. Abiding anywhere but the vine is refusing the gracious invitation and does not end well. But that disconnect branch is exactly what an earthly life absent Jesus is here—quite short and ending in death...then comes the fire.

Abiding in Christ is not just accepting the reality that things are exactly as Christ says they are—it is rejoicing in that things are exactly as Christ says they are—according to the Gospel good news! Abiding in Him is not just acknowledging His promise, it is living in it. Seeking to allow His happy eternal truth to overshadow on all our days lived under His grace.

And like I said, it is hard work. It is not always easy. Jesus says, *"Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* We can't be positive what exactly that pruning is, but it doesn't sound pleasant. It makes me think of the testing, trials, sacrifice and suffering that faithful Christians often suffer for Christ's sake. The shame of our sins as we turn in repentance and turn again to God as beggars of grace—that's pruning also. We struggle. We struggle against the forces of evil, the fallen world, and against our own sinful nature. But we struggle because the plans God has for us are so much grander, glorious and enduring than any we would possibly make for ourselves in this present age.

I don't want to sugarcoat this. Jesus invites us to abide in Him and that means subjugating ourselves and surrendering our fallen will to His greater and holy will. We long and strive to be His branch, drawing our life and our entire reason for being, from our Redeemer Lord. The first step in this is to see the truth. This is not law. This is not burden. This is not loss. *"Abide in me, and I in you."* This is His invitation to gain the eternal kingdom of God itself.

The greatest Gospel today is that you have indeed already received it! You are the branches! Jesus says so. Jesus does so in Holy Baptism. Jesus does so in His Holy Supper. He does so in His proclamation of the Gospel. *"I am the vine. You are the branches."* That is present-tense Gospel truth of Christ. Take that gift and run with it.

Every day wake up intent on abiding in Christ, doing the work, knowing that even in your fallen, broken, sinful state, you are going to be successful. Not because you do it well, but because of the Gospel Jesus promises here: “*Abide in me, and I in you.*”

Put your focus on the kingdom to which Christ invites you, not the fallen one around you. Abide in the true vine now; celebrate in His glory forever.

Amen.