

Abide in Love



From the First Letter of John: *"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."* (1 John 4:16b)

Sometimes I am utterly overwhelmed by a simple statement of absolute truth. I remember when I first stumbled across these words. There they were, tucked away in the middle of a short letter at the back of the Bible. My heart shouted "Eureka!" Turns out the Beatles were right: *"All you need is love, love. Love is all you need."*

Ah, but no sooner does my heart leap at the truth, than my head fills with questions. If God is love, then where is God's physicality? Who do we pray to when we say: "Our Father, who art in heaven...?" The word "abide" is used three times in this verse, and is sprinkled through both of today's Johannine readings. What does it mean to abide? If the answer to the fundamental theological question of the nature of God is simply "God is love," why do we have 783,000 other words in the Bible? Why is such a simple truth so complicated?

One truth. Many questions. Let's start at the beginning, then see where our readings take us. By the beginning, I mean Genesis: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."* (Genesis 1:1) Love on its own is not love at all. Love is relational. Love requires other. So God created the universe and fashioned us in his image.

"God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." (Genesis 1:31) St. Thomas Aquinas says that "God's love...pours out and creates the goodness in things." (*Summa I.Q20.A2*) God's love has poured goodness into us. We have been made in love, by love and for love. If the scientific fact that we are made of stardust can inspire grandeur and awe, how much greater is the awesome truth that we are God's love poured out?

God's love is *"perfected in us"* (1 John 1:12) when we love God in return and love one another. But love also means the freedom to choose to not love. And we did not. So God sent his only Son to reconcile us to each other. To be *"the atoning sacrifice for our sins."* (1 John 1:10)

By Christ's death and resurrection, we are restored, re-formed and re-membered into a new community of love. In this community, Jesus tells us he is the vine and we are the branches. Nourished from a vine deeply rooted in the goodness of creation, carefully cultivated by the divine vinegrower, we bear much fruit.

Those of you who are gardeners or farmers may relate to this metaphor. I can see myself as the vinegrower. I smell the soil under my fingernails, feel the familiar grip of my pruning shear, and take delight in the sweet fruit that the earth and my labors have brought forth. From there, it's a small leap to shift my perspective to imagining myself as a lovingly tended branch, the vine's life force flowing through me as I bud forth abundant fruit.

Central to all this is abiding. In Jesus' metaphor, the vine and branches abide in each other. Abide is a rich word, both in English and ancient Greek. It means to live in

or remain in, and some bible translations use these other words. And it is more. Abide has overtones of constancy, depth, intimacy.

John says *"no one has ever seen God"* (1 John 4:12). Since God is love, this is quite literally correct. Love cannot be seen like this pulpit or the pews or chairs you're sitting in. We can't see God, but we do know God, for *"if we love one another, God lives in us...we abide in him and he in us."* (1 John 4:12, 13) When we confess that Jesus is the Son of God, we find him abiding in our deepest center. Closer than thought. Closer than breath. Jesus Christ is the beating heart of who we are if but let him. God's physical presence doesn't get any more real than that.

Our mutual abiding in Christ energizes our love for each other. The vine and its many branches form a vibrant, prolific entity. This vine, this church, bears much fruit, feeding a world hungry for love, sweet love.

With the love of the resurrected Christ coursing through our veins, we are formed into his disciples, boldly bearing witness to his restoring love across the world. The prayer book is quite deliberate when it bids the Lord's Prayer with the words: *"As our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say"* (BCP p363).

We can be bold because the abiding gift of Christ's love dispels fear. *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."* (1 John 4:18a) Today's reading from Acts gives us an example of such boldness. After the stoning of Stephen, during Saul's persecution of the believers, Philip, who served with Stephen, went forth to fearlessly seed the Good News. Philip spies a high official of the Ethiopian queen, and boldly runs up to his chariot to strike up a conversation.

The official turns out to be a eunuch, who early church tradition names Simeon. However important his station, Simeon was still a eunuch, living with the shame of his mutilation. Making it worse, although he was a Jewish seeker, his mutilation meant he could not be a Jew under the Law.

Philip finds Simeon reading a passage from Isaiah about the suffering servant. *"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter...In his humiliation justice was denied him."* (Isaiah 53:7-8). Maybe the eunuch saw himself in this passage. Perhaps he was trying to see if redemption were possible for someone relegated to the margins of religion and relationship.

Philip, bearing witness to the Good News, explains to Simeon that the real import of the passage is that it speaks to Jesus' own suffering and crucifixion. God has taken Simeon's suffering and shame upon himself. The truth of the love of God is Simeon's eureka moment. He is not broken, but has been made whole in Christ's atoning sacrifice. Claimed as Christ's own in baptism, Simeon finds a home in the community of love among the believers. Tradition has it that he became a tireless worker for the Gospel, bearing much fruit.

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." This is the simple, clear, powerful truth. Maybe one reason why he have all those other words in the Bible is to show that across the theatre of human drama, absolutely no one is excluded from God's saving love.

Simeon, despite his outward success, suffered in shame and isolation until he saw how deeply loved he really was. Who in our world is living with shame, both secret and public. Who is feeling isolated, ostracized because of difference? People hungry for love, for acceptance, for the sweet fruit of the vine, are all around us. In the church where I was received, we used to sing a silly little popular 1960s song called "Love is all around." It's been covered many times and is all over YouTube. The tag line goes "So if you really love me, come on and let it show." Abiding in love, freed from fear, let us go forth bearing much fruit as disciples of the risen Jesus Christ.