

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Abide in Love”  
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Lessons: Acts 10:44-48; John 15:9-17

Jesus said: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” What does it mean to “abide” in Christ, to abide in Christ’s love? That is a central question that runs throughout John’s gospel. In chapter one, two of John’s disciples follow Jesus and ask, “Rabbi, where are you staying--abiding?” And Jesus invites them as he invites us to “come and see.” At the very end of the gospel Jesus speaks of the beloved disciple “remaining” or “abiding” with him. Elsewhere the word is translated “dwell,” “stay,” “continue,” or “endure.” Abiding in Christ, in Christ’s love is central to this gospel which was written some time after the resurrection, when memory was fading and those who had first-hand experience with the Jesus of history were becoming fewer. How do we keep the presence alive? How do we abide in Christ? That is not an easy question to answer.

William Brosend, a Baptist minister in Rochester, New York writes: “Few of us are clear about what it means to ‘abide in Christ.’ Move to Capernaum? Not likely, though it has been tried, and visits to Israel are surely inspiring. Go to the desert, the monastery, the hermitage? If that is your calling. But for most of us it is not. What about the foreign mission field or a local Christian community, living in solidarity with the poor and dispossessed? Certainly—if that is your calling. But such suggestions are grounded in an understanding of abiding that seems more about place than presence, while I take Jesus to be talking about being present to the presence of God in our midst *wherever* and *everywhere* we are.”<sup>1</sup>

There was a monk in the seventeenth century, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, who wrote a wonderful little book which has become something of a classic called: *The Practice of the Presence of God*. If you’d like to read something very simple and also extraordinarily profound, I would recommend it to you. Brother Lawrence suggests that we can be attuned to God’s presence all through the day in everything we do and that certainly is part of what it means to abide in Christ’s love. Practice seeing and celebrating God’s presence in everything around us. Practice seeing and celebrating God’s presence wherever and everywhere we are.

In his introduction to this book, Henri Nouwen writes: “One of the most stimulating aspects of this precious book is Brother Lawrence’s deep conviction that prayer is not saying prayers but a way of living, in which all we do becomes prayer...Through the practice of the presence of God nothing, absolutely nothing, was outside his intimate relationship with God. That is how he could experience an ongoing sense of joy and a real sense of communion.”<sup>2</sup> In everything, he worked to see a connection with God. That’s part of what it means to abide in Christ. I used to be part of a spiritual formation group and one of our exercises was to meditate on a verse from Isaiah where God says even to the likes of us: “You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you.” Could you claim those words as being spoken to you? In fact it is spoken to each and every one of us. Imagine yourself in the presence of God and hear God speak those words to you: you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you. That is another way to abide in Christ’s love.

Jesus also says: “If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love,...This is my

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<sup>1</sup> William Brosend, *Abiding love: John 15:1-17; 1 John 5:1-6*, in *The Christian Century*, © May 17, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Preface to The Practice of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. © 1977. An Image Book.

commandment that you love one another as I have loved you...I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” Keeping the commandments of Jesus--the commandments to love--is a way to abide in Christ. Keep the commandments by loving one another.

The story today from Acts offers an example of this kind love. Peter the apostle had grown up in a home and in a time when Gentiles were considered unclean. His kind of people did not associate with Gentiles. He had surely learned from his parents and from the community of faith, and from the writings of Scripture that he should not hang out with Gentiles; they were a bad lot and there was no telling what he might get into if he associated with them. It was part of his religious identity: don't mix with them. So you can imagine his confusion and fear and maybe even anger, when God told him in a dream that what had long been considered profane or unclean, God had now made clean. Surely Peter was worried about meeting with Gentiles, but God had called him to do so and what he discovered was that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on those Gentiles. To his credit Peter then asked: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Practicing that kind of hospitality, where strangers are welcomed, even those we've been taught to question, is another way to abide in Christ's love. Claim that love for yourself, absolutely, but then share that love far and wide with everyone you meet, no matter who they are or what they do or what they look like.

I like to think of this church as being a friendly place, and I've heard stories about the way that some of you were welcomed when you first came here to worship. That welcome makes a difference. A minister friend once told me that nearly ninety five percent of those who attend a church for the first time are in one sort or another of crisis. If they aren't welcomed, they often assume that God doesn't care. Practicing hospitality is another way of abiding in Christ.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. There is no higher calling; there is no greater source of joy. In all that you do, wherever and everywhere, practice God's presence; abide in Christ's love; give your life for the friends God has given you; be friends of God and of each other and do this so that Christ's joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.

Let us pray: Gracious God, help us to abide in your presence, through prayer, through action, offering hospitality and practicing love, offering to all humanity an example of what you desire for the world. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our savior and friend. Amen.