

Camp Hebron September 8, 2019

John 15:4-9

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

What We Need is Here

Wendell Berry

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

SERMON:

Before we jump into the scripture for today, I want to take a moment together and abide - to rest, to remain here, for just a moment. Let's come back to our opening reading and open our senses to the gift of summer - close your eyes if it's comfortable, and simply notice what's here, drawing to mind some of the ways you've experienced summer this weekend - the touch of summer, the sounds, the tastes that linger, the smells.

That's abiding, resting in the gifts of God's abundance that surrounds us.

As you listen to the scripture being read, notice how the word abide is used 9 times in these 5 verses. You might hear 'abide', or you might mentally substitute "rest" or 'dwell' or 'endure'. Instead of 'abide in me' you might hear instead 'dwell in me as I dwell in you'.

I have developed a practice over the years of pairing scripture with poems, so I bring to you a poem from Wendell Berry, 'What We Need Is Here' alongside this scripture.

Hear the Word:

John 15:4-9

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my

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

What We Need is Here

Wendell Berry

Geese appear high over us,
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,
as in love or sleep, holds
them to their way, clear
in the ancient faith: what we need
is here. And we pray, not
for new earth or heaven, but to be
quiet in heart, and in eye,
clear. What we need is here.

(read scripture, then poem, finishing with “Abide in me as I abide in you... for as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”)

I preached a variation of this sermon a few weeks ago, as part of the Allegheny Mennonite Conference Summer gathering at Laurelville. Three of us preached that weekend, and when we were sent the scripture passage and asked if we had a theme we wanted to focus on, it didn't take me long to claim 'abide' as mine. It's been a very full summer, and the call, the command to 'abide' is the Good News I've needed to hear.

This is my second time at camp Hebron with all of you - not everything is brand new anymore! There have been a lot of firsts this year - my first year as a pastor, my first year in State College. One of the challenges and gifts of pastoring is figuring out how to spend my time. I have a huge amount of freedom in what my days look like. When does a work day begin, when does it end? Some weeks I find myself carrying the tasks of this calling with me day and night. So I try to continue to learn what it means to simply 'dwell in Christ as Christ dwells in me', allowing that stance to guide my work and my days.

While many other pastors talk about summer being a down time for them, mine has felt full - my son, Jesse, got married in June, Mennonite Convention was July, I just moved into my new house, I took on the 12 Scriptures project and I've battled with Lyme disease for much of the summer. Does any of this resonate with your own life - lots of wonderful, fullness, but... just lots to do.

Yes, abide, rest, remain, is a word I need to hear.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Abide, abide, abide, it's not a word that we often use in daily speech. Today, outside of biblical readings like this, often times the only way we hear abide being used is in reference to laws and rules. We abide by the laws of the land; we abide by court decisions... usually it means to obey by staying within an established system. The disciples would have heard it that way too. But Jesus stretches this word, *meno*, in Greek, further. Here it means to endure, dwell, or be present. It's different from simply keeping a law. When I choose to remain within the limits of a law, I am usually denying myself because of potential consequences, like remaining within the speed limit so I don't get a ticket.

This isn't the tone that J sets. He's not cautioning his disciples, or us, to abide - or else. This is not a coercive threat. Rather, J is offering comfort and an environment in which his disciples can thrive, where they can grow and produce fruit.

Our passage today is part of a much longer section in John, chapters 14-16, known as the Farewell Discourse in which Jesus explains the significance of his departure to his disciples and points them toward the life they will lead after his death. The Farewell Discourse is the writers way of helping the early church through the two immediate crises they faced - the meaning of Jesus' death on a cross and his absence from his followers. Our passage today is part of the way that Jesus responds to those crises before they occur, giving his disciples ways of carrying on his work, reminding them who they are and whose they are.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

On this final night, J is preparing his disciples for the time when he will no longer be physically with them. Abide, he counsels. Remain with me, as I remain with you. Continue with me, as I continue with you. Dwell with me, as I dwell with you. Endure with me, as I endure with you. Be present with me, as I am present with you.

J could have given them a to-do list for when he was gone - don't forget to do all the things we did when we were together, like heal, serve the poor, spread the good news. No, instead he says 'abide'. Stay, remain, dwell, endure.

What, there's so much to be done, we might say. It's a challenge to simply abide. We would rather go, work hard, see the evidence of our labor. But on that last, pivotal night together, J is commanding his disciples to abide. He knew the tendencies of his disciples, he knows ours. You are going to have to abide, he says. Not because the kingdom work is finished; not because there's nothing else you could be doing - but because abiding is what is best for your relationship with me.

Have you ever seen the bumper sticker that says: Look Busy, Jesus is Coming? There's plenty to be done and to be good disciples, we're supposed to be busy all the time, right? Doesn't sound as catchy to say "Abide. Jesus is coming"

I wonder what this command to abide meant for the disciples? J knew they would struggle to abide, to dwell in his love and teaching. They would have a hard time remembering what it was like to walk with him. They would want to leave. J gives them this illustration of a branch abiding in, dwelling in the vine. J allows them to see that sometimes fruit takes time to develop, and its ability to grow is in the hands of the vine grower, not theirs. Their work is simply to remain in Christ.

What does it mean for us? These words of encouragement are for us as well. No matter how tempted we are to be busy for God, that's only part of what we're called to do as disciples. John's J does not leave us with a to-do list. He reminds us to abide. He calls us to reject the notion that constant activity gives us significance. He invites us to recognize that our relationship with Christ is a gift from God, cultivated and nurtured by the vinegrower, not the result of our own work. The branches do not bear fruit apart from the vine and the vine grower.

We are not gardeners, but branches. We are not responsible for knowing how everything is going to work out in the end. We are called first, and last, simply to abide in love.¹

There's plenty of work for us to do. Important work. And Jesus knows us, knows that in order to produce good fruit, we need to be rooted in him. What I love about the Wendell Berry poem is the line "What we need is here". God gives us what we need. It's here. And so J commands his disciples and commands us too - trust that I provide. Rest in me, remain in me, dwell in me, as I dwell in you, because apart from me you can do nothing.

¹ Armstrong, Lindsay. 2015. *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Vol 2*. Westminster John Knox Press, pp 170-174.

May it be so.Amen.