

Vine and Branches

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Third Presbyterian Church
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I John 4:7-21 and John 15:1-17

“Abide” is one of those old-fashioned words we don’t much use anymore. We don’t say, for instance, when we don’t care for something or someone, that we “can’t” abide that, or them. The definition there is something like “accept” or “tolerate.” Like “I simply can’t abide this weather.”

But there is another definition, even older, more archaic. “Dwell.” “Continue.” “Endure.” “Remain.” The writer of the biblical letter called I John and the writer of the gospel of John itself, perhaps the same person but certainly from the same school of thought, favors this word a great deal.

But first, a detour. “Beloved,” I John says, using another favorite term... “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” There are no more iconic words in all the Bible, and no clearer invitation. Love. Love as the one manifestation of what it looks like to follow Jesus. Love.

The Greek word for this love is “agape.” Three different Greek words for love appear in the New Testament. “Eros” equals romantic love. “Philia” equals something like brotherly or sisterly love, familial love. But “agape” love gets to the heart of the matter. Giving love. Sacrificial love. So that when I John invites us to love one another, it is that kind of love that’s on the table. It is that kind of love God has for us that God sent Jesus.

And because God loves us so much, we are called to love one another. If we are seeking a relationship with God, that relationship will look like love.

I say these words at every wedding I lead: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” The mistake in remembering those words *only* at a wedding makes love only about romance, or sentiment. It can be that, of course, and that is a good thing. But it is deeper than that, at least when it comes to faith. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” Agape love throughout, giving love,

sacrificing love, the love God has for us that we in turn should demonstrate to others, not just friends, but strangers and even enemies.

The opposite of this love, I John insists, is not hate, but fear. “There is no fear in love...perfect love casts out fear.” That is worth remembering. This is all worth remembering, but think for a moment what it would look like in our lives, or in the life of our broken culture, to envision love casting out fear. Love casting out the fear of the other. Love casting out the fear of the unknown.

I do not know if it was love that drove the meeting this week between South and North Korea, but I do believe that love looks like a reduction in the prospect of nuclear war.

What would love casting out fear look like as we thought about education, or race, or poverty?

What are we afraid of that is so powerful, and what would casting that out look like?

End of detour. I began with “abide,” and to abide we return. Because, really, there is an organic relationship between the kind of love we are talking about and the God who shows us, in Jesus, what that looks like. So when we connect with that God, that love, and dwell in it, reside in it, return to it time and time again, ABIDE in it, we will be able to love with that strong and bold and perfect love that casts out all fear, in our own lives and the life of the world.

Abide in God – abide in love. Abide in love – abide in God.

And in case the earliest followers, or 21st century followers, need help understanding what that looks like – and of course we do – then Jesus helps us.

If you are a red-letter Bible person, this is a red-letter portion of John’s gospel, with Jesus speaking extensively, using a metaphor that would have been familiar to his audience, his listeners. Even I understand this image. We abide in God’s love, through Jesus, and are strengthened in that love as we abide in God. Vine and branches.

Several weeks ago, in the massive wind storm we experienced, an enormous tree, some 50 or 60 feet tall, came down a few houses down from us. No one or nothing was damaged, as far as I can tell. Still, it was impressive.

Now I know this was a tree and not a vine – I know that much – but here’s the point. Unlike many trees that were damaged in those strong winds, branches breaking off with enormously loud cracks, limbs splitting at the base, this tree was uprooted, entirely. Its root system was so

shallow that it simply appeared to tip over, roots and all, because of the wind. Now of course had the root system been deeper perhaps a different kind of damage would have happened. And, of course, it is healthy for some branches to be removed...pruning it is called. Jesus understands that. We know that.

But whether roots and branches or vine and branches, the deeper point is the same – and it all comes back to love. “I am the true vine,” Jesus says. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” There is that word again, the invitation, made even more real because it takes human form. “I am the vine, you are the branches.” “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” Then this summary: “This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you.”

Here it is, agape love, self-giving, sacrificing love. We saw it demonstrated again in the Parkland shootings, where teachers and coaches put themselves in harm’s way to protect their students. And we hope, or at least I hope, that I would behave in such a way if the moment presents itself.

But if this love is the kind of love that casts out fear, it is not about a one-off moment, which may never come. It is about approaching life, our lives, the life of the world, from that place. If we abide in that love, if we take seriously our calling to be branches of this vine, not the vine of fear, not the vine of self-interest, not the vine of cynicism, but this vine of love, then our lives will look different, feel different, be different. In all things.

From our fears and sins release us, the old hymns says. FEARS, as well as sins. They will know we are Christians by our love, the more recent folk hymn suggests. Not by our beliefs. Not by our institutions. By our love, love that only can be strong as it is connected to the very source of love.

I continue to be compelled, haunted, in a way, by the life and words of Martin Luther King, Jr., fifty years after his assassination. In August of 1967 he offered a speech, as the Vietnam War progressed, as tensions between his non-violent movement and the Black Power movement progressed, as his focus on poverty intensified. The speech is now known as the “Where Do We Go from Here” speech.

In it, King said: “...I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind’s problems. And I’m going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn’t popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I’m not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I’m talking about a strong, demanding love. And I have seen too much

hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of sheriffs in the South. I've seen hate on the faces of too many Klansmen and too many White Citizens Councilors in the South to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love."

That love, of course, ended in his death. But it is the love he demonstrated in his life that also matters. Love for those who were oppressed – by race or class. Love for nation enough to call out its deepest flaws. A strong, demanding love.

I do not know the extent that King understood his work to be strengthened because he was abiding in God's love. He was a Baptist preacher, after all. But I do know that the fruits of his work, the fruits of his ministry, were love, and I cannot believe it accidental that those fruits were born from faith in Jesus.

And I also know that though it might take different forms, that God's commandment to King is no different than God's commandment to us, through the voice of Jesus: "Love one another."

Love one another, in all the places where love is needed, in all the forms this love takes. And as difficult as it may be, it will only be strengthened if we remember its source, that true vine, and our invitation to abide in it. Amen.