

ABIDE IN JESUS' LOVE

John 15:9-17

Sixth Sunday in Lent (Series B)

May 5, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 15, verses 9 through 17. In this gospel lesson, Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 15, beginning at verse 9, we read in Jesus' name.

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. ¹⁷These things I command you, so that you will love one another.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

This passage is a continuation of last week's. Last week we read the first eight verses of John 15, where Jesus calls himself the true vine. He teaches that he is the vine and we are the branches, so that he is our literal source of spiritual life now and resurrected life on the Last Day. If we abide in him, like a branch abides in the vine, we will live and bear fruit. But if we do not abide in him, we will be cut off and die like a branch that falls off a vine. He says this because he loves us, and he wants us to abide in him, and he wants us to have life in him, and he wants us to bear fruit. He wants us to abide in him because it is good for us, and it is good for one another.

“Abide” is a special word. We don't use it a lot in everyday speech. And most of the uses in the New Testament are from John. We hear it several times here in *The Gospel of John*, and he uses it several times in his letters of 1 John and 2 John. Some translations use the words “remain” or “dwell,” because those are more familiar than the word “abide.” But abiding means more than just remaining. Remaining simply means that we don't go away. “Dwell” is a little bit closer, because it means to stay and live in a place. But “abide” is more intimate. And we see that in the way Jesus describes this abiding. He speaks of himself as the vine and us as the branches. We are connected to him. We are in him. We receive life from him. We are so intimately connected to Jesus that we are a part of him. He teaches us to abide *in* him, not *near* him or *with* him, but *in* him. He promises that he will also abide in us, and his words will abide in us. And he

teaches us to abide in his love. All this stuff about abiding speaks of the intimate relationship that we have with Jesus.

You may have heard the slogan, "Christianity isn't a religion; it's a relationship." This is one of those Christian clichés that might even be better known than most Bible verses. I want to examine it just a little bit, because Jesus speaks to some of the things that slogan might mean. So what does it mean when someone says, "It's not a religion; it's a relationship." If they mean that Christianity is different from all the other religions of the world because our God actually came down to us and continues to abide with us in this intimate relationship, that would be right. We have a personal God, because he is real. False gods can't have a personal relationship with you. But our God is real, and he has come to us, so we have a personal and intimate relationship with him. It's more than a religion where we worship some distant God. It's a relationship with the one true God who has come down to us.

But there are also some not-so-good things that slogan could mean. Religion involves worship. If it means that Christianity is not so much about worshipping God and bowing before him, but instead simply about being with him, that's wrong. We should have a posture of humility before our God. He is worthy of our humble adoration.

Religion also involves having a set of beliefs that we hold to. And it means having rules that we follow. This is one of the things that the "not a religion" slogan could mean. We might not like the authority that comes with religion. But God does tell us what we should believe. And he does give us rules to follow. Jesus tells us that his words will abide with us (15:7). And he gives us commandments to follow. He commissioned his disciples to teach the nations to observe everything that he had commanded (Matt. 28:20). In this passage, he even says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (15:10), and, "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (15:14). The Christian religion has doctrines and commandments. To throw off this authority is to separate ourselves from Christ and forfeit the relationship.

And the other thing that religion involves is an organized community. "It's not a religion; it's a relationship" could mean that we have a personal relationship with Jesus, but it doesn't involve anyone else, and it doesn't involve worshipping with the Church. But this is also wrong. Jesus commands us to love one another (15:12). Scripture commands us to meet together for worship (Heb. 10:25). We've had a lot of Scripture readings from the book of Acts recently. And throughout that book, we see the early Christian Church growing, and we see how they were devoted to meeting together (2:42). To have a relationship with Jesus Christ necessarily means that we would have a relationship with the rest of his Church. We are part of one another and we need one another. I don't mean that you all have to be extroverts. And I don't mean that you have to share your deepest feelings as soon as you meet another Christian. But I mean that we should recognize that we are a part of one another in Christ. And he has given us to one another so that we would love one another and be loved by one another. So you may not do this with everyone, but there should be someone here that you allow to bear your burdens with you. To cut yourself off from the Church is to cut yourself off from Christ, because the Church is the body of Christ. He calls us into the Church, and commands us to abide in him together.

So true Christianity is a religion. There is a God that we worship. There are doctrines and commands that he teaches us to hold to. And we come together for worship and fellowship. It is a religion, and it is a relationship with Jesus, and through Jesus, also the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is both a religion and a relationship. If it's not both, it's neither. If you don't have a relationship with Jesus, that is, if you do not *abide* in Christ, then you don't have true religion.

And if you're not religious about the Christian faith, then you're not abiding in Christ, and you don't have a relationship with him. To abide in Christ necessarily means that his words will abide in us and we will love one another. That's religious, and it's our relationship with Jesus.

In the first part of this "abide" passage, which we considered last Sunday, Jesus instructs us to abide in him, he promises that he will also abide in us, and he teaches that, if his words abide in us, we will bear fruit. In the second part of the passage, beginning at verse 9, he makes a little shift from talking about abiding in him to abiding in his love. This isn't a big shift, and it's not something different than abiding in him. To abide in him is to abide in his love, and to abide in his love is to abide in him. But he draws our attention to the way he has loved us. That's how we really know who he is, and it's his love that gives us life.

Love, the kind of love Jesus talks about here, is not a feeling. He's not talking about warm affection, although that's good. And Jesus does have warm affection toward you, and we should have warm affection for him. But that's the kind of love the world often talks about. And they talk about it as some mysterious thing that comes and goes. They don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So a man and woman can fall in love or fall out of love, and they think there's nothing we can do about it. That's not love at all. Sometimes, it's the exact opposite of love, because we might think that "falling out of love" means that someone is justified in breaking their wedding vows. That's love of self, instead of love of the other person. And love of self is not love at all, but selfishness.

But the kind of love Jesus talks about here is the action kind of love. He's not talking about an emotional feeling. He's talking about selfless actions of service. This selfless kind of love is what he has for us. It's what he calls husband and wife to exhibit toward one another. It's what parents should have for their children. In fact, it's the kind of love we should all have for one another. We should have this kind of love for all of our neighbors. But Jesus especially teaches us to have this kind of love for our fellow Christians. It's the kind of love that considers others as more important than ourselves. It's the love that seeks their good ahead of our own. It's the kind of love that lays down one's life for someone else. The love that Jesus speaks of here is not the feeling that would move us to do that. But love is the actual action of laying down one's life for someone else. It's the committed attitude of considering others as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3), whether or not we feel like it. Instead of following our desires, love does what is right in spite of our desires. So Jesus speaks of it as an action.

So sometimes the way Jesus speaks of love sounds a bit strange. He sometimes speaks of it in the past tense. Here he says, "*As the Father loved me, so have I loved you*" (15:9). That sounds kind of weird. Or in John 3:16 he says, "*For God so loved the world.*" When he uses the past tense to speak of love, it kind of sounds like God used to love us, or the Father used to love Jesus, but now he doesn't. It sounds that way, because we wrongly think of love as a feeling, so the past tense would mean that the feeling used to be there, but now it's not. But love is an action. So when Jesus uses the past tense, he's referring to some specific action by which God loved the world or the Father loved the Son. God loved the world by giving his Son for us. And the Father loved the Son by serving him in whatever way one member of the Trinity serves another.

Imagine if someone said, "I loved my children yesterday." We'd say, "What? You mean you don't love them anymore? What happened between yesterday and today?" But he says, "No, no. I mean that I loved them by hugging them, playing with them, feeding them, making them take baths, and reading the Bible with them." If we use the word "love" the same way Jesus uses it,

then love is the actions we perform to serve the other person. So when Jesus talks about how the Father loved him, and he loved us, he's talking about the actual actions of love. It's considering another person as more important than ourselves, and acting on that. That is how God the Father acts toward his Son, and it's how Jesus acts toward us.

So Jesus can speak of love in the past tense to refer to the actual actions of love that he has performed, he can use it in the present tense to mean that his actions of love for us are ongoing, and he can use it in the future tense as a promise that he will continue to perform actions of love for us for all eternity. He did love, he does love, and he will love.

Jesus said these things to his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. Up until this point, he had loved them by serving them, teaching them, and leading them. And he would continue to love them and love us by laying down his life for us. That was his greatest act of love. And he commands us to love one another in the same way. So he said, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends”** (15:12-13). This is how Jesus loved you.

Love is not the feeling that makes you think it's worth it to lay down your life for someone else. Love is the actual doing of it, whether you think it's worth it or not. The love of Jesus for us is that he actually laid down his life for us, even though we don't deserve it. Jesus tells us to abide in this love. And this is the kind of love that we can abide in, because that act of love created a space where we can remain and live. It's a safe place, where, in that love, under the blood of his sacrifice, there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). We have peace with God (Col. 1:20). It's a space where the accusing darts of Satan cannot harm us. It's a space where the temptations of the world cannot take us away from our Father. It's a space where death cannot even take the life we have in Jesus.

Imagine this, if it's even possible: Jesus considered you to be more important than himself. Philippians talks about this (2:3-8). And Jesus still considers you more important. For all eternity, Jesus will consider you more important than himself. Now, I can tell you that you are not more important than Jesus. But if Jesus were standing here in the flesh, we could ask him, “Who's more important, you or me?” And he would say, “You.” And he would mean it. Because that's what love is. That's what he teaches us love is. So if his answer were anything else, he would cease to love us, but his love will never cease. Jesus considers you more important than himself, and he always will.

And he would also add, “You should consider one another more important than yourselves,” because this is the right way to live. He created this way to live, and he lives this way.

So Jesus loved us and loves us. And he welcomes us to abide in his love. His love abides, and he invites us to abide in his love. That is, stay here. Keep your heart here, under the blood of Jesus' sacrifice. Never hesitate to confess your sin, because his answer is always forgiveness. His gracious smile toward you is never going away, so abide in him. He laid down his life as a propitiation for our sins. His sacrifice stands forever as our atonement. So abide in his love, because his love abides forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.