

## EASTER FIVE, YEAR B, APRIL 28, 2024

Abide! The word abide is kind of an old fashioned word and not one that is part of our everyday vocabulary. The word means to dwell with, to stay connected to, to be with or even to hang with. Taking it a little further it is to immerse ourselves wholly in something, or to allow anything to captivate our heart and life to the point where it becomes central to our lives. What are the things that you are connected to or immersed in?

Is it your job, family, hobbies, interests, or activities? How much of your time is spent in doing those things? Are you a sports fan who can't miss a game your team is playing? Is there a favorite television program that you will binge watch? Is there a hobby that you totally immerse yourself in?

The reality is there are a lot of things that we are constantly abiding in and are taking up permanent residence in our lives. We kid ourselves if we think that those things that abide or root in us are not affecting us, shaping us, and transforming us. The things we value, what we spend most of our time doing, the activities that we engage in, our attitudes and ways of engagement, all speak to the things that immerse themselves in our hearts. These things are the fruit of our abiding, the fruit of our rootedness. But are they the fruit that marks us a follower of Jesus who we are called to abide in.

In today's Gospel and in the letter from John we read about what abiding in Jesus is all about. Jesus calls us to be rooted in him. He says, "Come and open yourself up to being grafted to me. I have strong roots. I have the DNA needed to make you fruitful, alive, and to make you flourish, to make all of creation flourish."

It's an unbelievable invitation yet one that we fail miserably at most of the time. The key to abiding in Jesus - his DNA is love. Yes, love. I cannot emphasize enough that God is the essence of pure love. Out of God's love comes all the things we need to abide in Jesus and what we as Christians are called to be and do.

The key to life is our learning how to abide, to live on the vine, to stay connected, to hang in there, to keep Christ's life flowing into us and through us. And if we do that, Jesus says we will bear much fruit.

So, imagine what that looks like! Imagine our commitment as followers of Jesus to allow the Holy Spirit to graft us into Christ, to allow the nurturing, energetic, and fruitful presence of Jesus to be the source of life for us.

But Jesus also tells us there has to be a lot of pruning in order for this new growth to happen. We have to get rid of the weeds and those things that stunt our ability to grow. It can be painful as we look into the mirror – the mirror of our souls to see what we have rooted our lives in. It's easy to say we follow Christ but our lives oftentimes say otherwise.

Do our values, the way we treat others show that we are rooted in Christ? Most of us practice what is called cafeteria Christianity. We pick and choose what teachings of Jesus we like that coincide with our personal values. I daresay we are all guilty of unhealthy rhetoric whether that's in our social media engagements or in our personal conversations. We can become so divisive that we are unwilling to listen, unwilling to see other points of view. Have we allowed ourselves to fall prey to fear and ignorance even ignorance of a loving God just to put God and Jesus in a box that suits our needs?

It's easy to find ourselves rooted in intolerance, rigidity, self-righteousness, condemnation, hate, selfishness and injustice. Why? Because it's easier to go along with the rhetoric that surrounds us on a daily basis or a Christianity that's based on exclusion or nationalism than living into the life giving and life blood of God. To be rooted in the true DNA of Christ takes patience, perseverance and the desire to be rooted in love, compassion, reconciliation, forgiveness, inclusion, acceptance, peace, nonviolence, generosity and justice.

In 2021, Tyler Perry, the actor, film maker, playwright and studio owner received the Humanitarian award at the Oscars. In his acceptance speech he said this. "You know, when I set out to help someone it is my intention to do just that. I'm not trying to do anything other than meet somebody at their humanity." He then told the story of a homeless woman who had approached him years earlier. Thinking she wanted money he reached into his pocket to give her some when she said, "Excuse me sir do you have any shoes?" It stopped him cold as he remembered being homeless himself and having only one pair of shoes. So, he took her back to the studio and found her a pair of shoes. For the longest time she wouldn't look at him and when she did with tears in her eyes said, "Thank you Jesus. My feet are off the ground. She then proceeded to tell him that she thought he would hate her for asking. But he told her "how could I hate you when I used to be you?"

He went on to say "How could I hate her when I had a mother who grew up in the Jim Crow South in Louisiana who saw so much death from civil rights boys to the little girls who were in the bombing in Alabama". But most of all, he said, "I remember being a little boy and coming home and she was at home and I was like 'what are you doing home you're supposed to be at work?' and she was in tears that day and she said there was a bomb threat. She couldn't believe someone wanted to blow up this place where she worked, where she took care of all these toddlers. It was the Jewish community center.

"My mother taught me to refuse hate. She taught me to refuse blanket judgment. And in this time and with all of the internet and social media and algorithms and everything that wants us to think a certain way—the 24-hour news cycle—it is my hope that all of us will teach our kids just refuse hate. Don't hate anybody."

"I refuse to hate someone because they're Mexican or because they are Black or white, or LGBTQ. I refuse to hate someone because they're a police officer. I refuse to hate someone because they are Asian. I would hope that we would refuse hate."

He then went on to dedicate the award "to anyone who wants to stand in the middle, -- stand in the middle because that's where healing happens. That's where conversation happens. That's where change happens. It happens in the middle. So, anyone who wants to meet me in the middle, to refuse hate, to refuse blanket judgment and to help lift someone's feet off the ground, this one is for you, too. God bless you".

That's what it means to be rooted in Christ. It's to refuse all the hate that we are constantly bombarded with. It's to refuse all the labels we put on others. It's to refuse to let hatred, no matter what form it takes to consume us. In order to do that we need to abide in Jesus as the vine because our connection to it is essential. A writer once said that we are a "cut-flower civilization", we look good for a while but without roots, we soon wither and die. To abide in Jesus is to have roots.

In my former parish in Denville, the green set that we had made for the Pentecost season had a cross in the middle of the altar frontal and there were vines that were wrapped around the cross and then flowed out from the cross. If you looked closely at it you saw that the vine was rooted in the cross. The connection is part of who we are, the connection is for us to nurture. We do this as we worship, as we nurture our faith and life and as we seek to discover what we are called to be and do. To abide in Jesus is to allow his life to flow from the roots to our lives.

Our three churches are now seeking to find how we will abide with each other while holding up the reality that our foremost mission is how do we abide with those in our community. Scripture says, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

How do we connect those fruits of the spirit with our communities? How do we become a people that teach one another what it means to be in loving and respectful relationships even with those that we disagree? How do we engage in difficult conversations that can lead to conversations that uplift, restore, renew, reconcile and honor the image of God in the other?

We forget that the Spirit pushes the church beyond whatever boundaries we construct. The Spirit pushes us beyond our comfort zone, beyond our regulations, beyond our understanding, our racism, our classism and beyond our control. Where is the spirit pushing us?

We need to realize that fruitfulness is not for our own benefit or even directly for the benefit of the church. Our fruitfulness is for the sake of God's world. Our fruitfulness is for the world, in adding to justice, peace, welcome, diversity, imagination, reconciliation, and creativity.

It is my hope and prayer today that we can become a group of Episcopalians committed to being agents of reconciliation, committed to a movement rooted in Jesus, a movement that inhabits the true teachings of Jesus and that allows for the way of Jesus to shine a light on God's reconciling love in the world.

Jesus said "Abide in me as I abide in you." and as the translation of the bible known as The Message says, "Make your home with me as I make my home in you."

Let us make our home in the teachings of Jesus so that we can spread his love not only to us but the people around us, our communities and the world. Amen.