5-5/6-18 Rev. Amy Haines

1 John 4:7-21 Abide in Love Easter Season Series

Have you ever been to a wedding and heard read I Corinthians Chapter 13, which begins “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but do not have love…” and ends with “…Now faith, hope and love abide, these three; yet the greatest of these is love.” I would venture to say that 2/3 of the weddings I have officiated have used that Love Chapter.

Some scholars, however, would argue that today’s chapter from 1 John is also a Love Chapter,

with its constant descriptions of how God is love, we are to abide in God, and we are to live by love.

Listen again to verses 13-16:

“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (4.13-16 NRSV)

We are called to abide in God as God abides in us. And since God is love, we are also called to abide in love, love to God and love to one another.

Yet what does it mean to abide? When was the last time you used the word “abide” in casual conversation? Have you ever used the word “abide” in conversation?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, to abide is to tolerate, withstand, await or sojourn. -merriam-webster.com

Yet when abide is used in the scriptures, and in our hymns, it takes on a deeper meaning of sojourn. We are invited to abide in God, to abide in Jesus, to abide in love. We are invited into an intimate relationship that is deeper than simply remaining with God, as some translations would say.

To abide is a deeper level of commitment than to simply remain with someone. To abide includes intentionally growing in relationship with another rather than coasting along and taking one another for granted. To abide is more active than passive. To abide in Jesus means we are to live in, make a home in, and always dwell in a relationship with Jesus. To abide in Jesus means that we will always remain connected to Jesus, through struggles and joys, through tragedies and triumphs, over time and distance. To abide in Jesus means that no matter who we are, no matter what we have done in the past, and no matter what we are facing now in life, we are still with Jesus, thankful for his presence, listening to his promises, responding to his love and grace.

What a joy to be in such a relationship each and every day!

I like to think of abiding like sitting in my favorite chair. Think about that one chair you sink into, don’t want to ever get out of, that chair where you can just be you. Imagine God surrounding you, embracing you, like that favorite chair. For me that is an image of abiding.

We are called to abide in God because God first desires to abide in us. Each one of us has been created to be in a relationship with God and each one of us has been loved by God since before the day we were born. Nothing we do in life will be able to separate us from such extravagant and grace-filled love as the love of God for all of his children.

No matter whose son or daughter we are, no matter how we identify ourselves by what we do or by which organizations we belong to, no matter how we perceive ourselves or how we think our peers perceive us, from before we are born we have already been given the gift of an identity as beloved sons and daughters of God, an identity that is strengthened when we seek to abide with the Son of God, Jesus, confessing him as Savior and Lord and loving others with the same love we have received from Christ. We are called to abide in God because God first desires to abide in us. We are called to love God because God first loved us.

God’s love is not an abstract idea, a powerful emotion or even just a divine attribute. God’s love is lived out through a specific action, practically expressed in the person of Jesus, and specifically expressed through Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection that offers us the hope of new life.

As the letter of 1 John proclaims:

“This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins.” (v9-10 CEB)

Consider the specific ways you show love to those around you. Gifts given or time spent with children, nieces and nephews. Chores completed around the house because they need done,

not because you have been asked to do so. Surprising another with small gestures of thankfulness, or small gifts that may be practical, sentimental, or even silly, yet still say “I care for you”.

We can say the words “I love you” every day. Yet as we were reminded last week, our love ought to be lived out in word and action.

Like any other action, learning to abide in love takes time.

As I meet with couples seeking to get married, nowadays most of them are already living together and sometimes already have children together. So one of the questions I often ask them is what adjustments they had to make when they began to live with each other. When they chose to abide with each other, to make their home with one another, how much did they have to adjust?

Of course the answers vary widely, from those who say they had no real struggles adjusting to amusing stories of adjusting to bad habits to real struggles of differences of opinion clashing as they sought to abide one with another.

I recall some of the adjustments Ken and I had to make after we got married and began to abide with each other, adjustments not only in daily schedules but also in habits and cleaning styles and communication. I hope that Ken would agree with me that now, after 17 years of marriage, we are still growing deeper in our love and our relationship as we continue to make our home and abide with one another.

Another time when I had to learn to abide with another person was returning home for summer break following my freshman year at college. At school I had tasted freedom and independence then came home for the summer to abide under my mother’s roof and rules.

That summer was a challenge for both of us to learn how to abide with each other in a new way, as adult women yet still as mother and daughter. Our love for each other was still strong,

but we struggled to learn how to make a home together once again.

How have you learned to abide in love with other people, be they parents or children, spouses or adult children, roommates or fellow members in the body of Christ?

Within every congregation are people who would never associate with one another outside the walls of the church. Yet within the body of Christ, they are called to abide with each other, to be in relationship with one another, to love one another. When we come from diverse backgrounds and ideologies, various life experiences and passions, learning to abide in love even as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ can be a challenge.

For abiding in love means we are called to love one another even on those days we don’t like each other. Abiding in love means we are called to journey together in love even when we disagree. This love in not emotion so much as an intentional choice.

And as true as this is for us today, it was also true for the early church to which this letter was written. 1 John was written to a community struggling with divisions over boundaries, theology and community. Our struggles are not new. And neither is John’s call to follow Jesus in love.

Thankfully, when God calls us to abide with him, when we are called to make our home in God

through a relationship with God’s Son Jesus, we are invited into a deep and lasting relationship with God from the depth of God’s abundant and overflowing love for us.

Author Ben Curtis would challenge us to consider:

If we’re not abiding in Jesus, then where is it that we abide? Do we abide instead in cynicism and rebellion? Do we abide in resignation and depression? Do we abide in rose-colored glasses that avoid the reality of life around us? Do we abide in our vices that help us cope with life—

a violent show or movie that appears cathartic to our need for revenge? A little more alcohol than normal to take the angry edge off the day? An unhealthy passion for winning?

Ben said, “I had always thought of these things as just bad habits. I began to see they were much more; they were spiritual abiding places that were my comforters and friends in a very spiritual way. “The final light went on one evening when I read John 15:7 in The Message:

"If you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon." Jesus was saying in answer to my question, "I have made my home in you. But you still have other comforters you go to. You must learn to make your home in me." Where are you making your home, where are you abiding? Where you abide tells whose side you are on.

 -adapted from Merv Budd 3-30-07 sermoncentral.com

We are called to abide in a relationship with Jesus, to abide in God as God abides in us, and out of such a relationship to abide in love, love for God and love for one another.

I like how Eugene Peterson describes this abiding in God:

“This is how we know we’re living steadily and deeply in him, and he in us: He’s given us life from his life, from his very own Spirit. … Everyone who confesses that Jesus is God’s Son

participates continuously in an intimate relationship with God. We know it so well, we’ve embraced it heart and soul, this love that comes from God. God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us.” (4.13, 15-17 MSG)

Abiding in God is taking up permanent residence in a life of love. We are called to love because God first loves us. This is not selfish love, loving only when we feel like it. Rather, when we abide in love we commit to a lifetime of love, through word and action. And the deeper our relationship with Jesus, the more mature our love, which will expand how we love and whom we love.

What a gift we have been given—to abide with God in a permanent residence of love! That through faith in Jesus we have been forgiven and loved, nurtured and sent forth, to abide in the same love we have received by sharing it with others.

Yes, abiding in God through abiding with Jesus is only step one.

As we pondered last fall, we are called to love God and love neighbor.

Step one is abiding in Jesus, while step two is living like Jesus, producing fruit like Jesus, loving others like Jesus.

Once we make our home in God, we are not called to stay there, cocooned away from the rest of the world. God loves us in order for us to love the world. God abides in us in order to strengthen us to go out and be Jesus in the flesh in the world today.

Listen to these words from John 15: 4-5:

Jesus said, “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.”

Consider the fate of cut flowers. Even the most beautiful flowers will one day die, as they are no longer nourished by the stem being rooted in the ground.

Think about every wind storm, and how many dead limbs fall upon the ground. Once branches are snapped from the trees they begin to wither and die, without proper connection and nourishment from the trunk and roots of the tree.

John reminds us that apart from God, we can do nothing and we will bear no good fruit.

Separated from God, we are like dead tree limbs with no hope of nourishment. When we choose to live in another zip code from God, rejecting a relationship with God’s Son Jesus,

we cannot live by love because only in God do we know true love and only in God can we share true love.

How does Jesus’ love for us make a difference in our love for others? How are we loving one another as a reflection of God’s love for us? How are we choosing to abide in God, as God abides in us, and love others because God first loved us? What is the fruit of our relationships with Jesus?

Unfortunately, according to author Christian Schwarz, too many churches speak about love

but do not radiate the love of God. He says,

“Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of getting to know hundreds of churches on all six continents, many of them being wonderful examples of Christian love in action. They not only meet the needs of their members, but also reach out to their communities in very creative ways.

The sad thing, however, is that I have also encountered the very opposite kind of churches:

communities in which believers may grow in their knowledge of the Bible, but not in their ability to love. …These churches are literally frozen, and upon joining such a congregation

you’re in danger of catching emotional hypothermia. But doesn’t this communicate the very opposite of what Christian love is all about? Doesn’t the Bible tell us that love should be the very sign by which Christians can be identified?”

--The 3 Colors of Love, Christian Schwarz, p. 14-15, adapted

As we abide in God, we ought to learn to abide in love. Once again, 1 John is fairly blunt.

Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (v20)

Yet, this is hard to do. Human nature wants to hold on to grudges. Human nature wants to hate those who hurt us. Human nature wants to cut off relationships with those with whom we disagree.

This is not a call for those abused to fully love their abusers. This does not negate proper boundaries for healthy relationships.

We really cannot love that way we are called to love on our own. Thankfully, we don’t have to.

When we abide in God and God in us, we are called to be the conduits of God’s love. We are to allow the Holy Spirit to love through us.

..In his book Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis wrote,

"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."

 -Our Daily Bread, February 14. Sermonillustrations.com:love

When Hudson Taylor was staying in the home of a friend on one occasion, the host asked him, "But are you always conscious of abiding in Christ?" "While sleeping last night," replied Mr. Taylor, "did I cease to abide in your Home because I was unconscious of the fact? We should never be conscious of not abiding in Christ." -6-18-07 sermoncentral.com

In a moment, as we come to share together in the bread and cup of Holy Communion, may we be conscious of God abiding with us. As we leave worship today, may we ever be conscious of abiding in Christ. Then, as we abide in Christ, may we also abide with each other, in forgiving grace, abundant love, and supportive service.

First we were loved, now we love. (v19 MSG)

May it be so throughout our lives.

Let us pray.