

Abiding with Jesus

John 15:1-17 ~ March 5 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

I have always enjoyed camping. And I know that a lot of you also find it a favorite recreational activity. My very first camping experience happened when I was about seven years old. My father was an avid outdoorsman. Camping was second nature to him, since he considered the woods of North Idaho as his true home. So the summer after my first grade year in school, Dad decided it time for us older boys, me and my brother David, who was five years old at the time, to stay out in the woods ... all night.

Now the first time Kris and I took our family camping we had sleeping bags, air mattresses, tents, fancy cook gear, and sorts of paraphernalia that seems indispensable to the modern camper. Not so, in my Dad's case. He had grown up during the depression era, and he had quite a different understanding of camping. He took a couple of army blankets, a cast iron frying pan, a variety of food items that he simply called "grub," a double bitted axe, matches, and a small tarp. There was not a single trip to a sporting goods store involved. He put everything in an army surplus backpack and off we went.

The place we camped was just above the hidden waterfall where a number of you have been during our trips to Shadow Valley Camp. My father had a particular place in mind that was a little open area right beside Spring Creek. There was a place where two large cedars and an old stump formed a little pocket that my dad turned into a sleeping nest for us. We helped him gather the fir boughs that we used to cover the roots and make it soft for a night's sleeping. We put our tarp over the boughs to make a comfortable bed. The many rows of limbs above us in the cedar trees provided complete shelter from precipitation.

Our food was cooked in the cast iron skillet over the open fire. The same vessel was both the serving dish and communal plate for the meal of beans and weaners that may still be the finest cuisine I have ever tasted. However, we were allowed our own forks as a concession to hygiene. Water from the creek was the perfect complement to the meal. As the evening closed in, we snuggled together under the blankets in the little camping nest sheltered by the spreading boughs of those massive cedars. We were as warm and comfortable with our night's sleep as any I can remember. We only woke occasionally when Dad got up to stoke up the fire.

Now, I'm sure that the passage of time has romanticized my memories of that night in the woods, but it is a touch point for me when it comes to explaining what it means to abide in the Biblical sense. The concept of abiding and dwelling with God is one of Scripture's key concepts. And we do well to attempt to conceptualize an understanding that connects deeply with our lives. Here is how today's sermon text addresses this issue:

Abide in me, and I in you. 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

The word, abide, means to continue to live in a place. It means an acceptance of one's surroundings and one's state of existence. That is why I think the example of camping helps us understand what Jesus is teaching here. When we go camping the whole point is to live in a particular place for a period of time. That is what makes camping fun. It is staying somewhere simply for the sake of abiding there.

Now the important point of abiding is connection. When we abide somewhere we become connected to it. Like my first experience with camping, I became completely connected to that little spot above the hidden waterfall. I can still feel the safety of the sleeping nest. I can smell the wood smoke and the cooking meal. I can taste the crystal sweetness of the creek's water. I am connected there because I abided there. Maybe only for one night, but the connection is very strong.

This is what Jesus is calling us to do with our spiritual lives. He is calling us to abide in him. We are invited to set up our lives, like we would set up camp, in his word. Abiding in Jesus means putting all our faith in his teachings. Abiding in Jesus means that we talk to him often. As we abide with him, he is right there with us to hear every exclamation of our hearts, to engage every thought that passes through our minds, and to shelter our very souls from the hazards of this life. We can call it prayer, but it is not the formal address that we often imagine where we call long distance to God with our greatest fears and our highest aspirations. Abiding prayer is closer, less formal, and more personal. It is like conversation around the campfire where the only purpose of abiding prayer is to share ourselves with Jesus and to get to know him better.

When he spoke the words in today's text he was speaking to a group of men and women that had lived in community for many months. They had traveled together, stayed close to each other, and shared many meals. This is the context for abiding that Jesus uses when he calls us to abide in him. But with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the disciples faced the same difficulties we do with conceptualizing what it means to abide in Jesus. Abiding in Jesus is now an act of faith. It is a frame of mind that is aware of the Holy Spirit's closeness. It is prayer, Scripture, and worship. All of those things go into what it means to abide in Jesus, and to have him abide in us.

So what are the particulars of abiding in Jesus? Jesus is actually quite clear about this. He says:

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

Could it be any clearer than that? The commandments of Jesus, the rule of life he sets out for us is the key to our abiding in him. Now we have to be very careful here. Our sinful-self licks its lips at any mention of commandments or a rule of life. The old Adam in us is always interested when there is any possibility of good works to achieve self-righteousness. But this is not the nature of the commandments of Jesus. These are not commandments that permit us to do good works for the sake of our own righteousness. The commandments for abiding with Jesus are house rules. They are rules about how we abide together. These commandments describe the nature of life together as branches of the one true vine. Jesus explains it this way:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

The nature of the house rules for abiding with Jesus is that we love each other. Our modern world is confused about this, because it only associates love with feelings. The word Jesus uses here for love, *agape*, actually has very little to do with feelings. It is primarily about the way we act toward another person. What this means is that we don't even need to like another person to obey Jesus house rules about loving each other. What we need to do is to treat them with respect. We need to identify with the common sinfulness that we all share. We need to commit to each other knowing that the way we forgive others is related to the way we experience God's forgiveness for ourselves.

This is not a Pollyanna style of existence, where we pretend that everything is wonderful and focus on just being nice. Jesus command is that we love the way he loves. He loves the sinner even while he hates sin. As sinners ourselves, our love for others starts with

our acknowledgement of the sin that resides in our own lives. We cannot love others as Jesus commands without starting with repentance. Once we acknowledge our own sin, then God's Holy Spirit can guide us past our neighbor's sin into acts of Christ-like love. This is why obeying Christ's command brings no righteousness, because we start obeying by acknowledging that everything we accomplish is by the grace of Christ.

This means that abiding in Jesus actually has a kind of Base camp. By this I mean that abiding in Jesus has a foundational place that we return to again and again. The base camp for all those who abide in Jesus is the Cross of Christ. That is the place where our sin and Jesus forgiveness come together. We see in the dying form of our savior the nature of God's very real love for us. We understand the lengths he is willing to go to forgive us and to preserve us into life everlasting. Abiding in Jesus means that we establish our base camp in his Cross. Abiding in Jesus means that we put everything we have into faith in the one who died for us. Abiding in Jesus means that the Grace of God expressed in the Cross of Christ is the place we live day in and day out.

From the cross of Christ we can see the true nature of Christian Love. Only when we start in the cross can we progress to love our neighbor. Only when we start in the Cross of Christ can we let go of the futile and silly desire to seek our own righteousness. Only when we start and end in the Cross of Christ can we even begin to understand the nature of the love Jesus calls us to imitate. And only then can we know that any expression of that love which comes from us for our dear neighbor is truly a work of God's Holy Spirit in us and not our own achievement. When that becomes the case then we are indeed abiding in Jesus.

This is why abiding in Jesus depends so completely on the Holy Spirit's activity in our daily lives. Abiding requires the relationship that the Holy Spirit forges between us and Jesus. As Jesus tells us...

No longer do I call you servants, ... but I have called you friends. ... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide...

What is this relationship of abiding that the Holy Spirit forges between you and Jesus? You are chosen by Jesus. You are his friends. You are appointed to bear fruit. So now... Abide in Jesus!

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.