

John 15:1-8 5 Easter 4/29/2021 Pastor Bill Uetricht

Andy was a really good guy. I loved him a lot. I knew him because he was a crack cocaine addict. It was the late eighties and early nineties when crack was the scourge that tormented cities and neighborhoods, including the one I lived in in Toledo. Rich people who use cocaine use the fancier stuff, the regular cocaine. Folks not so rich often use crack cocaine. It's a terrible drug, phenomenally addictive. From my experience in living in a community that it devastated, it's evil. It causes people to do what they would normally not do. And that was true for Andy.

As a crackhead, Andy spent much of his early life moving from apartment to apartment, job to job. He had abused his wife on numerous occasions, pushing her down the steps more than once. He often forgot about his baby boy, paying little attention to him.

Forever, Andy would be a crackhead. For the entirety of his life, he would have to battle his addiction. When I got to know him, he was in recovery. Andy had allowed the pain, the stupidity, the pretend arrogance, the brokenness of his life to be a means of growth for him. He had also become a great servant to others. Every week he would show up at our church, not for worship or study but for a Cocaine Anonymous meeting. And every week he would make the coffee, set up the chairs and tables, talk to the fellow addicts before and after the meeting. Doing this, as well as organizing the outreach efforts of the group, was a part of what Andy called "his program." The program was a necessity for him to be healthy. Apart from it, he told me, he wouldn't be well. Apart from it, he would still be wrapped up in himself. The program challenged him, changed him, pruned him, comforted him, connected him to others, people who became his family.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." John's Jesus is utilizing an image that would

have made a lot of sense to folks who were agricultural people, people who grew grapes for one of life's essentials—wine. The vines and the branches are connected. Today Jesus is urging his disciples who are about to experience his leaving, his dying to remain connected to him and to those who come together around his name. The audience of John's gospel is a group of people who are facing rejection and persecution at the hands of people who are no longer welcoming them at the synagogues where they worshiped. They are being kicked out of those synagogues. The Jesus followers could easily choose to abandon the Jesus' community and Jesus' teachings. And John is urging these followers to hang in there, to "abide" in him.

"Abide" is one of John's favorite words. It signifies that the relationship with Jesus and with his followers is more than casual contact, more than a matter of standing on the outside looking in. When Jesus says "abide with me," he is urging us to come on into his house, to make his home our home. We aren't just to stand at the door or to stop by once in a while. We are to come on in, take our coats off, remove our shoes, sit down at the table, and eat of the great feast that has been prepared. And in Jesus, the feast is great.

Earlier in John, Jesus told his disciples, told us, that we had not chosen him; he chose us. We're the chosen, not in a way that suggests that others aren't and that too bad they aren't like us. We know better than that. No, to say we are the chosen is to say that we have a place, a welcome place that is not dependent upon our choosing, our getting everything right or doing everything right or our being what others think we ought to be.

We don't choose God. God chooses us long before we ever think about choosing him. God gives us a home. God gives us a place. That's what baptism communicates: "You are a child of God, marked with the cross, sealed with Holy Spirit forever." Lizzie Frietsch is right. When the

church is truly the church, it is a safe place to be who we are. Karley Plekes is right. When the church is truly the church, it will be a place where we are not judged for who we are. In God, we all have a true home. We don't earn it or create it. It's all a gift.

Jesus in John today says, "Abide in me as I abide in you." That "as I abide in you" part is so significant to me. As he urges us to take up residence in him, he reminds us that he has already taken up residence in us, us together. If all you hear is "abide in me," you think you have a lot of work to do. And in some ways, you are right. But before you hear about the work, hear the word of grace. "I abide in you." Jesus and God are not realities that we have to bring into our lives. They are already there. We already have a home. We already have a place.

Part of the work of the church is to remind you that. You don't have to go looking for your place, your home, it's already here. Nothing excites me more than when the church helps people experience that. So many of us and so many young people are searching for a place. It's hard to find a home in a world that constantly communicates that you don't measure up or fit in. When the church is truly the church, we help people find the home that is already theirs, the home where God is already abiding. When the church is truly the church, the Ethiopian eunuchs of the world, men whom the book of Deuteronomy make it crystal clear are not welcome as full participants in a Jewish worshipping community because of their altered bodily status, are indeed welcome also. All are welcome, including people who don't fit into our neat little categories. And not only are they welcome, their gifts and their ability to change us are welcome, too. I suspect Philip's encounter with the eunuch forever changed him. When together we live into the home that God gives us, we are never the same.

And living into the home that God gives us is what abiding in Jesus is all about. And yes, that abiding is some work. It involves working the

program. It entails showing up, setting up chairs, talking to others, being fed and challenged by others. Truthfully, this church stuff welcomes people who sit on the edge. There is no need to be judgment of them. But abiding in Christ, abiding in love, abiding in the kind of love that truly welcomes requires investment on our part and isn't easy. And truthfully, it doesn't always come naturally, which is why somebody like Joel Dulyea says he needs to show up week after week to church because left on his own, he would do what comes naturally. And what comes naturally is not what it means to abide in Christ.

Andy needed to do the program. We need to do the program. We need to show up, get the coffee going, set the tables up, study with other people, be taught by others (as Philip taught the eunuch), fellowship with them, be in their homes, worship them, enable our lives to be connected to theirs. Now I understand that it has been difficult to do this during the time of Covid. In fact, it often was a bad idea. And I have been so grateful for our online presence to enable community to continue, to support our persistence in working the program. And I am exceedingly pleased that folks who find it hard for whatever reason to be here can still connect with us. But I say this particularly to the young, and to those who are fully capable of leaving their homes, when Covid is no longer our preoccupation, don't live your life online.

Abiding in a community, abiding in Christ involves showing up, hugging people, dealing with people who get on your nerves, being accountable to other people who will look at you in your eyes, sharing your real selves, your real bodies, your real hurts. While I have been so impressed with the honest character of our online education experiences, you know as well as I do that as country music star Brad Paisley sings, online you can live in Malibu, have posed for Calvin Klein, been in GQ, and have six pack abs that will blow your mind, while in reality you are overweight and the six pack that your abs have

experienced are not taut muscles but that which comes from Budweiser. You may be cooler online, but working the program entails showing up as the real people you are, doing the hard work of sharing and building community.

If you have ever been part of a twelve-step movement, you will realize that part of the program of the movement involves some liturgy at the very end of the meeting, liturgy that includes these words: “keep coming back.” To abide in the program is to show up again and again and again. This is how we sharpen each other. This is how we grow. This is how we are *pruned*, as John talks about today. This is how we build community. This is how we abide in the one who already abides in us.