

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

May 5, 2024

Displacing Love

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Abide in my love.” We’ve heard that a lot recently, haven’t we? The chapters that make up Jesus’ Farewell Discourse¹ repeat this abiding language seven times in the span of their four chapters. Clearly, this is a foundational topic for Christ to reiterate it so often in these final teachings to his followers before his Passion.

Jesus establishes his love as mirroring the Father's perfect, unwavering love. Following this declaration comes the central command: "Abide in my love"². The Greek word used here, "*meno*," carries the sense of dwelling, remaining, or continuing. It's not a one-time act but a continuous state of being. Jesus invites us not just to believe in his love but to actively cultivate a life rooted in it.

What does a life rooted in God’s unconditional and abundant love look like? Well, how have you experienced such love expressed towards you in the past? Take a moment now and think about some times in your life when you have felt deeply and powerfully loved? Now, how might you describe it?

Accepted? Seen? Known? Cared-for? Vulnerable? Peaceful? Warm? Fuzzy? Whole? It’s hard to describe, isn’t it? But we know it when we experience it. And what have been the sources of these experiences for you? Creation? A friend or family member? A partner? An experience? A community? What is it to be loved and to be loving?

This is particularly key when we consider the later verses of our Gospel text for this morning. Jesus makes it clear that this abiding love is not passive. Abiding in God’s love prompts a response in us. A desire to share this powerful love with others. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”³ As is so often the case, God is giving us a gift in inviting us to live differently than our broken selves want to live. Jesus teaches that a natural outcome of being loved by God is to

¹ John Chapters 14-17

² John 15:9 (NRSVue)

³ John 15:12

love our neighbors. Much like a natural outcome of being limited humans is the need for Sabbath rest. Or how the outcome of our selfishness requires us to proactively protect and honor our neighbors' lives, relationships, reputation, etc.

As always seems to happen, God gives us a command that, were we focused on being healthy and whole on our own, we'd follow quite naturally. But given our broken and selfish natures, God gives us loving guidance and careful invitation to righteousness. But the beautiful part of all of this is that ultimately God does all the work!

Abiding...remaining in God's love, while not passive, is not something we do any more than participate in. God is at work in us and through us when we abide in God's love.

This command of Christ's is not a matter of obedience or punishment. Let's be free of those thoughts! The aim of this command. The aim of the Way of Christ is not to build a punitive system wherein God is waiting to catch us in sin. No, the aim is made clear in verse 11, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." The aim is a reciprocal relationship with God (**my joy be in you**) which leads to complete joy! This joy is not fleeting happiness, but a profound contentment rooted in God's presence.

Abiding in Christ's love is not without challenges. We may experience doubts, temptations, and periods when keeping the command to love feels difficult. However, Jesus acknowledges this in John 15:16, promising help: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever." The Holy Spirit empowers us to navigate challenges and to Walk the loving Way of Christ.

But perhaps the biggest challenge the love of God faces in abiding in us is what must be displaced in order for that love to grow and deepen. There are many other forces that would rather take up that space in our minds. Perhaps love must displace pride. For pride erects walls between us, fostering a sense of superiority and making empathy difficult. To love requires humility, recognizing our shared humanity and the inherent value and dignity of every person.

Or perhaps love must displace prejudice. We often categorize people based on race, religion, or background, leading to pre-conceived notions that hinder the genuine connection God calls us to. Love demands we see individuals, not stereotypes, and embrace the richness of human diversity.

Fear certainly, must be displaced by love, “perfect love cast out fear”⁴ after all! And good thing it does too as fear hinders love. Fear of the unknown, fear of difference, fear of being hurt – all these can lead us to withdraw and build walls. Love compels us to step outside our comfort zones, to embrace vulnerability and trust in the righteous power of connection.

Following Jesus' command requires a continual process of replacing these self-centered tendencies with love. It's a journey of self-reflection, challenging our biases and actively seeking understanding. Love doesn't erase differences, but it allows us to bridge them, fostering a world where compassion and respect reign.

Letting go of fear, pride, prejudice, and all the other things that try to crowd love out is how we abide in God's love. Bravely looking into the compassionate, loving, and unflinchingly truthful eyes of God and seeing ourselves fully laid bare...that is how we learn to love. As God gazes at us...so we are invited to gaze at others. Seeing them. Accepting them. Loving them.

In his book, “Loving and Living,” Thomas Merton summarizes this beautifully: “Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone - we find it with another.” And “The beginning of love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them, we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we only love the reflection of ourselves we find in them.”

Abiding...remaining...living...dwelling in God's love, that's all we need do to Walk the Way. So easy...yet so difficult for our broken selves. Just...be loved...be loving. That's it. And yet there's so much in us that gets in the way. I pray that all of us, may better learn to abide in God's love. I pray that we let the persistent Holy Spirit work in our hearts...displacing all the things that get in the way with love. With God's love. With the love that unites us all. Amen.

⁴ 1 John 4:18