

## Sermon for Easter 5, Abide in Me, April 28, 2024

Today's gospel passage is part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse in St. John's gospel. It kind of starts in chapter 13 and it goes to the end of Chapter 17. Jesus is talking to his disciples on the night before he died. He's saying all the last minute things he wants them to be sure to remember, which are also good things for someone coming to baptism to remember, as Kamila is today, and for any Christian. He also institutes communion, and the foot washing. And then he talks to them, this long discourse. I know how he feels. I only have 2 sermons left to tell you all the things I hope you'll remember. You could be here a while! But having these readings for my last couple of Sundays is great.

In chapter 14 he starts by saying, "Let not your heart be troubled.... In my Father's house are many dwelling places.... I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and bring you to myself, that where I am, there you will also be." So he tells them not to worry about him leaving them, dying, because he will still be watching over them and will bring them to dwell with him eternally when they die. And that promise is also for us. And then he promises to send the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort them and to be with them always and he promises that he and the Father will both dwell within us. And he tells them again not to be afraid. Again, this promise is also for us.

Then in chapter 15, he begins with a gardening analogy. He says we need to abide in him, so we can bear fruit and if we don't, we'll be like a branch from a grapevine that breaks and dries up and dies and it's no longer any good for anything and gets burned in the fire. We need to stay connected to the source of sap, the source of life, which is him. So the first thing to say about this, is that Jesus is using this analogy to make a point, and his point is pretty clear because he repeats it a lot of times: we need to stay connected to God as the vine branch is connected to the vine stalk if we want to thrive, grow and bear fruit.

This is not a theological treatise about what happens after we die if we don't abide in him. He is not threatening to burn us up if we miss our daily prayers. He talked about the afterlife in chapter 14 and he said, "Don't worry. I will come and bring you to myself." This is an illustration from nature about why it's so important for us to abide in him, to stay connected to him. Because if we don't stay connected to Jesus, to God, we could wither up and dry out spiritually. So don't let your heart be troubled about the afterlife!

I am a gardener. I've already started a little gardening this year. The first thing we do in the spring is to clear some of the leaves and dead stuff away so the spring bulbs and other plants can get the air and the light and really grow. If you don't do that, they're kind of pale and slimy. And I also go through with my pruners and I cut off anything that's dead. And when I've done that, the new shoots have room to grow.

I've already started looking at the shrubs to see how they did. I see the rhododendron isn't happy where it's planted. I think I may need to dig it up and plant it somewhere else, where it will have more sunshine and fewer deer eating it. So before it dies off, I will dig it up and put it somewhere with more light and better soil and some fertilizer, where it will hopefully do better. And I'll keep an eye on it, take care of it.

And then there's the forsythia. It was altogether too happy and it was taking over everything at the bottom of my garden and my neighbour's. It was growing so high that it was shading the other plants and crowding them out. And because it was overlarge, it wasn't blooming well. So last fall my neighbour and I pruned it back drastically. Now this spring, it hasn't had too many blossoms, but I know that it's going to go wild next spring because it's a lot healthier when it's been pruned.

Jesus says God is like a gardener, always carefully tending the plants in the garden. Pruning this back, replanting that, fertilizing something else, moving the blanket of leaves off the crocuses, giving tender loving care to every plant. Knowing all the plants and what they each need to thrive, and keeping an eye on them so they can grow and be healthy and bloom and bear fruit.

Today we are welcoming Kamila into this garden by baptism, adding another blossom to God's garden. God has been watching over her all her life and God will continue to do so, and help her thrive and grow and bear fruit, as she grows up in Christ and learns to abide in Christ.

In fact, we are all like God's garden. I think it's helpful to think of each one of us as a whole garden, rather than one small branch that might get lopped. That kind of thinking makes us afraid and St. John says in his letter today that there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. He says fear has to do with punishment and if we are afraid of punishment, it's a sign that we need to grow more in love. Jesus did not come to condemn us or to cast us out but to save us all and care for us and tend us so we can bear more fruit.

So what might this mean? In practical terms in our lives? If we think of ourselves as a whole garden? Sometimes a plant in the garden isn't doing well and needs extra attention. Maybe our feeling of self worth? Or maybe going through a hard time through no fault of our own, like a death in the family or an illness? Or maybe we need to move some anxiety or shame that are smothering the little shoots of joy and love that God is growing in us, like dead leaves over the crocuses. Sometimes there's a weed that needs to be pulled out. Maybe something like addictions or prejudice or other things that harm us and others. Sometimes some part of us is growing too much and needs to be pruned back, so other aspects of our lives may have a bit of air and light. Like when our lives aren't balanced and perhaps we are paying too much attention to our work and not enough to our family or not enough to helping others. And when we let the Gardener do these things, we will become a peaceful, well-balanced, healthy garden with beautiful blossoms and abundant fruit. Mind you, like in any garden, the Gardener has to keep up with it with constant care.

What kind of fruit and blossoms might we be bearing if we abide in God and let God tend us and weed us and prune parts of us and fertilize other bits of us? Well, Jesus has just said that the Spirit will be in us and it's the Spirit who connects us to God. The Spirit is our link to God. So we would expect the fruit to be the fruit of the Spirit, I would think. What is the fruit of the Spirit? St. Paul lists some things in Galatians 5. He says it's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, generosity, faithfulness, self-control. We could probably add a few. I've always thought courage should be in the list. And maybe a sense of humour.

Jesus also says in chapter 14 that he and the Father will come and dwell with us. And St. John says that God is love and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. If we love, God lives in us and his love is perfected or completed in us. So love is the main thing, isn't it? In chapter 13, Jesus says everyone will know we are Christians by our love.

Every time we show love or kindness to someone, every time we are patient or gentle with someone, every time we control our first impulsive desires for something harmful to ourselves or others, every time we are generous, every time we have the courage to stand up for what is right, every time we do these things, we are bearing fruit. And it's a sure sign that we are abiding in God. That we are connected to the source of life and love, who is God himself, the way a vine branch is connected to the roots and stalk.

So how do we abide in God? How do we stay connected with God? Well, it's simple, really. Simple, but not easy. We pray. We take time every day to pray. In our confirmation classes, each meeting we talked about another way of praying and the homework was to go and try it out. Some ways of praying work really well for some people and not others. Others might need a different type. There are lots of ways to pray. Find one that works for you and do it. The important thing is to pray, to actually do it. To intentionally invite God to be with us and spend time with God. Whether that's by saying the daily offices, or reading the Bible, or singing hymns while you walk in the woods. But do it.

We also worship God. We gather together with other people of faith and we worship God together. It doesn't matter if we agree about everything or not. The important thing is to express our love for God together and to invite God to be with us and draw us closer to God and to each other. We do this by singing God's praises, praying together, asking for the Spirit, listening together to the Word of God in the Scriptures, offering ourselves and our gifts to God, taking communion together. And by sharing tea and coffee and snacks and talking after the formal service.

And thirdly, we do our best to follow Jesus' commandments by loving each other, helping the poor and needy, visiting the sick, clothing the naked, housing the homeless and so on, in his name. And by his power.

All these are ways for us to abide in Christ. When Jesus knew he was going to die soon, he told the disciples he wasn't abandoning them but that his Spirit would be with them and they needed to rest in that, cultivate that, abide in him and they would bear fruit. As I know I am leaving, I can say the same thing: Jesus isn't abandoning you. Jesus' Spirit will still be with you. Rest in that, cultivate that, abide in him.

I've been like an assistant gardener here, working under the direction of God the head gardener. Now God has decided to transfer me to another garden, and you are sad and I am sad to be leaving you. But the head gardener is still with you, and you'll soon have another assistant gardener. You will still be looked after. Abide in God and let God's Spirit abide in you, and you will thrive and grow and bloom and bear the fruit of the Spirit abundantly for a long time to come. You will be even more like a lush garden here in the heart of Spryfield, bringing beauty and love and the Spirit's fruits to the whole community.