

Abiding in God

If we count the number of times in this Sunday's reading from John we hear the word "abide or abides" we will hear it 8 times! When a word is used so insistently we can be sure that something important is being said; something Jesus *really* wants us to understand. It all begins with the vine. For Jesus, the vine is the metaphor for community and how community thrives when it is connected to and through God's love. And we also hear about pruning the vine. This is easy to understand if not so easy to always do! But first we get to this question of *abiding*, abiding in the love of Christ. We look to Jesus. To abide in God's love as Jesus does means to be in a *living* relationship.

Abiding is not DUTY; Abiding is not AN OBLIGATION; Abiding is not even SERVICE out of obligation or duty. The faith that *abides* is a living, breathing thing that is DONE not simply thought about. Service to one another and neighbor rises OUT OF the vibrancy of this LIVING, DOING love.

TO ABIDE IS NOT TO IMITATE... A fish does not imitate water; A bird does not imitate the air; A branch does not imitate the vine. All of these *abide* within that which gives them life and strength. They are inseparable from that which gives them life and growth. "Abide in me," Jesus says, "as I abide in you." This is a promise, that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us. That no matter what happens, Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens God in Jesus can redeem even our largest failures, sorrows or shine healing light on our deepest shame. We have God's promise that by staying in Jesus, *abiding in him*, we are always able to work for good. Keep in mind, after all, that these words are said just before Jesus goes to the cross. And I would argue that the cross was not simply a part of some larger plan, but rather the chief example of God's commitment to wrestle life and hope from the very place that seems most devoid of life and hope.^[1] As former Luther Seminary professor David Lose says, "There has been countless voices over the centuries that argue that the cross is some kind of mechanism by which God finds a way to forgive us despite how wretched we are. Frankly, most of that theologizing is a poor attempt to domesticate something that is absolutely beyond our control. He says that if the cross means anything, it means that God chose not to sit back removed and distant from the pain and paucity of our mortal, free, and difficult life in this world, but rather came in Christ to be joined to it – the ups and downs, the hopes and disappointments, the frailties and faults of our life in this world – so that we would know of God's unending commitment to us. "The cross was not the instrument that made it possible for God to love us, the cross is evidence and testimony to just how much God *already* loved us and it is God's promise to be with us through all things. Just so, the resurrection is the promise that no matter how much tragedy we endure, these hardships will not have the last word." God does not prune us as a punishment, God allows our lives to teach what in us is good and straight from the vine versus those habits and horrors onto which we cling, but suck the very life and love right out of us. I offer us this prayer by Steve Garnaas-Holmes from *Unfolding Light*: Loving God, Vinegrower of Life, I bring to mind with gratitude those ways you bear fruit in me, where your grace blossoms into blessing. Receive my thanks. Wise vinedresser, show me what in me does not bear fruit, what impedes the flow of your grace in me: fears and resentments, desires, habits and attachments that do not bear the fruit of your love, dead branches that no longer serve you. Help me see. God of mercy, prune me with your grace. Help me release all that does not bear fruit, and let go of what diminishes your love in me. Help me repent. God of peace, help me trust your spirit flowing in me, blossoming forth with your glory, bearing the fruit of your presence. Help me love. Amen. Abiding in Love, Stephanie+

^[1] David Lose, Luther Seminary
