

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday May 2, 2021 Easter 5B
Text: John 15: 9-17
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Make Yourself at Home in Christ's Love

I have a strong affection for the 15th chapter of John with its repeated admonition to **Abide**. At one point in my life that single profound word Abide, hung framed above my college desk calligraphed in four-inch letters as a daily reminder of what each Christian is called to in this beautiful passage and pulling me back from my performance crazed life. Abide in me as I abide in you (15:4). Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (15:5). As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love.

The word Abide is complex and layered in meaning. The word can mean to accept or to act in accordance with or obey, observe, follow, keep to, conform to, adhere, stand by, stick to, acknowledge or respect. I'm also quite taken with Eugene Peterson's translation of verse 9 and 10 of this passage in The Message. It reads:

9-10 "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love.

I love this translation, "make yourself at home in my love." What a wonderful invitation from the lips of Jesus. I imagine that if God has drawn you here today that you have a hunger within you for a relationship with God, you desire to make yourself at home in Christ's love. **All of us have this deep desire to be at home, to belong in a deep and abiding way, to know who we are and to whom we belong.** I love this notion that we have come from God's love and it is where we belong, where Christ invites us to Abide. How is it that one achieves such an intimate state with Jesus?

At the core of the Christian faith is the persistent mystery and paradox that the God who is beyond all knowing and source of all being is also deliciously near, intimately present in the minds and hearts of all living souls.

In fact, this presumption of presence is something that is found throughout the Gospel writings. Over and over again the New Testament writings remind us that God is present to believers in a way that they can know and acknowledge. From the very beginning this is the message: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel" which means "God is with us,"; and "where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them; and "remember I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 1:23;

18:20:28:20); Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"; (I Corinthians 3:16). Abiding is one way of talking about this same experience or presence.

However, it is not an easy experience to wrap our hearts and minds around. One rich and creative attempt to express this intimacy between Jesus and those who are his followers comes from within Celtic Spirituality. In the ancient Celtic prayer known as "St. Patrick's Breastplate" we get a stirring and many-faceted look at how to imagine our spiritual life of "Abiding with Christ." During Lent I joined St. Mark's Tuesday morning Anglican Rosary group where I learned to pray in a new way. One of the Rosary prayers I have enjoyed is based on this Christian hymn.

You can find the words to this in the blue hymnal in front of you on page 370. It is one of my favorites because of course the Irish are my people. It is a pretty long hymn but I just want to look at verse 6

Christ be with me,
Christ within me,
Christ behind me,
Christ before me,
Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ in quiet,
Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Each line of this Irish poem, each preposition is a way of understanding the intimacy of abiding in the divine presence that was so much a part of the early Christian experience.

Christ Be with Me

One of our deepest human needs is companionship. None of us want to be alone and the truth is that loneliness is an experience that cuts across every socio-economic status. Several years ago, I remember talking to Sherry Reeder about her PhDs studies. It was a huge and demanding accomplishment. In talking with her I learned that the 6 people who earned their PhDs in Nursing Practice had formed a study group that helped them to get through the ongoing challenges of the program. There were 3 others who decided not to join the study group and do it on their own, sadly these 3 were unable to finish the program. I asked about this and Sherry told me, you can't make it alone, you need community, you need to help one another and hold each other up along the way We know what it means to have others with us and this makes Jesus' promise, "Lo I am with you always" one of the most comforting. In

fact, this is probably one of the most important ways that we minister to one another. Simply being there for each other, “being with” is not always easy in the midst of tragedy, loss, depression, or confusion. Often, we are not sure what to say, but our presence even our silent companionship can mean more than anything.

So, when Jesus says “abide in me as I abide in you” this is an assurance that we desire and value. We will not be alone. We will not be abandoned. Though we may not always be comfortable with God’s presence in our lives and it may not always be exactly what we had in mind, God will show up, be our companion on the way, and as the Gospel of John begins, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14).

Christ Within Me

This line reminds me of one of my favorite prayers from the morning office that begins, “Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being (collect BCP p. 100 or Acts 17:28). Not only is it true that Christ lives within each of us, intimately and personally but it is also true that we are in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). I remember as a child my pastor working to impress upon us that being “in Christ” meant that we stand before God clothed with the Christ, that God sees us as if we were his own beloved.

As catholic Christians we are well aware of the notion that God dwells in us. This indwelling of God’s Spirit is made tangible as we ingest the bread and wine of the Eucharist. It is a testimony to the ongoing intimacy we are called to with Christ, God entering us and abiding in our very person. What we can say is that God is our dwelling place just as each of us is God’s dwelling place. It is a wild idea that God humbly inhabits our bodies. It places enormous importance upon our physical body, the care of our soul and the unnerving knowledge that we are ourselves a site of God’s revelation to the world.

Christ Behind Me

On a pilgrimage I participated in, everyone was given jobs, I was given the job of wrangler, meaning that I was to bring up the rear on our journey, attending to those who had fallen behind, caring for the injured, encouraging the tired and trying to motivate the lazy.

The Christ that is “behind me” is the Christ who guards my back. We have all see too many scary scenes in movies where danger comes from behind. The hero keeps looking behind, sure that someone or something is following in the shadows, the footsteps coming nearer. The fact that we only have eyes in the front of our heads may seem like a design flaw in moments of fear but it is also a way of making us dependent upon one another. To know that Christ is behind me, to know that Christ has our back is to know safety. It frees us to attend to what is truly important in front of us. Christ is our holy wrangler, walking behind us always there to lend a

hand, to encourage the feint hearted, protecting us from unseen danger and to share our load when things seem overwhelming.

Christ Before Me

I'm not sure what you select as one of your favorite psalms but for me it has been Psalm 139. It is a wonderful meditation on finding God ahead of us. "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I feel from your presence?" the psalmist asks and the answers to these questions are deeply reassuring. "If I climb up to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there also. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand will lead me and your right hand hold me fast."

Wherever we go, God has arrived ahead of us. I remember as a young candidate for Holy Orders, my sponsoring priest reminding me that in every situation Christ is present, he is already there ahead of us, our job is simply to discover this live-giving presence. We are never in a situation God doesn't know intimately because God has "been there" before us.

To understand abiding in Christ as knowing that Christ goes before us places a great emphasis upon listening for God's voice in our lives, discerning the leading of the Spirit. It challenges us to a life that is as open to following as it is to leading. Our culture seems to worship leadership at times but there is something profound and wonderfully countercultural about following. Becoming a follower of Jesus requires that we stay in relationship, watching, listening, loving, taking the next steps as they become clear, saying yes to the adventure of following the one leader who truly has our best interests at heart.

Christ Beside Me

Evidently the original text of St. Patrick's Breastplate reads "Christ on my right, Christ on my left". But the hymn writer Cecil Francis Alexander who wrote or adapted many hymns in our hymnal like Once in Royal David's city and All things bright and beautiful compressed this line into one "Christ beside me". It is a comforting thought that abiding with Christ means that we are flanked by God, by one who knows us, supports us and accompanies us. It is also provocative to think that Christ walks with us in our strengths our right hand (sorry lefties) and in our weakness or shadow side. This leads to a knowledge that God is to be found in our skills and abilities our strong hand as well as in the midst of our weaknesses our faults and our unconscious.

Christ Beneath Me

As a child I remember a song about a wise man building his house upon rock. As the great theologian, Paul Tillich, put it, God is the "ground of our being." We all need a rock. We need a firm foundation a touching place from which to operate with confidence. John 15 uses the image of a strong vine from which the branches obtain their nourishment. It is by the root stock of God that we are supported and this is to

be our orientation, refusing every temptation to turn elsewhere for security, companionship or hope.

There of course is a great deal more one could say about the prepositions in this beautiful piece of Irish poetry and prayer. Together they remind us that God's embrace is so intimate, so comprehensive that we are never outside of it. To abide is to relax into these prepositions. To surrender yourself to the presence of God that surrounds you already. To abide in Christ is to find the love of God at the center of all things. It is to be taken captive by this love, to recognize it as the pearl of great price and to have gladly abandoned everything for the sake of it. Abiding means turning toward God again and again, allowing yourself to hear God's voice and to begin to follow Christ even after we have lost our way. It asks of us a kind of attentiveness to God's presence that is actually open to following in unexpected ways, rather than determining on our own what path we will take. Abiding is neither effortless nor is it something so demanding as to be impossible. Abiding is to discover that God indeed surrounds us, is within, behind, before, beside, beneath, and above. There is no place we can go away from this loving presence and in Christ we find our abiding joy.

While I don't often end a sermon by asking people to sing today, I would like to do that. Please turn to Hymn 370 in the blue hymnal vs. 6 and sing with me these beautiful words that we pray are true for each of us as we learn and encourage each other to abide in Christ's love, to make ourselves at home in Christ's love. For it is in this connection to the source of life and love there that we will find what we need, what we need is already present and available, what we need is here.

Christ be with me,
Christ within me,
Christ behind me,
Christ before me,
Christ beside me,
Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ in quiet,
Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

Make yourself at home in Christ's love.

*I wish to acknowledge my debt to Marilyn Chandler McEntyre for her wonderful meditation on St. Patrick's Breastplate in her article *The Encompassing Embrace* that forms the basis for this sermon. May this sermon be an encouragement into the abiding place of Christ.*