

# Abiding and Bearing

A sermon by the Very Rev'd Timothy Jones  
John 15:1-8  
Easter 5 / April 29, 2018

There's a single word at the heart of our Gospel  
reading today.

A misunderstood word.

An old-fashioned word.

But this word, if understood correctly,  
could enrich our lives beyond measure. This word  
could transform the impact  
we have on the world around us,  
the impact we have on the people around us.

It's a little word.

If someone asks you who wasn't here today what  
the sermon was about,  
or if someone was here, but, shall we say,  
dozing, and asks you, you can answer with a  
single, simple word.

Pull out your bulletin.

The word appears on the fourth line.

If you are sitting on the end by a pew Bible, you could pull it out and turn to the Gospel itself.

The word I'm talking about appears eight times in our John reading. Eight times! That's how important it is. It's that word *abide*.

*Abide*, Jesus says, like a branch on a vine.

Even for those of us who have never seen a vineyard or held the branches of a grape vine, if you use your imagination you get a picture of how leaves and grapes connect to a sustaining trunk and roots.

Jesus says, "I am the *true* vine."

Any farmer or gardener will tell you that you have to have the right stock for foliage and fruit to bud and grow.

You have soil that hydrates and nourishes.

When we think about our own need for energy and connection and sustenance,

that's sounds promising. And if you want to grow  
and have fruit, you have to abide.

Someone was leading a youth group meeting and  
talking about this passage and she asked,

What does this word *abide* mean?

One of the young people said, well, it means  
follow the rules, as in *abide* by the rules.

But the word we translate as "abide" in our text  
means something much richer.

The word abide

is much more promising.

To *abide* is to stay with.

To abide is to keep connected,  
not just stay within a list of regulations and rules.

To abide is sitting with someone and taking in  
their wisdom and warmth.

To abide is not to rush off.

Abide is a relational word.

Jesus is telling his disciples to draw sustenance  
from him, to find their life and even ability in  
him, not in some principle.

And there's great drama behind what Jesus says,  
because of the setting for his image of the vine.

Jesus has been sitting with his disciples in the  
upper room, for the Last Supper.

So the backdrop is his pending death.

He knows it's coming.

And once he goes away, how will they manage?

He uses this image of branches and leaves and  
grapes that draw life-giving

nourishment from his presence—

his presence as a living, risen Lord.

They needed that promise as they faced death.

They needed that power as they went out as  
messengers in the days after Jesus' resurrection.

It's an image we need to thrive as followers.

An image of what is possible from the Jesus who  
is here and still present.

To abide is, well, like what I experienced when I was small. I think of my first memory of my mother. I would crawl up onto her lap.

She held me close.

I don't remember much of anything about what I said to her. But I remember her kindness, affection. We were communing.

Prayer, I like to say, in its simplest definition is sitting still in the presence of God.

It's not always talking and asking.

Sometimes it's basking.

It's being and doing what any leaf or blossom or seed does to thrive, which is to take in all the nutrients, all the riches it can.

As someone once put it, we say God is always there but we act as though he is just kind of nearby.

But over the past week or so I've had conversations with five parishioners who have

been touched in some profoundly spiritual way by  
what has happened to them here.

Three of them so moved that they went out of  
their way to tell me.

Whether in liturgy, or some kind of small group  
or Bible study, or an outreach project,  
or listening to a sermon,  
or praying in a quiet place,  
we can be filled with God.

The Methodist minister Donald Shelby says this:

“Many of us have experienced such engulfing  
moments when we were overcome with glory, ...  
when the power and presence and goodness of  
God enfolded us, when the world was suffused  
with a shining like that which follows a storm.”

So expect something more than going through the  
churchly motions.

Abide, says Jesus. Be still. Stay. Pray.

Read the Bible for yourself.

What if, this week, you found at least five or ten minutes a day to pray, absorb, flip through the Book of Common Prayer?

You've heard the old saying,  
Don't just sit there, *do* something.  
We need sometimes to turn that around:  
Don't just do something. *Sit* there.  
Make room to commune with the living God.  
With his presence you can do what you could  
never if you tried to operate  
out of your own smarts.

Abiding in him happens even during times we  
face challenging circumstances.  
Maybe especially then.

So abide.

What's the one-word summary of this sermon?

Abide. What is possible for us to do today?

This week? Abide.

But one more thing.  
One more word must be added.  
Jesus said abide.  
But he also said, “Bear.” Bear fruit.  
Bear much fruit.

When Jesus tells his disciples, “Abide in me as I  
abide in you,” he has just done something we  
don’t see in this passage, but that is important.

Jesus had been dining with the disciples,  
and he says, “Arise. Let us go on.”  
So the disciples now learn they are not only to sit  
in his presence, they are to get on,  
go out and do his work.

Jesus is saying sometimes you get up.  
They are probably even walking now  
as he says *Abide*, perhaps passing a vineyard in  
the Kidron Valley on the way to the Mount of  
Olives. And maybe he’s grabbed a winding  
branch with plump grapes.  
He points out the fruit.

We abide in order to bear, he’s saying.

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You not only nurture a spiritual connection,  
but you also get involved in the wider world.

You know what we mean when we say a time or a  
process is fruitful.

We mean something meaningful,  
even life-changing came out of it.

You can have a fruitful *life*.

Abide and that ends up empowering you to go—  
to go out into a world of need.

Jesus knew abiding is not a private experience we  
hug to ourselves.

I believe that sometimes we display a false  
modesty about the riches of our faith.

We're not convinced how amazing grace is.  
But the good news is worthy of telling far and  
wide. Many need to hear it.

When Mary Parmer was here for the Invite,  
Welcome, Connect workshop, she spoke about  
how vital and necessary and natural

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it is to invite people.

Remember the statistic about how many, when surveyed, say they would come to church if invited? Sixty-two percent!

One writer says this about the church long ago: the early church, unleashed by the Holy Spirit, was “a cultural revolution—a far-reaching wave of cultural [change, that made a profound difference, their presence and prayers] reshaped the Roman Empire.”

But how did it happen? Look at how small they were when they started:

Twelve, at first (the disciples). Then hundreds (responding to Jesus’s preaching). Then thousands, as the first apostles spread the message. A movement with a few thousand adherents in the first century became half of the empire by the fourth century.

But how?

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One reason the early church grew had to do with  
the early Christians' simple  
response to a social problem:

The plagues that swept the cities and towns of the  
Roman Empire.

In response to the rampant contagion of disease,  
the pagan priests, the leaders of the pagan  
temples, fled the cities.

Not the Christians! They stayed. They cared for  
their own sick, but also for the sick of their pagan  
neighbors. They were present.

They had staying power, so they served  
sacrificially. That got people's attention.

And the good news,  
well, they couldn't keep it to themselves.  
The message of Jesus's death and resurrection  
spread like gossip over a backyard fence.

I want us to get comfortable again with another  
old-fashioned word: evangelism.

With telling the good news of our faith,  
Which is too good not to share.

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With living out the good news in our  
sacrificial giving.

There's a place for sitting with Jesus and taking in  
nourishment from the table, or nourishment  
teaching from prayer.

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But there's also a time we go.

There's a time to ask God to fill us, feed us, help  
us feel our faith.

But then we share what we have. We heal.

We extend an open hand.

Jesus invites us to connect and to stay close,  
as branches to the vine.

Then we do the work he has given us to do.

We will bear the fruit we can bear only when we  
abide in him and he abides in us.

Then he sends us out, and oh,  
what a difference we make.  
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