



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 6 Year B

#### Abide With Me

[RCL]: Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

*Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
the darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:  
when other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

*Abide with Me* is a familiar hymn that Henry Francis Lyte penned while battling tuberculosis. What a thrilling prayer request: for God to abide with us always, and even more so when the “darkness deepens” or “other helpers fail.” But what does it mean for God to abide with us?

The gospel reading from John reminds us of Jesus’ words to his disciples and us that, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love” (John 15:9). To abide in Jesus’ love means to abide in Jesus because Jesus is love. In the gospel, Jesus lays out three benefits of abiding in him. First, abiding in Jesus means that the love of God is present in us, and, as a result, we can love like Jesus. Like most things, this is much harder than it sounds. Using Jesus as our model for love, many of us come up short and miss the mark. Jesus loved unconditionally and without judgment and without the need for reciprocity. Verse 13 spells out what it means to love as Jesus loves: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Crazy right? And definitely not humanly possible.

Wrong.

If we could turn our gaze to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for just a bit and remember how Taylor Branch in *Parting the Waters* tells what happened after King’s front porch was bombed while his wife and 10-week-old baby were inside:

*“King walked out onto the front porch. Holding up his hand for silence, he tried to still the anger by speaking with an exaggerated peacefulness in his voice. Everything was all right, he said. ‘Don’t get panicky. Don’t do anything panicky. Don’t get your weapons. If you have weapons, take them home. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is*

*what Jesus said... We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.”*

Indeed, Dr. King is just one example of the love of Jesus being humanly possible; there are others. This tells us that it's possible for us all, with God's help.

Second, abiding in Jesus and loving like Jesus creates the byproduct of joy. We become joyful and joy is present when Jesus abides with us and when we abide in Jesus' love. Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10-11).

Later in *Abide with Me*, Lyte mentions the dimming of earth's joys:

*Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.*

In life, sometimes joy is hard to find: when disappointments and setbacks are the order of the day and God seems far or prayers seem unanswered. It is difficult to keep one's joy when there is no hope or the walls seem to be caving in all around us.

Nehemiah 8:10, however, reminds us that the joy of the Lord is our strength. Whether the "joy of the Lord" here refers mainly to the joy the Lord has or to the joy the Lord gives us, we have no real hope of joy or strength unless God is joyful Godself (John 15:11). God cannot give us that which God ultimately does not have.

In Nehemiah's story, we find a people who were in the midst of conflict. Hope was dwindling, and joy was a rare commodity. Nehemiah reaffirms the people as they hear the words from the Book of the Law of God that this is where we find our strength for life, for setbacks, disappointments, health crises, raising children, relationships, missions, everything. The strength we need for this life is found in the essential joy that God provides if we abide in him and in his love.

Thirdly, abiding in Jesus means that we are anointed to bear fruit that will last. Jesus says, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name" (John 15:16).

The proof is in the pudding. What fruits are you bearing? A good tree does not bear bad fruit. Jesus is serious about his disciples bearing fruit. Good fruit. Fruit that will last.

We have been anointed by Jesus, who abides in us, to bear fruit joyfully.

That appears several ways. One important way today is in how we are making disciples. How are we sharing and telling of this love that we embody and that radiates throughout our entire being and all whom we touch? How are we telling our faith stories with each other and especially with those who might not know Jesus for themselves? We are not called to practice an insular type of faith or Christianity; we aren't called to stick to what we like and what's comfortable. If Jesus abides in us, truly abides in us, this all comes somewhat naturally. This doesn't make it easy.

But when Jesus abides in us, we can't help but exude his love and ways and share them. We can't help but be joyful in all things. And because the proof is in the pudding, the fruit we bear is good and pleasing in God's sight.

Abiding with Jesus is exemplifying the love that God and Jesus share with each other and that we as a community are called to enact.<sup>1</sup> Like Lyte, if we acknowledge our helpless state and beseech Jesus to abide with us, teaching us to love like him, we can joyfully sing out in confidence:

*Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;  
shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;  
heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

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<sup>1</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible: Luke-John*. Vol. 9. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.