

Being Easter People – Abie  
John 15:1-8  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
April 25, 2021  
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There is a popular children's book written by Robert Munsch - a book that isn't only enjoyed by children but is bought and read by many adults. It is titled *Love You Forever*, and I suspect many of you have read it.

Throughout the story a mother picks up her child and rocks him singing, "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as you're living, my baby you'll be." She does this from the time he is an infant, but she doesn't stop there. Even as he grows, she quietly goes into his room when he is sleeping and picks him up and rocks him as she sings. Even when he is an adult, still, she sings it to him. Finally, at the end of the book, when the mother is old and sick, her son comes over and he picks up his mom and rocks her as he sings, "I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always, as long as you're living, my mommy you'll be." When he goes home later that night, he picks up his own daughter and sings the original song to her. The circle of love continues as he shapes his own parenting after that which he received.

There is something about feeling connected that gives us a sense of identity. There is something about being rooted in love that makes all the difference in our lives and that shapes us in ways that cause us to reflect the place or person in which we are rooted, to which we are connected.

Rootedness...connection...a place from which to build our lives...they are important. And Jesus knew this. We hear it in his words in the Gospel of John: *Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (John 15:4-5, NRSV).*

In other words, where we live, where we get our nurture and our nourishment, where we make a home and root ourselves, all of this matters. It shapes us. It makes us into who we are. More often than not, we reflect the people and places where we make our lives.

In the 1996 Doubleday book *Teaching Tolerance* Sara Bullard writes, "The relationship of family bonds to attitudes of tolerance has been well established by studies of tolerant and intolerant personalities. Those people most likely to be open-minded and empathic toward others share the experience of having been raised in homes where bonds of love were strong and lasting" (82). She goes on writing, "One study...compared fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders who expressed prejudiced attitudes with those who didn't, and asked their mothers to respond to detailed questionnaires. The study found that parent-child relationships based on power rather than on unconditional love were more likely to lead children toward intolerance" (83).

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What is the family of origin if not a place we live, a place we are rooted, a place we abide? If study after study can show us the impact of those with whom we are connected on shaping us, then doesn't it make sense that the more deeply connected we are to Jesus, the more we will be shaped by him?

But, what does it mean to "abide" in Jesus?

Abiding in Jesus isn't about claiming Jesus. It's not just about saying we are Christians.

Abiding in Jesus is living so closely to him that we are shaped by who he is. It is being so deeply connected that we see the truth of his character and let it become our truth. It is sharing with him the essence of life itself in ways that mean we can't help but reflect him. It is aligning ourselves with him, being in sync with him. It is the invitation, as *The Message* translates verse four of today's reading, to "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."

It's really the same concept as those studies about children mirroring what they learn at home. If we live in relationship with Jesus...if we make a point to keep our life close to his...if we pay attention to who he is and how he interacted with others...and if we choose to abide there, to make our home there, then soon we will reflect those same values and priorities in *our* lives that he did in his.

Prior to Easter, the church observed the season of Lent. Lent is often used as an annual time to renew our commitment to being in relationship with God, to following Jesus. During Lent, as we did at First Christian this year, Christians often get intentional about spiritual practices. And so, in good Lenten fashion, many of us explored new ways of praying - walking labyrinths, praying in color, using scripture as a tool for prayer, and more.

But these practices are not just about the act of prayer itself. They aren't just about trying something new or being able to check a Lenten discipline off our to-do lists. Prayer isn't about impressing others with a deep commitment to our faith. Rather all of these practices, like the weekly routines of corporate worship and celebrating communion together, are about spending time in the presence of the divine in order to become more like Jesus, in order to reflect more clearly the heart of God.

And here in today's text, which John's gospel tells us comes after the last supper, so during Jesus' last week of life...here, Jesus gives an invitation to his closest followers to stay close to him, to remain in relationship with him, and in doing so, to become like him.

That same invitation comes to us as well.

And what is unfortunate is that for years so many churches spent so much time forcing people into molds of obedience, that many people hear this passage and don't even

notice that invitation. Instead, those verses that talk about pruning, about cleansing, about taking away that which is no longer productive and throwing those branches in the fire...these verses have too often been used to convince people that this passage is about sin, about the threat of being cut off if they don't behave.

But, friends, let's remember a few things.

First of all, if you've ever tended much of anything that is green and growing, you know that pruning is necessary to growth. This isn't about a threat of cutting people out of the community, but rather about the reminder that as we grow toward God, we will outgrow other things...bad habits, bad attitudes, self-centeredness and more...these are the things that were and are to be pruned as we grow toward God.

Additionally, the fascination that many modern Christians have with hellfire and brimstone is just that...a modern fascination. Jesus did not go around threatening to throw people into the fires of hell. And if we remember that, then we can also hear that branches being put in a fire provide fuel for something else that is necessary.

Just picture life in Jesus' day. This passage talks about a vineyard. The purpose of vines is to bear fruit. The fruit is to be consumed. Meanwhile, the branches that did not produce, that needed to be pruned. They were not wasted, but became fuel for something else - a fire for cooking, a fire for warming.

What if we heard this passage as an invitation to life-giving relationship? What if we, even we who aren't consumed with worries of hell but who have heard talk of such understandings, what if we realized that this isn't a threat about sin, but an invitation to life? What if, as the God-figure in the book *The Shack* says, we heard God tell us, "I am not a bully, not some self-centered demanding little deity insisting on my own way. I am good, and I desire only what is best for you. You cannot find that through guilt or condemnation or coercion, only through a relationship of love" (126)?

Friends, we are invited to abide in Jesus, to live so deeply rooted in a relationship of love that we can do nothing but share that love and live in his compassionate and welcoming ways. This is an invitation to immerse ourselves so fully in the ways of Jesus that they become our ways.

If we are Easter people, people who believe in second chances and new life, then how better to share that than to draw closer to Jesus and in doing so to become more like him? Amen.