

**Sermon Preached by The Rev. Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA
on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B
May 5, 2024**

John 15:9-18

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

We are approaching the finish line. The end of the school year and graduations will soon be upon us. The church's program year is winding down. There are also the two races of the Pittsburgh Marathon and the Kentucky Derby. It is an opportunity to pause and celebrate... to mark a rest during the larger journey. Everyone is invited to a finish line party at 6 p.m. tonight to celebrate who we are and what we do at Calvary together.

Our Gospel story is also about approaching the finish line of sorts. This part of the Gospel of John (chapters 14-17) is called the "Farewell Discourse." They are the words of Jesus to his disciples immediately after the Last Supper in Jerusalem the night before the Crucifixion. We might think of this as a type of graduation speech or final words of wisdom and comfort before leaving. These are the last and most important reminders from Jesus to the disciples to guide them through troubled times. Remember these words, Jesus says, when I am gone.

Last Sunday, we heard the beginning of the discourse with a metaphor of a vine and branches. We, the disciples, are the branches connected to the source, Jesus, with God the Father as the vine grower. Those who abide in Jesus will bear fruit. That is a natural result of the relationship.

The story today continues and develops the idea further. One word appears three times today to describe the relationship between Jesus and the disciples and Jesus to God. It is used 11 times in this short chapter and 34 times in the Gospel of John. Did you catch what word that is? "Abide." I am not sure I have ever used the word "abide" outside church other than something like "The Steelers' coach can't abide lack of effort" which is a different meaning.

What does Jesus mean to abide in him and his love? At one level, to abide means to rest or not wander off or remain in or dwell in God. It seems to suggest a turn to the interior or to stay at home. That's how the classical Greek writers used the term, "meno" or abide.

The Gospel writer, John, adds a significant meaning to the idea of "abiding" by borrowing from the Hebrew Bible... to resting and remaining in... he adds movement, engagement, action. He opens the Gospel with the beautiful idea "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." That is, the God who created the heavens and the earth took on human flesh or became incarnate.

This same creator God became one of us in Jesus, the Word, and dwelt among us. A good translation for "dwelt among us" is put up a tent or camped out or tabernacled. John borrowed from the story of the Israelites. After they escaped slavery in Egypt from Pharaoh, Moses led the Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years. God went with them. They set up a Tent of Meeting or tabernacle in which Moses would speak to God. When the people moved, the tent was taken down and set up again wherever they camped next on the journey. This was portable by design and from necessity. Wherever the people went, God went with them and camped out or dwelt among them. The God we worship is not static or distant but journeys with us.

The Gospel writer holds these two ideas together we are likely to miss. The first disciples likely would have made the connection. To abide in Jesus is to remain connected or rest in the presence of God. But the very nature of this God is to camp out or dwell with us suggests movement with the people. It is engagement with them through stories, commandments to live, and prayer. The nature of God is action with and for the people through people like Moses ultimately dwelling among us in Jesus.

When we understand the writer takes a Greek idea and a Jewish idea, a western one and eastern one, and creates a new category this passage begins to make sense as words of wisdom to guide us through troubled times. John layers dwelling among us or incarnation on top of resting or abiding in Christ, broadening both.

The God we follow and proclaim calls us to rest, to find our home, to abide in that holy presence. Yet the same God is not static up or out there somewhere. The God we follow dwells with us... camps out with us...goes where we go. That means we are never alone.

How do we stay connected to the source or abide in Christ, to allow Jesus to dwell among us? One way is to gather to pray as a community and in private. We take a pause as the week ends in daily life to start the new one reconnected to our source. That's what we are doing now. In common prayer, we let the words and their meaning shape us so when we pray in private, we can listen better. We open our hearts and speak to God as a friend as Jesus encourages. The words are less important than the intention, the authenticity, the openness to one another.

Another way to abide in Christ and allow Jesus to dwell among us is to receive Christ into ourselves in the Eucharist of bread and wine. In it, we retell and remember what Jesus said at the Last Supper and invite him to dwell among us. The Eucharist is a weekly reminder that love is always movement between at least two parties in engaged action.

That is connected to the third way to abide in Christ and invite Jesus to dwell among us. Jesus says, quite clearly, if we keep his commandments we abide in his love. The commandments are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Like God, this is not static but active and engaged moving through the world. We love in action, not in feelings but in deeds. That is part of what the Incarnation or God dwelling among us means.

We learn that giving ourselves in service to our neighbors is the fruit that will last. Loving in incarnate ways changes their lives, and changes us from the inside out. The fruit of this incarnate love is joy... in recognizing Jesus dwells in communion with us wherever we are on life's journey.