



# SAINT LUKE'S

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER  
YEAR B

ACTS 8:26-40  
1 JOHN 4:7-21  
JOHN 15:1-8  
PSALM 22:24-30

A SERMON BY THE REV. BO REYNOLDS

APRIL 29, 2018

*“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me bear much fruit...”*

*Abide in me.* I have a deeply personal connection to this text from John 15.

It was Good Friday of 2014: I was living and working with 8 other folks around my age as part of the Episcopal Service Corps project called St Hilda’s House. We would pray and study theology together with an eye towards the role of our faith in broader society, and we would concurrently work full-time in the city we lived in at different social service, charitable, and community organizations. I’d joined this project in the summer of the previous year as part of my continued process of discernment towards the priesthood and as preparation for seminary, and... 8 months in to this experience...I was in tatters.

I’d chosen this particular program so that I could angle my way into my preferred seminary, ultimately a total failure as I’d found out the month previous. I was frantically hopping through the hoops my diocese had set up, seeking to appease the commissions and committees which governed my life. I was finding success at the organization I was working with, but absolutely fed up with the community I was living with. The more conflict would arise, the more I as an introvert would retreat from the group. Waking to say Morning Prayer became a drudgery and some days I would just snooze until I had to shower in order not to be late for work. Even going to mass felt distant and mechanical, instead of the usual solace it had provided until recently. I felt *withered*.

And so I stumbled into the confessional after the Good Friday liturgy, feeling hollow for knowing I should have been more moved by what I had just experienced. I let loose a torrent of frustrations, neuroses, and insecurities, kicking myself for not **acting** more pious, for not **feeling** more loving, for not **achieving** what I felt I needed to achieve.

And the kind voice of the priest chuckled softly and said, “You know, 9 out of 10 things you just confessed are not actually sins.” She reminded me of something that I have thought about repeatedly as we celebrate Easter: So many of the stories about Jesus after His Resurrection are about him simply **being** with his disciples. Cooking them breakfast, walking with them, eating with them, talking with them.

*Abide in me as I abide in you...*

The priest in that confessional gave me John 15 as text to pray. For the rest of that Easter season, I would use the church keys I’d been given to come in to the church late at night, around 10 or 11, turn on a single light, and curl in to a ball at the foot of the imposing stone altar. I’d try to quiet my mind and resist the impulse to begin again those frenetic negotiations I was always having with God: *Why did this happen? Was it because I did that? Well, perhaps this thing I did/achieved/said/taught etc might persuade you toward another outcome?* Instead, I tried to imagine Jesus on the beach with his disciples, cooking them breakfast, and find that same recognition of Love and communion within myself.

Because, as I have said before, and I am sure I will say again, Salvation and the life of Christian discipleship is not the process of appeasing a frowning deity with enough actions deemed 'Good' nor it is not a program of self-improvement through commitment and sheer force of will. What does the author of 1 John tell us?

*God is love, and those who abide in Love abide in God, and God abides in them.*

Salvation is the process of recognizing the Love of God within us and for us, as the true bedrock of our identity and our worth, and allowing that Love to transform and animate us. We manifest God's presence in the world by recognizing the image of God within us, Divine Love, as our truest sense of identity and allowing it to become our most powerful motivation. Christianity is not a faith about doing; it is about *becoming*. We no longer need to operate from a place of deficiency or fear because we have already been healed by the word of Love he has spoken to us.

By regularly remaining in the presence of God, and allowing the dry branches of our own efforts to be more loving or selfless to be cleared away, the true Love which abides in us can shine more clearly. This is a process over time and requires our dedication, but it the key to growing in a life of faith. This is what Jesus says: *"Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."*

Jesus' instructions about the branches which do not produce fruit are not **directive** but **descriptive**; Jesus is not telling us to "hurry up and abide" before God lops us off and tosses us into damnation, but is warning us of the dangers of spiritual self-reliance. Instead, read this as the same warning that St Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 13: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing."

Jesus is calling us to recognize and remain within the abundant Love of God for us. It is only through a deep rootedness in this eternal love that our everyday actions can be transformed into expressions of the very Love of God for the world. When we abide in Christ as he abides in God, our Love compels us into action: "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." Or, as the author of 1 John says this week, "...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Pause today. Recognize how deeply you are loved by a Love which hung the stars in place. And, as you walk, and continue to walk within this place of Love, allow it manifest in the world around you, like fruit on the vine, like spring blossoms on the trees.

AMEN





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