

Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

17 May 2009

Saint Mark's, Tampa

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When the new Dean was installed at the Cathedral earlier this year, the preacher said that he was going to take a page from Baptist preaching and really expound the text carefully – focusing not just on one paragraph or even one sentence, but preaching his entire sermon on a single word.

Well I'm not going to let anyone out-Baptist me in this Diocese. I too am going to preach on just one word. But I'm going to go a step further. One technique that was used a lot in the Baptist churches in which I grew up was the alliterative sermon outline. Some of you will know what I mean. The preacher would talk first about, say, the Person of the Savior, then the Price of Salvation, and then the Perseverance of the Saved. It was a nice way of signaling the transition from one part of the sermon to another, especially for people who wanted to take notes; it also helped you remember the main points of the sermon if you wanted to think about them later. This sermon came to me in an alliterative outline – and though it's not as elegant as the alliterative outlines I grew up, it's something, and I hope you'll indulge me just this once.

So now you're prepared: a sermon about one word, with an alliterative outline.

The word is *abide*. "Jesus said to his disciples, 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; *abide* in my love. 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 want to talk to you this morning about what it means to *abide*. And I'm going to consider three things: the personal intimacy of abiding, the prevenient initiative of abiding, and the preeminent imperative of abiding.

When you see the word 'abide' in the New Testament, it's a pretty good bet that you're in John – either the Gospel or one of the letters. In the Revised Standard Version there are 39 instances of 'abide', and all but two are in John. So you have to wonder why abiding is such a big theme, and such a distinctive theme, for John.

There is a character in the Gospel according to John who is consistently called "the

disciple whom Jesus loved.” It was the disciple whom Jesus loved who was lying closest to Jesus at the Last Supper – lying “close to the breast of Jesus,” as the Gospel puts it. When Jesus announced that one of the disciples was to betray him, the other disciples turned to the disciple whom Jesus loved and asked *him* to ask Jesus, “Lord, who is it?” On that first Easter Day, it was the disciple whom Jesus loved who first came to Easter faith. When he went into the empty tomb and saw the graveclothes lying there empty, he just *knew*, somehow. The Gospel says, “He saw and believed.” He was so much in tune with the heart of Jesus that by some flash of insight, some instinct of understanding, he grasped the meaning of the empty tomb.

The disciple whom Jesus loved is never named, but longstanding tradition tells us that it is John himself, the Apostle and Evangelist. Now if that’s right – and I’m certainly inclined to think it is – then it makes sense that John would emphasize abiding, because abiding is a word of *personal intimacy*. John knew that precious closeness to the heart of Jesus, that deep attunement that allowed him to know the mind of Jesus and feel the spirit of Jesus, that awakened such an insight into the work of Jesus that it quickened faith – not a faith of wishful thinking, not a leap into the dark, but a firm and settled and sure conviction that my friend is who he says he is and does what he says he does. This is the faith, our epistle says, that overcomes the world: not an intellectual commitment to *a* truth, but a personal intimacy with *the* Truth.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.” We are to *abide* in the love of Jesus, to be constantly awash in it, as a child swims in the love of a good parent, as a friend relies on the unshakeable support of a good friend, as a spouse draws strength from the ever-unfolding love of a good spouse.

We don’t, though. Too often I know I don’t abide in his love. I check in with Jesus periodically to say hi, but that’s not abiding in his love. It’s more like dropping a quick e-mail to the Bishop than it is like the disciple whom Jesus loved, lying next to Jesus, close to his heart.

God save us from checking in with Jesus. May we instead *abide* in the love of Jesus, knowing the personal intimacy with him of the disciple whom Jesus loved.

But our Gospel today does not speak only of the *personal intimacy* of abiding. It speaks also of the *prevenient initiative* of abiding. Now I’ll be honest here: no normal person uses the word ‘prevenient’; I just needed another ‘p’-word for the alliteration. ‘Prevenient’ means “coming beforehand.” It’s a word theologians use in connection

with grace: prevenient grace is the grace that God gives us before we turn to him, so that we *can* turn to him. To affirm prevenient grace is to affirm the words of that wonderful hymn we often sing here:

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;

Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” It is by his initiative, not ours, that we can abide in his love. And what a relief that is, because it means there’s no room for performance anxiety in the Christian life. We do not have to measure up to any standard, we do not have to earn anyone’s approval – we don’t have to catch God’s eye, jumping up and down saying “Pick me! Pick me!” – he has chosen us, and loved us, and we are simply to abide in that love.

Forget the past – things done and left undone, great accomplishments and embarrassing failures – because those things didn’t earn you God’s love and they didn’t keep you from getting God’s love. Rest a while from your anxiety about the future – how you might fail, where you might stumble – “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” He has chosen us, and he will not let us go. Just abide in the love of Jesus.

There is no condition on the love of Jesus – but there *is* a command. Talking about the prevenient initiative of abiding takes us right into the preeminent imperative of abiding. For Jesus says, “You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. . . . I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.” Jesus chose us for a purpose: to be fruitful. If we abide in his love, we will bear fruit, as branches drawing their life from the vine. Abiding in his love, how can we help but extend that love to one another?

It’s hard to talk about this without sounding goopy and sentimental and ridiculous, certainly for me, when I know how short I fall when it comes to bearing the fruit of love. And don’t even make me talk about the greatest love – the love that lays down one’s life for one’s friends. But the love that we are to abide in – it’s that kind of love, the kind that surrenders itself for the good of others, that goes out and seeks others, naming as friends those who are not yet friends, and pouring itself out for them without reserve.

You see, where our translation has “abide in my love,” Jesus actually says something stronger: “Abide in the love that is mine.” “The love that is mine” is the love that corresponds to Jesus’ nature and mission, not the love that Jesus *has* or the love that Jesus *gives* but the love that Jesus *is*, received from the Father without diminution, returned to the Father in complete self-surrender, and poured out for us without restraint. To abide in that love – to dwell in that love – is to be caught up in Jesus’ self-surrender, to be indwelt by the love that Jesus both receives and gives, the love that is the Holy Spirit.

There’s another place in today’s Gospel where our translation has the word “my” but the original has something stronger. It’s not just “the love that is mine”; there’s also “the commandment that is mine” – not the commandment that Jesus issues – for he is not a master giving orders to a slave – but the commandment that corresponds to Jesus’ nature and mission. It is the commandment to love with his love.

And there’s one further place. Jesus also speaks, not of “my joy” but of “the joy that is mine” – the joy of unbroken communion with the Father. As Archbishop Temple said, “The promise and hope is not only that we may be joyful as . . . [Jesus] is joyful . . . but that joy of the same substance and quality as His – *the joy which is mine* – may be in us.”

If we abide in the love that is his, we will keep the commandment that is his, and experience the joy that is his. Oh, how I want this. How I want to abide in the love of the one who has chosen me for himself, to be that beloved disciple, to lay my head at Jesus’ breast, to see into his heart with the perception of perfect friendship and know with utter certainty that he lives again for me and in me, so that the joy that is his will be in me, and my joy will be complete.

“Jesus said to his disciples, ‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.’”