

“Abide in My Love”
May 19, 2019 (Graduation Sunday)
St. Paul’s UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

John 15:9-17

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 have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 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. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

[sung]

“*All you need is love...*”

Love...is... everywhere! Pop stars sing about it; movies base their storylines around it; books sell because of it, and that’s just *romantic* love. Think about all the different instances we use the word “love” in every day conversation: “I love your shirt. I love my new boss. I love chocolate.” We use the word “love” *all the time* – we throw it around so casually, it ends up meaning almost whatever we want it to mean.

So... what *is* love? What is real love? What does it look like? And how do we know when we’ve found it?

Our scripture lesson for this morning comes from the Gospel according to John, and it, too, is all about love. In this passage, which is part of John’s “farewell discourse,” Jesus is talking to his disciples about his imminent departure from them. He’s telling them that he is going away, going to a place where they cannot follow. So, how will his disciples deal with it? What will they do?

Hint: it all has to do with love.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you,” Jesus begins, “so, abide in my love.” Okay, Jesus, you may have already lost me here. Abide in my love? Do what now? *Abide* is such an old-fashioned sounding word; it’s such a

churchy word. It's definitely not one we throw around much in casual conversation...

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm just abiding."

No, we don't use this word too much in our everyday lives. So what in the world does Jesus mean by it?

The way I see it, I think Jesus could mean two things here. If you look up the word "abide," you will find that there are two definitions,¹ pretty different from one another. The first is *to put up with; to tolerate*. That one strikes me as almost funny, when I think about Jesus saying to his disciples something like, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; *put up with my love*." It seems so funny, and then I think about it for another moment... and it seems so true.

Maybe we've actually stumbled onto something pretty profound here. In all his talk about love, maybe "putting up with each other" is exactly what Jesus is after. Sometimes I wonder if we forget how much time those disciples would have spent together; sometimes I wonder if we forget *how much they would've gotten on each other's nerves!*

Being in community means butting heads with each other, pushing each other's buttons, even offending each other from time to time. Whether it was Jesus' bunch of followers 2000 years ago, or us today, to live in community means that, inevitably, we are going to bug each other now and again. No matter how hard we try, it's bound to happen. Whether it's a family living together under one roof, or a *church* family living out God's calling together, after a while, we really start to grate on each other. And Jesus is no fool. He knows that. So he says to his disciples as he is leaving them: "Okay, this love I keep talking about... it all begins with a little tolerance. Our differences, the things we don't understand about each other, the things that drive us crazy about each other... the love that *I'm* talking about... it starts with putting up with this stuff... and trying to let some of it go."

That's the first thing Jesus means when he says, "Abide in my love." But I don't think that's all he means. Let's not forget about that second definition for the word "abide:" which is, *to wait patiently for*. So it seems to me that Jesus is *also* saying that love means... waiting. Here Jesus is, with his disciples, right on the verge of their separation from each other. These disciples, they don't know where he is going. They don't know how long he's going to be gone. So, "abide in my love," Jesus tells them. In other words, "No matter where I go, no matter where *you* go, my love is waiting for you."

What a timely word for *us*, here today, as we are gathered to celebrate one of our own – that's you, Sean – who is right on the verge of his separation from us.

Sean, when I was your age, when I went away to school, I got kind of lost for a while. It happens to a lot of us, even those of us who grew up in Christian

¹ My definitions are from an online dictionary: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/abide>.

families, going to church every Sunday, it happens to a lot of us, that when we leave the place that has nurtured us for so long, we can get kind of lost.

So, I got kind of lost when I went away to school. No one was telling me to go to church anymore, so I didn't. In fact, I stopped going to church for quite a few years there. After all, I had made plenty of friends and found my own community with them, and it was... okay. I had what I needed. Or so I thought. But even at 19, 20 years old, I do remember feeling like something was missing. I didn't know what it was at the time, but something just didn't quite feel right. So yeah, I was a little bit lost.

Fast-forward a few more years: I'm sitting in my dorm room, my senior year of college, and there is this gentle tug at the edge of my spirit (I guess this is what we call God's still, small voice) and it's saying something like, "Hey, remember me? Remember that church you used to go to? Well, I've got something for you to do. We're waiting for you." It was just a faint nudge, and seemed to come right out of the blue. But it was very real. And very familiar. It had been waiting for me. And it felt like... coming home.

So, Sean, you're going off to school pretty soon. In just a few months, you're leaving your family, your friends, your town, your church, the teams you've been a part of – you're leaving this part of the world that has nurtured and loved you for all these years. And I don't know if you're going to get lost when you go away. I'm certainly not saying you will get lost. You very well may not. You may find your faith strengthening, your love for God growing, your sense of God's call on your life becoming even more powerful as you embark on your adventures away from home. But, if you're like me, if you're like some of us here, you may get a little bit lost. And if you do, remember that a lot of us have been there. And what I can tell you, what *we* can tell you, is this: *no matter what*, we are abiding with you. In other words, our love for you is waiting. Our love is always going to be here. Your family, your friends, your town, your church: we are abiding with you, in love. We are waiting for you.

Most of all, though, God is abiding with you. God's love is always waiting for you, always ready to seek you out when you are lost, always ready to bring you home. Always, always. "You did not choose me but I chose you," Jesus says to his disciples; and he says it to us. "You did not choose me but I chose you," God says to us when we are baptized. "You did not choose me but I chose you," God says to us when we are confirmed. And on and on.

Today we begin to say "farewell" to one who has been a part of our family for a long time. "You did not choose me but I chose you," God says to you, Sean. And God says it to each one of us here today. "You did not choose me but I chose you." *That* is what real love is; that's what it looks like.

Real love looks like putting away our grudges, setting aside our differences, and resting in the God who is abiding in love, who is waiting for each one of us to come home.

Thanks be to God.