

“Abide in Love”
 Sunday, May 6, 2018
 St. Mark’s Episcopal Fincastle
 Rev. Dr. Jenny Call

Acts 10:44-48
 1 John 5:1-6
 John 15:9-17
 Psalm 98

It is a pleasure to be with you today, and I am grateful for the invitation from your priest and for your hospitality. I bring you greetings from Hollins University, where I met Willis in person last fall as he represented St. Mark’s at our Religious Communities Fair. The fair is an opportunity for students to learn about the faith communities in our area so that they may find a place to worship if they choose. I am grateful for your outreach to our students.

It is a very busy time of year at Hollins as another academic year comes to an end. I empathize with our graduating students as they stand in the crossroads between what has been and the unknown path that lies ahead. I understand on a personal level as I will graduate on May 17th with my Doctorate of Ministry in Educational Leadership from Virginia Theological Seminary. Some people begin a degree program with a definite plan in mind, and others...hope to find the plan along the way. I’m still waiting for God to help me to discern what this new title “Dr.” is all about.

We’ve all had those transformational moments in our lives when what we’ve waited and worked for comes to pass. But there are also the many seasons in which we are waiting, uncertain of how to move forward. This is where our faith gets worked out.

Recently we celebrated the joy of Easter. It is the highlight of the church year, and the foundation of our faith. But the liturgical calendar reminds us that Easter is a season, a time to make meaning of the miracle of resurrection as we await the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. It’s a time to consider what faith looks like in the in-between times. As we are six Sundays into the season, it’s time to ask ourselves have our alleluias become more muted? Have our joyous professions of faith faltered? As the first disciples pondered the gospel, waiting in anxiety and cautious joy between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, we as Christ’s disciples in another uncertain time continue to question how to live out our faith as we wait for his return. How do we live faithfully in this in-between time?

Jesus’ answer in today’s gospel reading is, “abide in my love.” *Abide in my love.*

Abide...I love the images this brings to mind. I think of cozy spaces, an abode, a home. There is an intimacy a closeness. We choose to remain and live with Jesus, our source and shelter. I also think of the image that Jesus shares preceding today’s scripture reading in the beginning of John chapter 15. Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches. God is the vine grower. When we abide in Jesus, the vine, then he can be the source of all we need. We as branches can thrive and bear good fruit, which is more love.

We abide in Christ’s love when we obey his commandment to love one another. I can’t help but think of this from my perspective as a parent. I am the mother of two children; Brady, who is 12 and finishing his first year of middle school; and Maryn, who is 10 and in 4th grade. They are in that wonderful and *challenging* period of growth where they are testing the boundaries and asserting their growing independence. It is a good a healthy thing, but often a difficult developmental phase for both parents and kids. Out of my love for them, I often must establish boundaries to keep them safe. Frequently,

they get frustrated by my restrictions and rules. I remind them that my commandments are not meant to be burdens, but come from my love for them and from my desire for them to grow up and share the love they have received in healthy and appropriate ways. That their love may have a positive impact and transform their world. I hope and pray that my parenting comes from the love that God has given me and that I share that love in a way that Brady and Maryn can feel God's love.

God's love is a continuous feedback loop. When we accept God's love, that love overflows from our hearts and we share it with others. But instead of running out, that love only continues to multiply as our love for God is demonstrated in the ways we love others. And through loving others, we feel God's love and presence most closely. As the Les Miserables song says, "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Love, as the subject of countless songs, books, and pieces of art, seems to be a simple concept. It becomes cliché. "All you need is love". Love can be reduced to a feeling that we either have or don't have. The same word "love" can apply to how I feel about my husband, my children, my complicated relationships with my family of origin, and ice cream. And I genuinely love ice cream.

We know that it isn't always simple, though. Love is easy when it comes naturally. Even in more difficult moments, such as battles of will with my tween-age children, I can love them even when I don't love their attitudes. But times of fear and uncertainty test our ability to show and feel love, particularly to those outside our circles. There are times when we are the ones outside the circle, feeling alone and lonely. Other times we witness the hatred of our divided world and fear that there isn't enough love to go around. Or we wrestle with injustice and worry that love won't be enough to make a difference.

This is where love surprises us, I think. Love is not always a feeling, it is an action. Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Love is a verb, and a powerful one. While our love can be a response to love we have received, sometimes love is a choice we make to love others who have not been loving towards us. Recently, there was a news story about two black men who were arrested without cause as they waited for a business meeting in a Philadelphia Starbucks. Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson were led away in handcuffs amid the protests of other customers. Later a settlement was reached in their wrongful arrest. At the request of the two men, the "city of brotherly love" awarded them \$1 each and promised to set up a program to support young entrepreneurs at Robinson and Nelson's request. According to ABC news, Donte Robinson said this of their decision, "We thought long and hard about it, and we feel like this is the best way to see that change that we want to see. It's not a right-now thing that's good for right now, but I feel like we will see the true change over time."

Love is surprisingly transformative...but it takes time. And sometimes it means going beyond our hurts, even injustice we've seen and experienced, and having the faith that putting love out into the world will make a difference. Love is a response we choose even when, *especially* when, we don't feel it. Love goes beyond what we need or think we deserve and instead thinks about the greater good. As such, love often means sacrifice: "This is my commandment that you love one another. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Love builds bridges, not to create unity or uniformity, but to make a way for understanding and compassion in our differences. We know we are to love our neighbors. It is generally easy to love those we call our neighbors, those who are close to us and we know well. But it is surprisingly easy to distance

ourselves from others by making them an “other” instead of a neighbor, assuming they are so different from us that they are unworthy of our love or attention. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh said that “Understanding must precede love.” When I hear your story, you are no longer an “other” to me. You have a story like I have a story, and our stories have elements in common that bond us together. There may also be extreme differences, but once I understand those, I can respect you. We have built a bridge of understanding, which paves the way for us to love our neighbors and to truly see all people as our neighbors.

This is important because God’s love is surprising in whom it chooses. In the scripture from Acts, the Jewish believers were astounded that the Holy Spirit fell on ALL who heard the word. It had been poured out even on the Gentiles. Do you know any Gentiles? WE are those Gentiles! The Spirit has been poured out even on us. It is a surprising act of grace that we have been adopted into the family of God and that we have been given this inheritance of love to share with others. Yet, ironically, how often have Christians become the gatekeepers of who is worthy of receiving God’s love? I’ve heard it said that we know we have made God in our image when God hates the same people we do. But in reality, God pours out love out on all who will receive it. That love is freely given and we don’t choose who is worthy of receiving it, thanks be to God, because some might be astounded that God chose to love us!

God’s love is surprising in how it does not diminish, but only grows as it is poured out and shared.

When my kids were younger, one of their longest lasting toys was a water table. This plastic table was a fixture in our backyard for years, and both my son and daughter loved to play and splash in the water. The base of the table was a round blue basin which held the water, and in the center was a yellow tower containing an assortment of water wheels and funnels that extended a couple feet above the table. The kids would fill up a pitcher with water and pour it out into the top funnel. They watched, transfixed, as the water trickled down through the various tubes and wheels into the basin below. They could repeat the process for hours, it seemed, and the water never ran out. As much as they poured out, the water was contained in the table’s basin, ready to be poured out again.

The same is true of God’s love. It’s poured out, and poured out, and poured out, and we are filled, and filled, and filled, and still there is more. Love creates more love. There is always more than enough.

This, too, is communion. The wine will be poured for all who believe, a remembrance of Jesus’ blood poured out for us, a sign of God’s great love for us. This love has been present from the beginning of creation. This love spoke the world into being, created all life, and called it good. This love sent prophets, and priests, and kings to guide people in the way, and then Love sent God’s own son.

Love poured out from God to Jesus, and from Jesus to his disciples. The Holy Spirit continues to pour love onto all who love God so we are reminded that God is with us. This love never runs out; there is always enough. When we drink of the cup, we are filled once again with that love; it overflows.

In this communion, as we come to the altar and share in the sacred meal together, we are reminded that the fruit of our love for God is in how we pour out and share this love with others. “As my Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”