

To Abide Is to Love
Pastor Jonna Bohigian
John 15:1 – 8

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been eight weeks. It doesn't quite seem possible that I've been away that long, but it has! It's now time to come back and to live into this new normal, as a wife, a mom, *and* a pastor. I feel that it is only right to begin this new season by expressing my gratitude to you, St. Timothy's. Being able to be at home with Dax for two months, **(picture)** to get to know this little one that had been growing inside me, and to experience what I couldn't quite imagine, has been an incredible gift. Thank you!

Many of you have been a part of Alek and my journey to parenthood, and in significant ways! I still have a voice message on my phone from Brenda Guise **(picture)**, who *gushed* after hearing that I was pregnant. She told me that she had been praying *every day* that I would get pregnant, and saw my pregnancy as evidence that God *does* perform miracles! Wow! I had *no* idea!

I share with *anyone* who will hear – Dax is a gift. God didn't *have* to give him to us. We didn't *deserve* to be parents. But God decided to give him to us, so we will do our best to honor this gift. And I pray every day that he would be a person who looks like Jesus, a gift who brings justice and joy to *many* people.

Thank you for being on this journey with us and for being his family here in San Jose – his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. You are the ones who will model for him, on a daily basis, what the Christian life looks like – its ups, its downs, its joys, and its pains.

I've got a question for you: Are you ever surprised by what comes to mind when you have a lot of time to think? I was! Almost immediately after having begun maternity leave, I remember looking at Dax – this sweet, innocent-looking boy – and thinking about my sin. Now this was something I was *not* expecting. As I looked at his little face, I couldn't *help* but hope that he would be better than me – stronger in faith, more loving, more generous. I thought of friendships that have disappeared, ways that I have failed to love, and the daughter and sister that I wish I had been.

I spoke with a Christian friend about this. She told me, “When you have a child, it is common to want to be the best model for your child, and to be reminded of where you have fallen short. So long as this brings you to *confession* and not to *shame*, it is good.”

Considering *my* recent journey, and the journey *we* have been through as a nation and as a world, there can be no Scripture more apropos on which to meditate than John chapter 15.

Jesus has begun to prepare his disciples for his departure. He will leave them, but he will *not* abandon them. When he leaves, God the Father will send the Holy Spirit to be with them. The Holy Spirit will teach them all things and will remind them of what Jesus has told them.

Then Jesus paints a picture of who he is. In the Gospel of John, this is what Jesus *does* – he shares *who he is* by painting a word picture. He says, “I am the bread of life.”¹ “I am the light of the world.”² “I am the door of the sheep.”³ “I am the resurrection and the life.”⁴ “I am the good shepherd.”⁵ “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”⁶ And finally, “I am the true

¹ John 6:35

² John 8:12

³ John 10:7

⁴ John 11:25

⁵ John 10:11

⁶ John 14:6

grapevine.”⁷ Jesus *longs* to be known by his disciples. He knows they won’t ever grasp the full extent to his identity, but he paints a picture and invites them to use their imaginations.

Jesus is the true grapevine. All other grapevines are inconsequential in light of Jesus, and aren’t worth their time.

Jesus’ Father is the gardener. The gardener does His work to produce the *juiciest* grapes. If a branch does not produce anything, He cuts it off. And if a branch *does* produce grapes, He regularly prunes it so that the yield will be juicy and plump, high quality grapes.

Jesus goes on to say, “Remain in me and I will remain in you.”⁸ Or, in our discipleship language, “Abide in me and I will abide in you.” This Greek word, to “remain” or “abide,” is the same, and it’s a favorite of John’s. John used this word almost as much as the rest of the Gospel writers combined! (John – 23 times and the other Gospels – 25 times.)⁹

Clearly, abiding was important to John, but what does it mean? What does it mean to *abide* in Jesus? Firstly, it means what comes to mind – praying, reading Scripture, being a part of the worshiping community and participating in Holy Communion – these are all a part of what it means in John to *abide*. And there is one more aspect to *abiding* in John which comes a bit later in chapter 15. If you’ve got your Bibles with you, I invite you to take a look. Beginning with verse 10: **(verse)** “When you obey my commandments, you remain [abide] in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and [abide] in His love.” Jesus’ disciples abide in Jesus by obeying him.

⁷ John 15:1

⁸ John 15:4

⁹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 898.

Obedience. Eek. That's kind of a "dirty" word. Owners take their dogs to "obedience school." Parents wish that their children would obey them. But obedience is not something *adults* seek for themselves.

When pastor and author, Eugene Peterson, sent a book to his editor with the title, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, his editor *rejected* his title. "'Obedience,' he argued, was a dull word – 'dead in the water'...It didn't fit the ambience of contemporary American religion." But Eugene "held out: it was a protest word against the fad-chasing, self-centered individualism of American spirituality." Eugene wrote him a letter. "'I know we aren't used to this. We have grown up in a culture that urges us to take charge of our own lives. We are introduced to thousands of books that we are trained to *use* – look up information, acquire skills, master knowledge, divert ourselves...whatever. But *use*? Well-meaning people tell us that the Christian gospel will put us in charge of life, will bring us happiness and bounty. So we go out and buy a Bible. We adapt, edit, sift, summarize. We then use whatever seems useful and apply it in our circumstances however we see fit. We take charge of the Christian gospel, using it as a toolbox to repair our lives, or as a guidebook for getting what we want, or as an inspirational handbook to enliven a dull day...[But] our task is to obey – believingly, trustingly, obey. Simply obey in a 'long obedience.'"¹⁰ **(picture)** *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* was published in 1980.

As out of vogue as obedience may be, this is what Jesus calls his disciples to do. He calls his disciples to abide in his love by obeying his commands, just as he abides in his Father's love by obeying *His* commands. And what is Jesus' command? Take a look at verse 12: **(verse)** "Love

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor*, 248 – 249.

each other in the same way I have loved you.” *Love each other in the same way I have loved you.*

Let’s take a step back. Who was Jesus’ audience? Jesus was speaking to his disciples. The Twelve had been with Jesus since the beginning of his public ministry – almost three years. After having given up *everything* to follow him, and working alongside Jesus for three years, you would think that loving one another might not have been so difficult. But it was.

The disciples were Jews, but they were as different as they could *possibly* have been. They were on opposite ends of the political spectrum. Matthew was a toll collector, and Simon was a Zealot. Toll collectors were *hated* by the Jews because they collected money from them to pay the Roman government, and then personally profited from it. Zealots, on the other hand, sought to *overthrow* the Roman government. Other disciples argued because they wanted to be the greatest. Peter and some of the others were fishermen, unlikely to have been chosen to be *anyone’s* disciples. The Twelve were an unusual group of suspects, and almost *assuredly* would *not* have been put together by *anyone* else!

The last words that Jesus commands is that they love one another. And the greatest demonstration of that love is to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.¹¹ *This* is what Jesus does, he *lays down his life* for his friends, for you and for me.

We are friends who don’t make any sense. We are so different from one another, and each one of us is *so sinful*. Romans 5:8 says, “But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.” *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

¹¹ John 15:13

We were *enemies* of God. You and I did not deserve Jesus, but he called us “friends,” and he died for you and for me.

Jesus commands his disciples to follow his example, to love one another. Love the one you don’t understand. Love the one a part of a different, or even “fanatical” political party. Love the one who betrays you. Love the one who doesn’t show love to you.

Jesus’ command to love one another is a command to you and to me, and it is *how* we abide in Jesus. 1 John 4:20 says, **(verse)** “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ but hates a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we *can* see, how can we love God, whom we *cannot* see?”

A couple of years ago, I met with a group of pastors to strengthen our preaching skills. Almost immediately, someone complained that they pastored a “purple” congregation. I asked someone near me what they meant by this, and the response was a simple, “They are pastors to a congregation that is both red and blue, republican and democrat.” Throughout our time together, this complaint continued to bubble to the surface. It was one of the most difficult realities to navigate, a congregation of differing political ideologies. And they wished that everyone was the same.

Life would be so much easier if everyone were the same, wouldn’t it? You can say whatever you want, and you get a nod of approval. You feel motivated, because instead of resistance, you feel everyone pulling in the same direction. You feel affirmed that you are right and “they” are wrong.

It *would* be so much easier, but that is *not* our calling as Jesus’ disciples. Our calling is to *love one another* – without exception and without caveats. This is how we are loved, and so

we love one another *so much* that we are ready to *die* for one another. *This* is how we abide in Jesus. And *this* is how people will know that we are disciples of Jesus, by our love.

Confession and prayer.

Blessing: May we abide in Jesus, as he abides in us. And may the world know that we are Jesus' disciples because of our *radical* love for one another. Amen!