

May 10, 2009  
Calvary Presbyterian Church  
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Before I was ordained, I did a short interim at Chevy Chase Presbyterian in the District. When I left, their pastor gave me this little book, *Ministry is a High Calling, Aim Low*, full of instructions for new pastors. I've found all the advice to be very helpful in my ministry. Rule number two—right after, “You will be the custodian—learn how to regulate the heating system,” and right before, “All ministers are interims—arriving at a church is like jumping on to a moving train, and leaving is like jumping off the same train a few miles down the track, both events can be disorienting—for the pastor and for the congregation.” Between those two important items is Rule number two: Avoid any word you learned in seminary. Never mention the name of any dead German theologian or talk about Greek words. I've been pretty good about avoiding those theologians, but those Greek words sometimes seem to be so important, I just can't ignore them.

This morning I just have to talk about the Greek verb **meno**. In both of the scripture readings for today, **meno** is used over and over again. The translators of the NRSV have chosen to use the old-fashioned word **abide** to translate **meno**. That same word had been used in all English translations since Tyndale first translated the scripture into English about 500 years ago. But **abide** is not a word we use much anymore. It has a long list of meanings in the dictionary, not all of which will do to translate **meno**. Some of the modern translators have chosen to use words like **stay** or **remain** or **live with**. In Greek, the verb has that sense of permanence. It describes a relationship that just moves in and completely takes over your life; something you expect to stay with forever.

This passage is from the private conversation that Jesus had with his disciples during their last meal together. Jesus had amazed them by washing their feet earlier in the evening and in this passage, we still find them sitting around the table listening to Jesus final message. Listen for what the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John has to say to us today. John 15:1-8.

### Bearing Fruit

After I finished at Chevy Chase, I went on a mini-mission trip with the folk from my home congregation. We went into the city and stayed at the Church of the Pilgrims near DuPont Circle for the weekend. The group was really surprised to discover that I had never done this before. I had often dropped off youth groups and their sponsors—negotiated the tricky parking lot, put the milk in the fridge, wished them well, and left. But I had never stayed.

We settled in and got to know each other on Friday night. Incredibly early on Saturday morning we went to serve breakfast at one of the city soup kitchens. The project called *So*

*Others Might Eat* feeds 300 to 400 people every morning of the year, no questions asked. Churches and other altruistic groups around town come in to cook one morning a month and another crew of volunteers come in to serve and clean up. I'd been on the cooking crew with my seminary classmates several times, but this was my first time in the dining room.

The floor wasn't level and I couldn't quite get my balance. I couldn't quite figure out what needed to be done. I was helpless as the young woman screamed and pounded on the locked back door begging to get in to the restroom. I didn't have the key. I didn't know who did. I was helpless as a tall woman with a serious hip displacement, who was wearing a green volunteer apron just like ours, took one plate after another from the serving line, eating just the sticky sausages with her fingers and dumping the rest directly into the trash. Who was she? Did the staff know what she was doing? Do I frown at her like a small child who is doing something she knows is naughty? Who would steal food from the folks crowding in at that door? I was helpless as the tiny emaciated woman cried huge tears and sobbed that someone had shot her husband. I didn't know if she was reporting the news or reliving ancient pain. No one seemed to hear her. No one threw their arms around her and held her until the terror ebbed. My heart ached for her, but I was temporary help. I couldn't quite grasp all that was going on. I never could quite get my balance. The floor wasn't level. I was just passing through this world of need. I wasn't staying.

Later that afternoon we had a visit with a bright, earnest young woman from the National Coalition for the Homeless. She read us all the statistics—noting that the number of homeless children is rising alarmingly. She introduced us to two homeless men who told us their heartbreaking stories of betrayal and neglect. She told us the goal of the Coalition was to end homelessness in America. She was very informed, very charming, but she was an intern, going back to graduate school in the spring. She wasn't staying either.

She talked as if she really believed it was possible to end homelessness in this country. She must have believed that someone she spoke to one of these days would have the political clout to get a seriously increased budget for low income housing units and a zoning variance for affordable rooming houses in the District. I would never want to dampen her youthful enthusiasm, but I wanted to say to her—“My dear, my dear, finding an apartment for every one in the city shelter today will not end homelessness. To end homelessness we would need to reorganize our economy so that everyone who works a full day, no matter how menial the job, would make enough money to find shelter and feed their children. It would mean figuring out how to provide an appropriate education for even the slowest and most uncooperative children. It would mean providing comprehensive health care for everyone—especially extensive mental health care. And then figuring out how to insist that unstable people take advantage of it without stomping on individual rights and returning to a time when anyone could be committed to a mental health facility against their will—sometimes with no treatment provided, sometimes for a lifetime. It would mean figuring out what to do about the immigration mess—without building a wall across Arizona. (We were just horrified at the price of that small stretch of new fencing around our back door here at Calvary. The tab for the border fence so far is 2 billion dollars and I read yesterday that Homeland Security has just invested another 600 million for sensor towers to add electronic surveillance of the border area. Doesn't anyone else see a frightening rerun of that wall around Berlin?) Ending homelessness would mean

figuring out how to stop alcoholism and addiction problems and child abuse and domestic violence—just for starters.”

The enormity of any piece of the potential solutions just boggles my mind. Where do we start? It would mean nothing less than changing our world—letting love and compassion overcome everything that stands in its way. Letting light shine in every darkened corner. My well-educated and politically experienced mind tells me that this is not going to happen. It is truly an impossible dream. Nevertheless, it **is** what I pray for. Peace and justice for everyone in our community. Peace and justice for all of God’s children everywhere in the world. The scripture says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done” (15: 7). I will keep praying anyway. The gospel insists on it.

**IF** we abide—stay, remain, live with—Jesus; and, if we allow his words abide in us—stay, remain, absorb our very being—then, whatever we pray for is possible. This text is the very middle of Jesus’ long farewell address—he makes this same promise three times—once in Chapter 14, here, and again in Chapter 16. Surely he meant for us to realize this was something we needed to hear, something we needed to remember; something we needed to believe. One of those theologians, who’s not German and not dead, so I feel free to mention her, said that if we really believed this about the power of prayer, the ushers on Sunday morning would be handing out hard hats and signal flares instead of bulletins. We would have seat belts to hold us into the pews until the upheaval from the world shaking changes that we pray for in here every week had subsided.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus says that he is the vine and all that we are and all that we can do is dependent on our relationship with him. Branches of a vine are so intertwined that it’s hard to tell how they are related to the branches around them. No branch is more important than the ones around it. While it is healthy and growing, it actually gets hard to tell what is a branch and what is the vine. But if a branch is cut off from the vine itself, it will wither and perish. It can never bear fruit on its own, separated from the true vine.

Grape vines are the symbol of permanence in the Bible. There is not much fertile land in Israel, and to give up the gentle slopes on the hillsides to wait for very slow growing grape vines to bear fruit, is to give up years of potential wheat or barley harvests which would make bread to feed your family. It is to believe that the future matters enough to give up what is easy and dependable in order to wait for those vines to produce—to abide patiently while the branches absorb what they need from the vine in order to bear fruit. It is to carefully prune, cutting out the branches that hide in the shade of the others, so the branches that reach out for the light will have enough strength to flourish and bear fruit.

I know it is more dangerous to talk to a Presbyterian congregation about the need to bear fruit than it is to talk about those German theologians. We are firmly committed to that Reform principal that we do not have to do anything to merit the love of God. Nothing we can possibly do will increase God’s love for us. God loves us because God chooses to love. We read in that epistle lesson this morning, “God is love and those that abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them.” All that abiding—staying, remaining, living with. What Jesus expects from

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, New York: Harper and Row, 1982, -40-41.

disciples is our very life. To live our lives believing that Jesus himself is the source of all we do—to live that way would be to love each other excessively in the same way that Jesus loved us.

Bearing fruit is not something that might happen after you become a disciple—it is part and parcel of being a disciple. Actually, this text puts the bearing fruit part first: “My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (15:8). The two things are as inseparable as the branch is from the vine. To bear fruit is to hear the commandment to show how we love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, because we love God whom we have not seen, but who lives—abides—in us. It’s not dropping off youth groups to work among the homeless, not dropping in to the soup kitchen for one meal, not sending others off to build a habitat house. But staying—abiding with each other—even the unlovely and unlovable—because indeed Jesus is willing to abide—to stay, to remain, to live with—us.