

Abiding in Christ

John 15:9-17

Rev. Nick Hatch

Abiding God, remind us of your enduring presence when we seek wholeness of long for wholeness in those we love. My the words of our mouths and the mediations of our hearts be acceptable to you, oh our Rock and our Redeemer.

Last week we heard the first portion of this scripture from John calling us to abide and to bear fruit, using the metaphor of the vine and branched. Jesus continues with this metaphor, expanding it outwards to speak about love and the interconnected nature of the power of divine love with regards to bearing fruit. Relating love, human relationship, and divine blessing is nothing new for Jesus for earlier in John Jesus said:

*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.*

Love and blessing, sacrifice and discipleship, life and death, earth and heaven are all part of the indwelling experience of life lived in Jesus Christ, whose arms outstretched compose the intertwined branches of our Living God. John's word enrich and complexify our understanding of Christian

love, for it is love without limit, love without merit, love without rational logic- but a sentient, responsive, breathing, flesh and bone, sacrificial gift.

For Christians the true archetype of love is found within the inner life of God. Using Jesus analogy, disciples' relationships with one another should conform their relationships with Jesus, to the Word, and then to the source of the Word- God the creator. It is within this web of love, the Trinity, that we truly glimpse what "wondrous love" this is.

St. Augustine offers an illustration for the Trinity which drives home this beautiful mystery. He viewed the Trinity as: Father – the Lover, Son – the Beloved, and Spirit – the Love that is exchanged between the Lover and the Beloved.

Lover, Beloved, and Love: what a dynamic web we find ourselves entangled.

Speaking of belonging, In the United Church of Christ we say:

*We believe that each person is unique and valuable. It is the will of God that every person belongs to a family of faith where they have a strong sense of being valued and loved. We believe that each person is on a spiritual journey and that each of us is at a different stage of that journey. - ucc.org*

And so today, this our Mental Health Sunday, we take time to ponder what it means to be valued, loved, journeying, as a family of faith through the joys and challenges of our collective mental health. We know that our

personal and corporate well-being are inseparable from our experience of wondrous community. We know our psychological and emotional health is engrafted into the flesh and bone of the vine of Christ.

I found church members who have loved someone amidst mental health struggles. And I asked them: What does it mean to “abide” with the one they love after reading this passage from John.

Each response gives us a lesson, an important perspective to the joys and challenges of being engrafted with one another. Think of these stories in complex and intertwined analogy we learned from St Augustine: Lover, Beloved, and love

First, Lover. God is the lover.

A member reflects upon loving his brother who was bipolar, saying:

My brother, Craig, he was a fighter. Most people that knew him would not have described him as a fighter, because he was a very kind and gentle man that played beautiful music. He was a fighter, not in terms of fists and punches, but in the fact that he did not give up.

It came as a shock to me to hear about my brother, in his mid-twenties, married, working as a teacher, that his life had suddenly gone totally off the rails. He was hospitalized and diagnosed as manic depressive. We now call it bipolar. He was put on lithium, which allowed him to function but not necessarily at a high level. He could no longer work as a teacher or hold

down a job other than having a few piano students. He stayed on lithium for decades which gradually destroying his kidneys. When the doctors discovered the damage, they changed his medication which treated his bipolar extremely well. The last few years of his life, he was mentally the best he had been in years. However, physically his body was now failing, and his life short.

I saw my brother about six weeks before he passed. He had just gotten out of one of his now frequent hospitalizations and was in a rehab center and on the edge of life. His hands were trembling now, and what had come so easily and effortlessly in the past now also became a fight. But as he started to play, the trembling in his hands faded and he played beautifully. It would be the last time that I would hear him play.

Inspired by my brother's life, the way he dealt with being bipolar by not dwelling on it and still finding ways to use his God given music talents, I frequently ask myself:

Am I using whatever talents that I have been given to the best of my ability, and are they doing any good in the world?

*Here is our first lesson for us today: God is The Lover, and we must center ourselves upon trusting God whose love is complete and endures all trauma.*

Jesus says “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.”

God is Love, and divine love is omniscient and omnipresent. It is a love that is so far beyond what we are capable of providing. It is a love that extends beyond death and proceeds our birth. A love so personal it causes us to reflect upon what’s most important, leaving us with transformative questions. And trusting that God’s love is real, and choosing to follow God’s life-giving commandments and centering ourselves upon God the unfailing Lover, release us to see the beauty of those we long to celebrate. Even in the midst of our fears and confusion in mental health disorders and crises, God’s love will not allow us to be singularly defined by our struggles. For we are his beloved children, we are more than a disorder or label- we are brothers and sisters, musicians and mothers, artists and uncles. People on spiritual journeys all in the holy act of returning to our maker.

Next comes, Beloved. Jesus is the beloved.

Another church member reflected upon the hardship of painful love. They shared:

My spouse’s depression puts a major strain on our relationship. I was often walking on eggshells, not knowing if something I said or didn’t say, did or didn’t do would result in a sudden, sharp, angry rebuke. Days would be spent under a cloud of not knowing what I could or couldn’t say or do so I would avoid interacting with them as much as possible. I didn’t feel loved or

think I could love them back. I “abided” in the relationship for the sake of the children but I couldn’t say I was happy.

*In this difficult recollection comes our second lesson: Loving someone through mental health struggles often brings suffering like that of Christ’s suffering for us.*

Perhaps this is the most difficult role within the trinity of love. For this role alludes to God’s beloved, God’s beloved Son. The son who performed miracles and gave hope, whose words bring life and whose thongs of his sandals we are not worthy to untie. God’s son who suffered. Suffered so that we know in our suffering we are never alone. God’s son whom died a violent death. Because Jesus is the beloved, Jesus knows the suffering we endure and inflict upon one another through mental illness and its relational trauma. The work of The Beloved on the cross- has the power to redeem these heartaches and failures and shows us we cannot “fix” another person’s brokenness nor allow that brokenness to ultimately define our calling own callings to serve Jesus ourselves.

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, so that the father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.”

Jesus chose all of us to bear fruit. Jesus does the choosing. Jesus bears our hurt and relational harm. He does this to offer us life, and life in abundance. Remember your calling is to trust in God, serve Jesus and bear fruit with the days you have been blessed to know.

Third, Love. The Spirit is the Love uniting them all.

One member shares:

Hearing the words: "I'm having a rough time..." from my loved one have challenged me to learn how to respond and adapt to their feelings, which is an ever-changing thing. Sometimes it is easy, like saying "Tell me about it." I know I need to present positivity, so that my positivity mirror reflects more strongly than the dark one. I wish I could do that better! But that is the love I give and I know that my efforts are appreciated and loved back. I don't abide my life partner. We abide each other.

*Here is our third lesson: The love of the Spirit unites us with one another, abiding with one another, we reflect a more complete love of the creator.*

United in the love of the Spirit, means giving and receiving, being formed and reformed all by Grace.

For Jesus says: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Sometimes our relationships come easily, sometimes they are hard, usually it's a life long journey of both. In the case of being united in love through the Spirit with those who struggle with their mental health, we enter into the ever-changing sea of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors which challenge us

to adapt, reflect joy into the darkness, provide for a listening ear, seek understanding where we have none, walk into the irrational, and the hope, daily hope, that we could abide with even more grace and zeal, praying for the light of Christ to penetrate even the darkest valley. The love of the Spirit unites and is uniting, it is living and churning and breath cast upon us. Becoming more aware of the holiness of the love between us honors the gift of sharing bonds in this life, and honors both the Lover and Beloved in our complex web of wondrous community.

Liberation theologian Jürgen Moltmann, a deep believer that it is God's nature to choose to suffer with humanity while providing us hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, comments upon the meaning of true love, in friendship. He says:

*When in human relationships, the parent-child relationship comes to an end, when the master-servant connection is abolished, and the with privileges associated with sexual position are removed, then what is truly human emerges and remains; and that is friendship. The new human being, the true human being, the free human being- is the friend. Friendship is the reasonable passion for truly human fellowship; it is mutual affection cemented by loyalty.* – Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p. 116.

Perhaps on this mental health Sunday it is Christ's promise for friendship, and its unparalleled freedom, that should close our time together.

For Paul says to the Corinthians:



*Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. – 2 Corinthians 3:17-18*

Friends: may we center our trust on The One whose love is timeless and divinely complete. May we receive the grace of the beloved Son who suffers by our sides. May we abide in uniting love of the Spirit, trusting this love to make the pieces of our hearts whole. For it is God's dream that you are well, peace-filled, whole, and fruitful.

Amen.