

“Remaining and Moving”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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John 15: 1-8

I grew up in Florida, and I learned to swim at such a young age that I can't remember a time when I wasn't swimming. I came from a family of competitive swimmers and there's a lot of family lore around it—stories like how my grandfather made my father and my aunt swim across the bay from their house to the city pier—and that's how they got to be such good swimmers because they were so afraid of sharks.

It's interesting because I was the only one in our family who never swam on a team—and I'm the only one still swimming regularly.

I swim a couple of times a week at a public pool and I love it. I can almost always get my own lane and the people are friendly—and, if I go in the morning it's generally the same people in the locker room—and it's almost always the same topic of conversation: how is the water? And by that, the questioner means how warm is it?

I just listen because, over the years I've learned that my judgment about the water is out of sync with most of the other swimmers—who are a number of years older. I used to be relieved whenever someone said, “oh, the water's great today,” knowing that, because it was warm, it would be easier to get in. But I started swimming longer distances—which meant I was in the water longer. And, I've realized that I actually swim much better when the water is cooler.

“Abide in me as I abide in you,” Jesus says to his disciples.

Abide. We use it mostly to mean going along with a court decision. But the Greek word means *remain*. Remain in me. Jesus uses the image of a vine with branches to talk about this remaining. The branches—in order to keep on living have to remain connected to the vine. Otherwise they just shrivel up and die.

Abide is a word that sounds so fixed. Remain. Which is a lot like *stay in the same place*.

But Jesus is painting a different picture with the vine and branches. Because vines do anything but stay in the same place.

Jesus is always talking in ways that bend our minds. Abiding with him—remaining with him—might be comforting but it's not comfortable. It's like abiding in a cool pool. Nobody is leisurely floating in that water. If you're remaining in that water, you're moving. And as uncomfortable as it is, you're actually growing as a swimmer.

I think it's helpful to know the context of these words about abiding. Jesus is speaking these words on the night he will be betrayed and arrested. He knows his time with his closest friends is coming to an end and he's trying to comfort and prepare them for his leaving. He's reassuring them of their continuing connection. And he promises that he will be with them in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says these words on a night when they're all together—celebrating that great Liberation Feast of the Passover. That time when they were really in touch with the power of God—and even if they didn't understand the full meaning of him abiding in them and them abiding in him—they might have been able to believe that all this abiding was possible.

I wonder how these beautiful words sounded the *next* day. When Jesus was not hanging out with them but instead was *hanging on a cross*. How true did this promise to abide with them seem then? I'm guessing it was pretty hard to believe these words of Jesus—that they even felt betrayed—that what seemed most real was his *absence* not his presence.

We know this place. One writer describes it as crying into the storm and receiving no answer. It's when the pain doesn't let up. When you long for the presence of someone you love—and all you feel is the absence. Or when you're looking for a way out and every door you try to open is locked. It's when the weight of the very real burden you're carrying has you pinned to the ground and you just can't get back on your feet.

It's that place where all you know is how alone you are.

Where you don't feel connected to much of anything—much less the living vine called Jesus.

It's a wrenching place to be.

I've been there twice—once for an extended period of time that made me wonder if I would ever get out. St. John of the Cross called it “the dark night of the soul.” It's when it's so dark, you can't see God *at all*.

There are many ways to understand the cross—and I also think it is beyond our complete understanding. One of the meanings that has become central for me is what it reveals about God's presence. What it says about God's abiding. The cross is this “hit you over the head” picture of God being in the place that looks by all accounts to be God-forsaken.

It didn't look that way on Good Friday. But on Easter, God makes it clear. Jesus was in that place that really *is* hell on earth—that place where all that seems real and true is the absence of God. Jesus was there. Jesus *is* there.

We might feel cut off from the vine. We might be in the place of being done with Jesus. But the crazy thing is that the branches can't cut themselves off from the Vine. Yes, there are times—sometimes some very long times—when the pain is so all encompassing that it's all we know. But Jesus is still there. Jesus remains attached to us. Jesus abides in us even in *those* times. Because that's just the way a Vine is.

There was an amazing story in the news this week about something that happened on a highway outside of Detroit. It was night—actually it was 1 in the morning and there was a man who was in a place of such desperation and disconnection that he was on the overpass, ready to jump on to the highway.

The highway patrol stopped traffic in both directions and sent out a call to truckers in the area. Thirteen trucks lined up—side by side—right under the overpass. What they did was shorten the man's fall. If he decided to jump, he would fall just 5 feet instead of 15 feet. Those

thirteen trucks stayed there—they remained—they abided. For two hours, until the man willingly backed off the edge and they were able to get him the help he needed.

What a picture this is. I can only imagine what was going on for the man on the overpass. But I'm sure it got through to him. It got through that wall of desperation and disconnection. It wasn't just the highway patrol officer who was telling him his life was worth living. Underneath him were 13 truckers who were saying that his life had value—to them.

The picture of the Vine and the branches is much more than a picture of our individual connection to Jesus. In the Gospel of John, this is a picture of the *church*. It's not the Vine and the branch. It's the Vine and the branches--plural.

And it gets at how all this abiding happens. Jesus is like the highway patrol officer, speaking words of comfort, telling us our lives have ultimate meaning, telling us he is with us. But the church—the branches connected to the Vine—is like those 13 trucks, making those words of Jesus real and visible and concrete.

That's the fruit Jesus was talking about. It's how the promise that he would be with us whenever 2 or 3 are gathered in his name gets fulfilled in real life. It may just be one or two other people but Jesus is present in us. We have the mind-bending blessing and calling to make the love of Jesus visible for each other.

We might underestimate what a difference that can make because we usually hide our dark nights of the soul from each other. So, you might never know just how important your presence was, your abiding was. You might never know that you were one of those 13 trucks. You might never know that your loving kindness made it possible for someone to know that God is with them—at a time when they did not know it.

The amazing thing about fruit is the seeds. They get planted—sometimes very far afield. The love that is experienced in this community is not contained in this community. And Jesus's promise to be with us—to abide with us—is revealed as much more. It's a love for the whole world—and it's growing in and through us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.