



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

MAY 13, 2012  
THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

## Abiding Love I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17

I love the writings of the Apostle John. He appreciates words and power they have to create images in our minds as they convey important meaning to our souls. At the beginning of his Gospel, John wrote what is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.  
John 1:1-5, RSV

In that vivid paragraph, John offers a summary of his beliefs about Jesus that identifies him as God the Creator, the origin of life, and the dispeller of darkness in an often dark world. Brilliant! Later on he writes,

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.  
John 3:16-17, KJV

In this most beloved of all Jesus' sayings, John conveys to us God's purpose in coming to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and his desire to save us, not to condemn us. Later, near the end of his time on earth, Jesus spoke to his disciples just before his death in an attempt to calm their anxious hearts and put their fears to rest:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.  
John 14:27, RSV

Time and time again in his gospel and his letters, John masterfully uses evocative language to convey eternal truths. That is why you have to read

John carefully, cautiously, and thoughtfully lest you miss one of these eloquent pearls of truth and wisdom.

We find one of these phrases tucked into verse 19 of chapter 5: “Abide in my love.” Our first reaction to that admonition may well be to think what a sweet sentiment it is. We should just wrap ourselves up in God’s love like a warm blanket on a cold day and rest there and enjoy it. What a Hallmark moment that would be!

Although there is an aspect of God’s love that is what we might call “sweetness and light,” that is not exactly what John is aiming for in this passage. “Abide in my love.” Abiding love. What exactly is it?

Julie Peeples, a friend from college who now pastors the Congregational United Church of Christ in Greensboro, reminded me this past week that to abide means to dwell, to live with, and is not simply a temporary experience. It means to hang in there for the long haul and as such is a powerful biblical concept. One of the purposes of scripture is to demonstrate that God abides with us at all times, through thick and thin:

- When Cain was sent off to roam the world after killing his brother Abel, God placed a mark on him so that no one would harm him. It was a sign of God’s protective presence with Cain.
- When Abram and Sarai journeyed into Canaan, God promised to make of them a new nation with whom he would dwell.
- When Moses led the Hebrew people to freedom, God demonstrated his presence with a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. Later, God had them build a tabernacle which symbolized God’s presence moving with them from place to place.
- In Jesus, God Incarnate, God became flesh and lived among us, identifying with us in a new and bold way.
- Through the Holy Spirit, God continues to dwell with us day by day.

Abide is an important word. Julie Peeples wrote,

That word, abide — that is a powerful word. Combine it as the Bible does with the even more powerful word, love, and you

have a way of life, a calling. Abide in love: dwell in love, let love make its home in you, let it be your starting point, the air you breathe, what you surround yourself with so there is no room for fear, for indeed “complete love casts out fear.” “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>1</sup>

“Dwell in love: let love make its home in you . . . .” As a wife, mother, and pastor, Julie knows something about dwelling in love. Her wise words are part of an open letter to the Pastor of the Berean Baptist Church in Fayetteville whose 55 minute sermon rant about the marriage amendment made headline news across the country a couple of weeks ago. Julie did not write her letter to berate him about his position on the amendment. The truth is that a number of thoughtful and helpful sermons were preached on either side of this issue. Rather, her concern was that in the name of Christ, Rev. Harris offered parenting advice such as if your four year old son exhibits a limp wrist, snap it back. If he acts effeminate, punch him! If your daughter wants to play sports, fine, but make certain she looks pretty. And if she acts too “butch,” reign her in! He also pointed out that anyone who is single for reasons other than the good of the Christian faith is sinful for God’s will for every person is to be married.

Julie wrote the letter to this pastor to remind him that God calls us—calls us—as our Christian vocation, not to be macho or girly, married or single, gay or straight, pastor, healer, or ruler. Instead, we are called above all else to abide in love whatever our status in life. We are called to abide in love, to let love live in us and through us to others.

Living is not easy, nor is loving! There are challenges, trials, temptations, disasters, triumphs, failures, and a host of other things that happen to us in life. Love is a big word for us to live into. It is not only that delicious, warm, fuzzy feeling we all want to feel; love is also a strong, powerful, demanding way of life. The Apostle Paul quoted what must have been a popular first century hymn when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth about love. Listen again to those familiar words:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not

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<sup>1</sup>Rev. Julie Peebles, “Abide in Love: An Open Letter to Pastor Sean Harris of Berean Baptist Church, Fayetteville, NC; 1 John 4:7-19,” (The Congregational United Church of Christ, Greensboro, NC, May 6, 2012); available online at: <http://www.congregationalucc.com/pdfs/open-letter-to-pastor-sean-harris.pdf>.

irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends . . . And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. I Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13

Dwell in THAT house, John says, the house of love. Live there, not just as a married couple, but in all relationships. Abide in patience, kindness, trust, humility, and respect. Live with understanding and truthfulness, with tolerance and faith, hope and endurance. Live in love for the long haul because that is where you will discover the greatest meaning and fulfillment in life.

In that house, it seems to me, there is no room for bigotry, prejudice, violence, or humiliation. Instead, we are to abide in ways that make life better for one another. Jesus said we are to feed the hungry, give drink to those who are thirsty, be kind to the stranger, cloth the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, and do whatever is needed for Christ's little ones. As John reiterated Jesus' words, we are to follow his command which is to love one another. We are to look beyond the appearance of another person, even beneath their actions to recognize the soul that God placed within them. How many of us abide in love in this way? I certainly don't . . . not all the time.

Cathleen Falsani points out that "Abiding is no easy feat, especially not in a culture that is success-driven, instant-gratification-oriented, and pathologically impatient."<sup>2</sup> Abiding, she says, means also to wait. Live and wait in the house of love. It sounds like a tall order to me.

Perhaps it is because today is Mother's Day, but when I think about that potent combination of dwelling and waiting in love, I think of mothers. Granted fathers can do it, too, but most mothers I know embody dwelling and waiting in love.

I think of the elderly woman I knew years ago in another state who told me that she prayed every day that her grown, middle-aged son would open his heart to God and return to faith. For decades she had prayed that prayer with no apparent result. Yet patiently, day after day, she prayed, loving and waiting, living into the hope that her son would accept the joy of his salvation.

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<sup>2</sup>Cathleen Falsani, "The Dude Abides, Indeed," *Sojourners* (July 2009).

I think of Hannah, the woman who prayed and abided in her faith long years to have a son and who then offered him in service to God through the temple. I think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who dwelled in the mystery of sacrificial love every day of her life, knowing on one side of death that she would have to give up her son and knowing on the other side of death that he would bring us eternal life. I think of every woman who waits patiently for nine months, living at the core of self-giving love, and then brings her child into the world knowing that the act itself is the beginning of giving up that child to his or her own life. That is abiding love. That is living patiently into the calling of love.

Of course God embodies this abiding love for it is God who patiently waits for each of us to come to ourselves, to stop pushing God away, and take up the mantle of love. Surely it is God who lives among us, who bears with us, and who continues to love us in spite of ourselves. Surely it is God who looks past our problems to our potential, who bears, believes, hopes, and endures everything that we do, waiting for us to come home and abide in love with him.

Abiding love is a powerful calling for life. It is not for the faint of heart or the weak of will. It is a game-changer, a revolutionary way of approaching life for it believes in the best, hopes for what is right, and works to transform the world through the power of love. Look at what Jesus did for us all through his abiding love. Imagine what we can do for Christ and one another when we choose to abide in love.

May 13, 2012

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

All praise to you, O God of our mothers and fathers, for the beautiful relationships in which our lives are rooted. We thank you for mothers who cradled us in love before we were yet born, for arms that held us, for nurture and encouragement that willed our thriving. We offer thanks, too, that we received first, from those who love us best, the lessons that brought growth and maturity and that continue to guide us, the self-discipline that channels creative energy, and the compassion to care for the needs of others. But we recognize even with the importance of these kinships and connections, that our relationship with you is the source and purpose for all of life. In each day, each relationship, each opportunity, Sustainer God, we see the blessings from your hand, that gently teach us how to love and how to live.

And we pray, O God, that even as we have been loved, you would teach us how to love one another. Hear our prayers, O God, for all who are wounded in body and in spirit, and who long to be made whole. Hear our prayers for those who suffer because of violence or persecution or neglect. Hear our prayers for those trapped in a cycle of poverty or hunger or addiction. Hear our prayers for those who are consumed by loneliness or despair. May we have the grace and the courage to bring healing where there is pain, peace where there is unrest, mercy where there is suffering, light where there is darkness. Make of us your instruments that we might join in your redemptive work for one another and our world. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

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