

Rev. Rebecca Schlatter Liberty  
Sermon preached at Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine  
April 29, 2018—Fifth Sunday of Easter  
Text: 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

### **Abide with Me**

Things are changing. On the night of Jesus' arrest, things are about to change for the disciples, big-time. In John's gospel, several chapters including today's reading contain Jesus' words to his disciples anticipating these big changes. These are the final hours before they journey together through his arrest and crucifixion and resurrection. It will be a wild ride. No one will get through it unchanged.

Years ago one of my confirmation students in 7<sup>th</sup> grade told me a story about a different kind of wild ride she had gone on. It was a zip line, which you often find on ropes courses. It's where you're strapped into a harness, kind of sitting in it, suspended by a short cable from a long cable sloping downhill. When you step off the platform at the higher end, you zip down the cable to the other end. This girl told me about how on her ride, she was holding on for dear life to the cable, but it was a long ride and she found her arms getting tired. She hung on until she simply couldn't hang on anymore. Then she had to let go. That's when she discovered that it wasn't her hanging-on that was keeping her safe, but the harness she was strapped into.

This was years ago, but I remember it so clearly because of when she told this story. I was driving her home from confirmation camp to be with her 11-year-old sister as she was dying. (Her younger sister had been sick with cancer for most of her life, and now her journey was coming to an end. Her family had been on a very long wild ride, and no one was getting through it unchanged.) As we were driving back so that the older sister could join her family for these final hours, we were making conversation in the car, when out of the blue she told me about the zip line. Now maybe she was just sharing a cool experience she'd had at camp, but it was also a powerful image of good news for her family in this terrible time. They did not need to hold on for dear life. They were being held by One who would never, ever let them go. They were all being held by the same One who had held their sister, their daughter, in love throughout her life. The One who would continue to hold her in that strong love even after her last breath.

The image of the vine and the branches, in the context of these difficult moments with the disciples, sounds a bit like Jesus is encouraging the disciples to hang on for dear life, they're about to step off the platform for a wild ride.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Abiding sounds like something we're "supposed to" do. Throughout the gospel, "abiding" is a really significant word. In Greek the word is "meno." It means to dwell, to be present to in an ongoing way. It has a literal meaning of "staying" or "continuing," but it also takes on a theological meaning of "presence." To abide with someone is to be present in deep, permanent, loving relationship, in which, as Pastor Elaine often quoted, "there is no 'between' between." The first time we hear the word in John's gospel, it describes what happens in Jesus' baptism: God's Spirit descends and "abides" with Jesus. The next time we hear it is only a few verses after that, when Jesus asks his first would-be followers what they are seeking, and they respond with a question: "Where are you staying?" In other words, Jesus, where do you dwell? Where are you present?

The word appears 13 times in these farewell chapters, as Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to abide with the disciples, a presence so close, so nourishing, and so necessary, it is like branches receiving sustenance and connection from a vine. "Abiding" is a reassuring word of stability and faithful presence whenever our journeys become kind of a wild ride. It's reassuring because it's not so much about what we are supposed to do, as it's about what God does. Thanks to Jesus' death and resurrection, God abides with us forever through Jesus' Spirit. Which means we do not have to hang on for dear life. We are held forever by One who will never, ever let us go.

There are two other ways to read this passage in John, neither of which yields much good news. One is to read it as instructions on *how* to abide—what we are supposed to do, to hang on for dear life. (If you have learned to read the Bible mainly as "instructions for living," that's probably how you will hear this passage, too.) Even worse, you can read it as a threat about what happens if you do NOT abide in Jesus, about not bearing fruit and thus withering and being burned in the fire. (If you have learned to read the Bible mainly as a guide to who's in and who's out, that's probably how you will hear this passage, too. Fruit-bearers: in. Detached from vine: out. Thrown into the fire.)

But if you are learning to read the Bible as a story of God's relationship with God's people, and a story of how that relationship is kind of a wild ride through which God remains wonderfully and terribly and often inexplicably faithful, then you have a larger and more grace-filled context for this passage. You can hear in it the promise of God abiding with us on every wild ride we go through—times of transition, illness, times when it looks like death might get the last word, as it surely did when Jesus was on the cross. You can hear in it the promise that through it all, when we are too sad and confused and exhausted to hold on, we are held by the One who will never, ever let us go.

And if you can hear this good news, then you can also hear in 1<sup>st</sup> John how we are invited to respond, the ways we get to participate in God's abiding love: By loving our brothers and sisters, friends and strangers alike. You can see that the message

was never so much about *how* to abide, as it is about *with whom*—with God, through the Spirit of Jesus, and with God’s people, all of them our brothers and sisters.

So, good news! When we are on a wild ride—a time of transition and change, for example—we can stop holding on for dear life to whatever we think is supposed to last. What a relief! We can stop holding on for dear life to the way things used to be, because we know that however things turn out for the future, we will still be held in the love of One who will never let us go.

Not all of us love zip lines. Not everyone finds wild rides exciting. Some of them in fact feel pretty terrible when you’re on them, zipping along through choices you don’t want to make, or losses you don’t want to experience, or questions you never thought you’d have to ask. But the ride is better if you trust the way you are held, rather than holding on for dear life. For one thing, it leaves you a lot more energy for loving others, rather than circling the wagons out of fear of what might come. You can see the difference in a church that trusts how we are held in God’s love no matter what, through hard choices and losses and tough questions. It’s a church that keeps loving brothers and sisters, friend and stranger alike; a church that keeps working for justice, keeps giving generously. A church that does not circle the wagons out of fear of what might come, but remains open to respond to the world’s deep longing for healing and hope.

This is a wild ride at Redeemer right now. We have one more month together as pastor and congregation, and you are collectively doing a ton of work to figure out what happens next. You are indeed facing tough choices and losses and questions. Thank goodness you get to do all that with the help of Jesus’ reassuring words about his abiding with us all through his Spirit. No matter what, none of us needs to be afraid of what will come. We are held by the One who will never let us go. For all the days to come, God will still be abiding with us and we abiding with God in Word, and Sacrament, and the love of and for brothers and sisters.

So while we may not be exactly glad for this wild ride of transition, we can say, “Count me in!” Count me in because of who the ride is with: a wonderfully faithful God of love. And the ride is not only with the brothers and sisters of Redeemer, but also with the brothers and sisters of the Bangor area and beyond who need your signs of healing and hope, your generosity, your work for justice. “Count me in” because just like for Jesus’ first disciples, we trust that this ride leads to new life not only for us but also for the world.

In a very practical way, many of you have said “Count me in!” in these past few weeks by offering pledges of financial support for the coming year. Your giving, in any amount, is a way that you acknowledge and respond to God’s faithful abiding with you and with this community.

Here’s another concrete invitation to see visually who all is on this wild ride together in the Redeemer community. Over these past four years, individuals have

periodically come to me and asked, when can we do another photo directory? This is something churches often do so that the members can get to know one another better by putting faces together with names. The last directory was a long time ago and no longer reflects the current community. These last few years of transition have never seemed like quite the right time to assemble your individual and family photos into anything as permanent as a book. But right now does seem like a good time to get to know one another better by putting faces together with names. It would be nice to look around and say, oh good, these brothers and sisters are abiding together here in God's love, we have all said, "Count me in!" and however this wild ride turns out, we are in this together and it will be okay.

So we've dedicated a bulletin board for this image of vine and branches here at Redeemer. In the back hallway by the library and classrooms, you'll see a black background awaiting a photo of you as an individual, couple, or family. You can bring one from home, or email it to the office to be printed, or have one taken here on the next two Sundays. By the day of Pentecost, May 20, we'd like to have photos posted from all who would be willing to say visually, "Count me in!"

This may be a wild ride, but I trust that like branches on the vine, we are all held together and nourished in the love of One who will never let us go.

***Hymn of the Day: ELW 629, Abide with Me***