

May 10, 2009/Fifth Sunday of Easter/David L. Edwards

God Is Love--Abiding In Love, Abiding In God

1 John 4:(7-16a)16b-21 *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.*

Let's look at the last part of our reading from 1 John 5, beginning with, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." This portion is a summary of what the writer has been saying. It is the core message of the First Letter of John. In Jesus we know God's love for us, which takes the initiative to reach out to us. The writer puts it boldly: God IS love. The word is *agape*, love that gives of itself, is concerned for the other, is steadfast and compassionate, and yet truthful. This is love not as a feeling, an emotion, but as a way of life.

The writer says that Jesus is the complete presence and fullness of God as love. And we as Jesus' community are to abide in this love that has come to us. This word "abide (*meno*)" is very profound. It means to dwell, to remain, and to continue steadfastly in love. If we are doing that as persons and as a community, then we are dwelling in God. If we are working with being a community of love, growing in our understanding of how to love, then we are, at the same time, abiding in God who is love. Abiding in love means a commitment to be in community. It means being willing to remain and to work through things, and to grow and be changed in the process. The nature of God's own love is to be the nature of our life together -- steadfast, compassionate, forgiving, truthful, and a willingness to take the initiative to love. We may come into the community initially to get what we want or need, but we "remain" in order to be part of this "abiding in love" that connects us with God and one another. Our life together and our life in God are inseparable.

If we are working with "abiding in love together," we don't have to worry about our relationship with God. The writer now says: "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world." The "day of judgment" may not have meaning for us today the way it did in the writer's time. This was the view that there would be a time, a day when God would bring a final judgment on the world. Christ would return to execute that day of judgment. This expectation was intense in the first decades after Jesus' life, but began to wane. Emphasis shifted to the importance of the community's continuing life in the world, our being in the world in the manner of Jesus.

Most of us do not hold this literal view of the "day of judgment." Yet don't we have a sense that there IS an ultimate measure of life? Am I living according to what is ultimately true, what ultimately matters? Are we giving ourselves to the things that are most important? Each of us, in one way or another, thinks about these things. It could fill us with a kind of spiritual anxiousness. However, the writer is pointing us in a different direction. The love that comes from God, that IS God, has been perfected among us in Jesus. The word "perfected(*teleo*)" means fulfilled, completed, or mature. When we are following Jesus, when our lives are centered in him, when we are striving in the same kind of life, we can drop our spiritual anxiousness, our fear. We can have in ourselves the kind of boldness or confidence that frees us from being preoccupied with the ultimate outcome of our lives. When we are love-driven, we no longer have to be fear-driven.

While traveling through southeastern North Carolina a week ago, I saw a billboard. It pictured a huge cloud with a hand coming out of it, the index finger pointing downward. Beneath were the words: "Repent now. Jesus has your number." THAT is spiritual anxiousness, living a certain way out of fear of what will happen to us. The writer of 1 John says the opposite: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love." The love that we know in Jesus liberates us from a fear-motivated life. There is no room for fear when we are maturing in love. Love displaces fear. Fear is attached to punishment, and

God is not about punishment but relationship -- God's with us, and ours with God and one another. And that relationship has the nature of love.

Now the writer comes back to the main theme: "We love because God first loved us." I think this has two meanings. First, we are ABLE to love because we have been loved by God. When we grow up without loving parents or other loving adults in our lives, we have difficulty showing love to others. When we have experienced abuse, we turn our hurt on others or on ourselves. If we have experienced little or no affirmation and acceptance from significant persons in our lives, we grow up continually hungry for approval and attention. We have a hard time getting beyond our own needs. It is vitally important for us to touch in ourselves the reality to which the writer is pointing. We have been and are loved by God, the very source of life itself. Having an intentional spiritual life helps us awaken to and ground our lives in that love. We call this the inward journey. It is giving regular and sustained attention to cultivating our awareness of our connectedness to God and the reality of God's love for us. Deepening this awareness, as individuals and as a community, opens up our capacity to love others, to move beyond the boundaries of our own needs. If I am growing in my awareness of having been loved by the very Power of Life itself--God--then I am also being liberated from my constant need for others to show me acceptance and affirmation. My loving of others will not depend upon which of my buttons others push. Someone likes me, so I like them. Someone is critical of me, so I reject them. Rooting ourselves in the love with which God has first loved us, we can grow in our capacity to first love others, to take the initiative.

The second thing is that God's having first loved us brings with it the COMMANDMENT to love others. The Gospel of John and the Letters of John speak frequently of the commandment of love. The writer says that those who say that they love God and continue to hate others are liars. Pretty strong language! If we do not love those we see every day, how can we claim to love God whom we cannot see? The writer brings it back to where he started. If we are abiding in love, then we are abiding in God. This means living together in the love with which we have been loved. It is all very practical. The spiritual life is about touching our relationship with God and God's love for us. It is also about living out that love with one another and, indeed, with all people. We call this the outward journey, the ways we express toward others and the world the love with which we have been loved.

The reading ends: "The commandment we have from him [Jesus] is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." There is a moral obligation inherent in the love we have received. God's love for us is NOT conditioned by our having to earn it or be good enough to deserve it. It comes to us as gift. And yet, receiving that love brings with it a condition--that we extend that same love to others. Having been first loved by God means that we cannot continue to live in ways that harm others or the community. Part of our spiritual work is examining our lives in the light of God's first loving us. We become aware of ways we continue in habits of speaking, acting, and thinking that cause harm to others and ourselves. Our spiritual work is also about being attentive to the ways we can express love toward others and the world, the outward journey of using the gifts God has given us and following the callings God has put in our hearts.

John's letter points to the importance of our life together as a community. Abiding, or living, together in the love with which God has first loved us is our vocation, our calling as a community. We are always learning what that love is about, always learning better HOW to love with the love of God as we know it in Jesus. This is not easy. If we come into the community expecting to avoid difficult and challenging people and situations, or to maintain the illusion that we ourselves are completely loving, we are bound for disappointment. But when we choose to abide with others in love, then we begin to discover the blessing and gift of true community. We begin to touch the very reality of God. Abiding in God, abiding together in love--I think this is the true source of our reaching out into the world around us, the outward journey of love.