

May 6, 2012 / Fifth Sunday of Easter / David L. Edwards

### 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.*

John 15:1-8 *I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...*

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.* We could also put it this way: *God is love, and as we abide in love we abide in God, and God abides in us.* This is the core message of the First Letter of John, and, I think, the whole of Christian scriptures. 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, is all-embracing, and yet is truthful. This is love not primarily as a feeling, an emotion, but as a way of life. This love is at the heart of the universe. It is the love that fulfills our lives as we receive it and as we live it out toward others, the world, and ourselves.

We are Jesus' community as we abide in this love. The word *abide* (*meno*) has richness of meaning--dwell, remain, continue steadfastly. It can mean to root our lives deeply in God, in love. If we are working with being a community of love, learning and 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 being 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 willing to take the initiative to love. We may come into the community initially to get what we want or need—to be loved--but we *remain* in order to be part of this *abiding in love* that connects us with God and one another, and that bears fruitfulness for the world.

If our living, as persons and as a community, has the character, shape, and energy of abiding, or dwelling, in love, 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(Jesus)is, so are we in this world.* The *day of judgment* may not have meaning for us today as it did in the writer's time. There was the belief that at a certain time on the calendar God would bring a final judgment on the world. Christ would return any moment 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 and character of the community's continuing life in the world, being in the world in the manner of Jesus, that is, as a community of God's redemptive, healing love. The writer is already making that shift.

We don't have to strain ourselves to hold an ancient belief that no longer fits. Yet we do have the 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 and faces these things. It can fill us with a kind of spiritual anxiousness. However, the writer points 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. It does not mean being morally perfect or making no mistakes. Truth is, we can be very imperfect, flawed, and fairly messed up human beings, AND be filled with the love of God! 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 anxiousness, our fear. We can have boldness and confidence that frees us from being preoccupied with the ultimate outcome of our lives, that liberates us from self-preoccupation of any kind. The more we become love-driven, the less are we fear-driven.

How did Christianity, especially in our own culture, become so fear-driven and fear-instilling? While traveling through southeastern North Carolina a couple of years 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 the life of faith out of fear of what will happen to us if we don't, or if we fail! It is completely against what the writer of 1 John says. *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.* There is no room for fear when we are maturing in love. Love displaces fear. What a message! How do we overcome our fears? Through love—loving ourselves, loving others, loving the world! Fear is attached to

punishment, and God is not about punishment but relationship, abiding with and in us in and through love. Here is a very fruitful point of reflection for us in our inward journey work. Where am I motivated by fear instead of growth in love? Where am I letting fear dictate my attitudes and actions toward myself, others, and the world? What am I afraid of and how is it keeping me from growing in love? Seeing into and understanding our fears leads to becoming free from them. They simply drop away as we mature in 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 of some kind, 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 get stuck in our own needs.

We don't have to stay there! Through our spiritual practice we can 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. That is our primary belonging, our true home. Having an intentional, consistent 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 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 become more whole, to move beyond the boundaries of our own needs. If I am growing in my awareness and experience 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. 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. That is why it is so important that our community continues to lift up the importance of making a commitment to our own spiritual life, taking responsibility for our own lives in their relationship to God, others, and ourselves. The community is not here for me to expect that others meet my needs, real or supposed, but to call me to maturity (*teleo*) in love, which is my true nature and destiny as a human being.

The second thing is related. God's having first loved us brings with it the

COMMANDMENT to love others. 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 complete and utter gift, only to be received. 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 or the world. 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. We become 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.

Kayla McClurg and Jean Brown, from our sister community in Washington, DC, the Church of the Saviour, are worshiping with us this morning. Kayla oversees a website of their community called simply INWARD/OUTWARD. Each day there is a quote of some kind that is food for our reflection on the life of faith in its inward and outward dimensions. There was one this week that I particularly liked. It was from Elizabeth O'Connor's book *Call to Commitment. We believe ourselves to be engaged this very moment in that which is the hope of the world. Our commitment is to the Lord of that redemptive community which has the task of pushing back its boundaries until it holds the world. There will be no peace or healing in our day unless little islands of koinonia can spring up everywhere—islands where Christ is and because he is, we can learn to live in a new way.*

This is what we are about here as a community. Being and becoming an island of *koinonia*, a community of God's love. O'Connor is right. There is great hope for the world where there are communities of the love of God, receiving that love more and more deeply and fully into their own lives, and expressing that love outwardly in the manifold ways God's spirit works through callings and gifts. This is what we have been called to be here as the Church of the Covenant, an intentional community of abiding in God and God's love, with ourselves, with one another, and so importantly these days, with the earth as God's creation. As we are faithful in the spiritual work of abiding in love, we are and become even more a source of hope and life for others, for the world.