

Sermon 4 28&29 18

“Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;

The darkness deepens;

Lord, with me abide;” (H82 662)

I’ll bet some of you can even hear the melody as I recite the lyric. I heard this hymn many times as the daughter of a mortician. People often request it for funerals.

Abide is an archaic word. It’s not often used in modern conversation. Yet, it’s a beautiful, wonderful word. The hymn occurred to me because we heard “abide” often in our Epistle and Gospel readings for today.

To abide means to act in accordance with a rule or decision, as in “to abide by the law.” It also means to endure. But this is my favorite meaning, especially for today: A feeling or memory that remains with us without fading, that *abides* with us – within us. That is what it means to abide. And what has God promised us? To abide with *us*. And even more important, to offer unconditional abiding love to us.

John’s first epistle goes to great lengths to assure us of God’s love. God doesn’t just walk beside us. No. John tells us that God lives *in* us – if we love each other. That is how God’s love is perfected in us.

So here’s the hard part: If we can love each other like God loves us, unconditionally, than God abides in us. That’s hard. We’re on this road and we’re doing great, but sometimes we veer off – sometimes we let life distract us. That’s why John asks us to look for God in each other. And that’s what brings us back. God’s love will always be there for us, *no matter what*. Think about that!

Jesus offers us an even better example of our connection with God. Plants are a great example of interconnectedness. We are not created by God to be alone. We are created by God to be social, to interact with God and each other. A branch cannot live by itself. It needs to be connected to the vine. We are the branches and Jesus is the vine. God is the gardener who tends the vine and its branches. We cannot live without Jesus and God’s care. All God asks of us is that we bear fruit.

But what does that mean? To bear fruit? Strictly speaking, it means to yield results. And this is where Jesus asks us to be responsible to him. It’s not about an exchange: “I will

love you if you yield results.” No, no, and no. It’s not about that. God will always love us, no matter what. But God *asks* us to share the love we are given, to love others. That is yielding fruit. That is abiding in God’s love, abiding in God as God abides in us.

And who appears in the book of Acts as one of the best examples of abiding in the love of God? Phillip. There are two Phillips in the New Testament: Phillip the disciple and Phillip the Evangelist, the Deacon.

I always find myself smiling when I think of Phillip. The Holy Spirit just seems to pick him up and plunk him down. I think many deacons could sympathize. “Just tell me where you want me to go, God.” And Phillip’s fine with it! Phillip is so wonderfully trusting, so willing. His response to the Holy Spirit is always “Yes!” He doesn’t demand an explanation or a warning, he just jumps into the deep end with both feet – not only trusting, but eager – Phillip’s whole life is “Yes!”

The Holy Spirit leads Phillip to a wilderness road where he comes upon the Ethiopian eunuch, traveling in his chariot, who happens to be reading from the prophet Isaiah. Now clearly this man was interested in Judaism because he had traveled over 1,500 miles to Jerusalem to worship, but now he just happens to be reading Isaiah’s prophetic words regarding Jesus. And the Holy Spirit just happens to drop off Philip and tell him to join the Eunuch in the chariot.

Does Philip question it? No! Philip is not a big picture kinda guy. He’s more of a “Tell me where you want me to go” kinda guy. I can just see him running alongside the chariot – trying to talk as he huffs and puffs. And he does the most wonderful thing. He doesn’t break into a sermon or wax eloquent. No! Philip begins teaching in the best of all possible ways: He asks the Eunuch a question. “Do you understand what you are reading?” He gives the eunuch an opportunity to be unknowing, to drop all pretense, to learn. And the Eunuch responds with a simple, incredibly wise, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” How many of us would be willing to offer ourselves over to learning by becoming so vulnerable? “No, I don’t get it! Please help me!”

And look at how far his education went! Philip hopped onto that chariot and on that dry, dusty road this very important servant to the queen of Ethiopia learned the most important lesson of his life because he was willing to be taught, because he was open to it. And that lesson was that *Jesus loves him*. Jesus sacrificed himself because He loves him. And

now this man knows, for the Bible tells him so! That's the way it works. "Jesus loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so."

And the eunuch is so excited by this that as soon as they pass by some water, and we're not told if it's a pond or a puddle, he asks in that wonderful excited way with which he has approached this entire experience, "Look, here is water! What's to prevent me from being baptized?" I can almost hear Philip's reply. "Well..., as a matter of fact... nothing!" The whole scene is breathless...!

So they go down into the water and Phillip baptizes him and as soon as they emerge, the Holy Spirit "snatches" Phillip away. Yes! That's the word from the reading – "*Snatches!*" It's as though the Holy Spirit has infused the Ethiopian and Philip with this childlike excitement and wonder. And in the next few seconds, Phillip finds himself at Azotus, maybe 20 miles away. And he travels along the coast maybe 70 or so miles, on foot, preaching as he goes, until he comes to Caesarea.

And the Ethiopian continues on his journey home – rejoicing! For over 1,500 miles! That time spent in the chariot with Phillip undoubtedly helped with the early evangelization of Ethiopia. Ta da!

How did Phillip accomplish such a remarkable thing? Phillip was available to the Holy Spirit. He allowed the Holy Spirit to abide in him. That is how he lived. That is what abiding in the love of God is about. It is about the Holy Spirit abiding in us.

"Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me."

Beautiful lyrics. A beautiful prayer.

"Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me." Abide with us! Abide with us in our life here together, Lord, here at Good Shepherd Lord, abide with us!