

We heard the message: “God loved us first...God is love. Whoever does not love does not know God... If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete...” (From both lessons)

So how do we abide in Jesus? By loving God and keeping our Lord’s commandments. Love the Lord your God with all that you are, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.

Scrolling through Facebook yesterday, I came across a person who posted a writing about how she wants to be in her own little world, doing her own little thing, experiencing only peace and fulfillment. No mention of any other person. No concern for anybody but herself. No abiding in God, just existing for moments of comfort and self-absorption. If Jesus was right, this person will find NO lasting joy.

Abide in me, our Lord invites, by loving others. In the same Facebook perusal, I saw a post about some Christian pastor out west who apparently so detests our President that in his sermons he calls him very negative names and declares that his deceased mother was a prostitute. Can this sort of preaching in any way be connected to the love of God? I cannot see it. The same with any religious groups that spew hatred toward anybody else.

I’ll never forget talking with a man who attended what he called “ Bible-believing” church. He quickly started talking about how the Muslims are taking over the USA and how we need to get rid of them even if it means killing them. I was shocked, because he had told me how much he loved his Lord Jesus. But there he was, spewing fearful hatred against other people.

If we abide in Jesus, are we not to take seriously what Jesus said and did?? He said, “Pray for your enemies, and do good to those who persecute you.” Jesus *never* told his followers to spew hateful statements about those with whom we disagree!

With all the political tensions, racial tensions, and worry about the future of our nation and our world, it’s too easy for us to lose our vital connection with our Lord. Lots of folks spend more time on Facebook than they do in prayer and certainly more time there than they do in church. Please don’t misunderstand me; I think Facebook and other social media sites can be really positive ways for people to share what’s going on in their lives, and to show concern for those who tell of their pain and losses. But that’s a *horizontal* connection; as Christians, we need to check our vertical connection with God, too.

Several years ago I was blessed to hear the Africa University Choir present a concert in Bridgeport. Twenty young folks from Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Sierra Leon, Republic of Congo, and Nigeria delighted us with their clear, unadulterated voices... At one point during the concert their conductor introduced a song about prayer by saying how hard it can be, in this

world, to love and serve the Lord... The road can become very difficult, and many in things in life can “push you off the path.” The only way to stay on the road of faith, said this man, is prayer. Prayer.. I listened to his words and knew in my heart the truth of them... The best way to stay CONNECTED to the God who nourishes and directs our life is prayer.

Prayer can be a quick “Thank you, God, for this day,” or a “Help, God, I’m overwhelmed,” or “Please guide me, God; let me know what you would have me do in this situation.” And *then*, prayer is listening for God to nudge you or help you notice or see something. It’s connection.

A little girl delighted in all the flowers growing beside the school playground. Spring was finally here! She gently picked off a bloom and set it on a wall at the playground so that she could take it home at the end of play time. Half an hour later, though, when her mother came to pick her up, the flower was totally wilted. The little girl couldn't understand what had happened to her beautiful flower.

Jesus didn't want his followers to wither up and fade away after his death and resurrection, so he taught them about the importance of "abiding" in him. To abide in Jesus is to remain connected to him, to remain in God's love by continually sharing love with others, by praying, by reading the Bible, by joining others in worshiping God and in seeking God's way for our individual lives and our life together. Abide in Christ and Christ will abide in you.

To communicate the importance of being in close relationship with God, Jesus used an image quite familiar to those who heard his words: the grape vine. The image of the vineyard as God's people, and God as the attentive but usually disappointed vineyard owner, is frequently used in the Old Testament. God's disappointment was due to the fact that in spite of all God's nurturing, the vineyard, the people of God, failed to produce good fruit. The people failed to honor God as they refused to show love: as they trampled on the poor and powerless and sought after money and power instead of what was just. They turned away from God to worship the gods of their neighbors. They did not love God, and so they were fruitless. A fruitless vineyard is worthless.

Jesus took this same image, and here, in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John, changed it around a bit to offer a tremendous promise as well as challenge. The promise: Christ as the true vine will give you life and enable you to produce good fruit if you will let him. The challenge: Apart from God's love as given us in Jesus, we will not be able to produce anything worthwhile. The image of the man pedaling a pedal-powered little plane over the English Channel finds a place in my brain. On June 12, 1979, a young man made aviation history when he pedaled his plane 22 miles to land, exhausted, on the coast of France. As dramatic as this feat was, muscle-powered flight is not practical, for a person simply cannot maintain the necessary energy output for extended flights. It is the same for the Christian life. There is no way we who are trying to follow Jesus Christ can “pedal our own faith.” We need to be connected to our Source of power, God, through prayer and through being available to let God work through us.

“Abide in me.” In order to be connected to God, we must decide that God is important to us. This means doing something you would not ordinarily do because God is important to you. Perhaps visit somebody in a nursing home, which you usually don’t like to do because you get the creeps when you walk into one. But you decide that you will make a visit to a person, not because you want to, but because you believe God would have you reach out. So you make a very physical offering of your time and your emotional well-being to God. The connection is strengthened, because you did something you would not have done except for your faith. A gift to God, a brighter day for someone else, and you find that *your* day is also better.

The earthquake in Nepal. Each of us needs to do something. Perhaps you have already donated through a relief organization or through one of the campaigns on television. Perhaps you will decide to make a donation through our church. It may be that you really do not have any extra money to give, but you dedicate more time to praying for the people of Nepal. Or perhaps you consider your own blessedness and give up a Coffee you might have bought this morning and put that money into a jar that you will eventually give to help someone else. That’s part of being connected, of being obedient to our Lord Jesus.

We are a church. We are called to be connected to the Vine, our Lord Jesus, through our actions, connected to each other, too, through the ways we are willing to reach out in love to help others. We live in a world where people are starving for meaning and purpose, where they have truly lost their way in a technological wilderness. If we turn away from our connection in Jesus, we will wither.

Jesus told us straight: Life off the branch becomes death. Any church seeking to exist apart from Jesus will find itself without voice, without message, and without power. It will be barren, little more than an adornment eventually to be cast aside and abandoned. Any individual who tries to be a Christian without letting Christ power him/her will end up feeling like an empty and often angry shell, dried up, lifeless.

We exist as a church only to be about the business of our Lord. To seek and save the lost, to proclaim to the hurting world that God loves it, to lift up those who are downtrodden, to seek justice for all and to resist evil and hatred by offering love. THIS is how we can abide in Christ Jesus, and he in us. We can do it because God loves us.

Let us pray: Dear God, you know how close or far each of us feels from you. You know the level of our hopes and the depth of our fears and doubts. We want to abide in you, we want to live abundantly and faithfully, but too often everything seems capable of throwing us off course. Please, Lord, abide with us, and show us, right now, how to better live in you. May we grow deep in your great friendship, and honor it in our actions and words. To the glory of your holy name! Amen.