**Abide in Me**

**Text: John 15:1-17**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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As you know, Pastor Helen and I spent the first two weeks of July trekking in Ireland. Then we attended the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The theme of the Assembly was *Abide in Me*, with the theme scripture coming from this text in John 15 that Leona read for us a few minutes ago. There were so many good sermons and lectures coming out of this text that you’ll be hearing about it multiple times over the coming weeks, even when I’m not preaching out of John.

But I want to get into the text this morning by way of the aforementioned trek in Ireland.

We trekked for 8 days – 4 one week and 4 the next – averaging maybe 10 miles a day. Much of it was uphill. Some days it seemed like *all* of it was uphill; especially in the Wicklow Mountains, south of Dublin.

Now, Helen and I have 2 very different ways of hiking uphill. I tend to forge ahead, trying to get to the top as soon as possible so as to end the torture as quickly as possible. And by the time I reach the top I’m huffing and puffing and I have to rest for a while. Helen – being the more sensible one – Helen takes her time, with short, easy strides, and when she reaches the top she’s ready to keep going. 2 weeks ago today, we were hiking up White Hill, one of the highest points in Ireland. As usual, I was way ahead of her, huffing and puffing and pausing periodically so that she didn’t fall too far behind (and so that I could catch my breath!), but I got to thinking that it would be fun to reach the summit together. So I waited for what seemed like a *long* time just below the peak of White Hill, recuperating while Helen took her much more sensible short strides. And then, hand in hand, we hiked to the summit.

What I was doing while I waited for her was *abiding*. Which brings us to our text: John 15, especially verse 4: “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.”

Abide. That’s not word that we use a lot. When you’re driving down the street, we don’t talk about abiding for the light to change. When your team has a lousy season, we don’t say, “Abide ‘til next year.” But it’s a good word; an important word. It must be, because Jesus uses it 11 times in the first 11 verses of John 15 alone.

Of course, Jesus isn’t speaking in English. He isn’t even speaking in Greek. But John is writing in Greek, so let’s look at the Greek word that our English Bibles sometimes translate as abide. It’s *meno*, and it can mean abide, remain, dwell, continue, endure and tarry. Jesus said, “Abide in me, remain in me, dwell in me, continue in me, endure in me, tarry in me.” We get some sense of what he meant when we think again of my wait for Helen so that we could summit White Hill together. There I *tarried*, waiting for my beloved. To tarry is to linger in anticipation. I was anticipating the joy of walking together. I was anticipating the beautiful view, looking out over the rolling hills and green fields of County Wicklow. I was anticipating the vista all the way to the Irish Sea. And I was anticipating the Snickers bar, sitting in my knapsack, which I planned to eat as we stood together on the summit.

To abide is to linger in anticipation. It is to anticipate all of the joy and adventure that a life in Christ can entail. It is to anticipate the thrill of discovering gifts that we didn’t know we had, accomplishing goals that we thought to be impossible, moving the world closer to becoming the beloved community envisioned by God.

To abide is to linger in anticipation. But we don’t have to linger alone. Jesus says, “Abide *in me*.” And he uses the example of the branch abiding in the vine. The branch, lingering in anticipation of producing much fruit, but first it must abide in the vine from which it receives nourishment. The water and the nutrients come up from the soil, through the vine and into the branches. That’s the only way that you’re going to get fruit. Yeah, I know, we get fruit by going to the grocery store, but that fruit never would’ve gotten there had it not grown on a branch that abided in a vine that was rooted and grounded in good, rich soil.

Jesus said, “Abide in me. Just as the branch abides in the vine, you must abide in me and then you will bear much fruit.” This means, first of all, lingering in anticipation. But it means, secondly, living in *community*. You see, to live the Christian life – indeed, to be fully human – we don’t abide alone; we don’t fly solo, we don’t linger in anticipation relying only on ourselves. We abide in Christ and in so doing we live in community. All sorts of communities: family, friends, neighborhoods, associations, labor unions, business groups, activist organizations, churches. Because, you see, in a vineyard, the vines and the branches cannot produce fruit alone. You need at least two vines, so that they can cross-pollinate and produce good, juicy, luscious grapes. To abide in Christ as directed in John 15 is to share life with others. It means living in community, with all of the joy and the pain and the hugs and the tensions and the laughter and the tears that are part of any kind of true community that I’ve ever experienced. “We are not alone,” says the creed of the United Church of Canada. “We live in God’s world.” And to be fully alive in God’s world – to bear what the Bible calls the fruit of the Spirit in God’s world: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – we have to abide in community; we have to wait and remain and dwell and continue and endure and tarry in community. (For the fruit of the Spirit, see Galatians 6:22.) Because it is through the love that we find in community – the same love that the Bible sees incarnate in Jesus Christ – it is that love that so nourishes us that we can do the hard work of caring for others and seeking justice and creating peace in our neighborhoods and nation and world where people seem so intent on tearing each other apart.

During the several days between trekking in Ireland and abiding in General Assembly, Helen and I attended a reunion of some of the folks with whom I went to high school: including, some of my track team mates and some of the students who attended our meets and cheered us on. I ran a pretty good mile in my youth, but I couldn’t have done it without the encouragement of my team mates and the fans. You see, when you’re running a mile and you’ve got another maybe 400 yards to go, something called rigor mortis sets in. Your whole body stiffens, and you’re gasping for air, and there’s this nasty voice coming from the dark side of your being that says, “You can’t do this. You might as well quit right now. You’re a failure and a fraud and you’ve got no business being out on this track with runners who really know what they’re doing.” And many’s a time that I might have quit; without that community of team mates and spectators.

It’s my senior year, the Chicago City Track Championship, and I need to finish at least 5th to earn the point that will keep Kenwood High School in contention to win it all. I’ve got 2 laps to go – 440 yards – running 6th, and my team mates are pointing to the guy ahead of me and shouting, “There’s your point, Bruce, you can catch this dude, he’s dead.” And I want to say, “You think *he’s* dead…” And now, with just 1 lap to go and rigor mortis getting a *firm* grip on me and the voice from the dark side saying I can’t do this, the cheers of the Kenwood fans fill the University of Chicago Field House. Somehow I find myself sprinting out of the last turn, running past the 5th man, crossing the finish line and earning that point for my school. Later that afternoon we won the Chicago City Track Championship by 3 points.

We can’t do it by ourselves. Nothing that is worth doing in this life can be accomplished alone. Jesus said, “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” We have to abide in him. Which means, we have to abide in communities of love. We have to endure, remain, dwell and continue in community so that we can tarry forth in Christ.

“Abide in me,” Jesus says. And so we do. We linger in anticipation. We bear fruit in community. But don’t linger too long. Because the one in whom we are called to abide never stays in one place for too long. In John’s gospel especially, Jesus is on the move. He calls his disciples on the run. He’s moving from a wedding in Cana to a well in Samaria, where a remarkable woman is waiting to engage him in dialogue. On his way he pauses long enough in Jerusalem to confront the power structure by throwing the thieves out of the Temple. Then he’s off to feed the 5,000 on a hilltop in Galilee, heal the sick, raise the dead, walk on water, while circling back to Jerusalem…where he’s arrested and killed by the Romans.

But, of course, that’s not the end of the road for this one with whom abiding means being on the move. We last see him cooking breakfast for the disciples on a beach in Galilee where he says, “Follow me.”

To abide with Jesus means to travel with Jesus wherever he’s going next; on whatever adventure of healing and teaching and justice-seeking he’s decided to take. We linger in anticipation of the next challenge, knowing that as we move forward in community, we will be following the one whose way is love; whose way is hope; whose way is challenging the self-serving policies of those in power; whose way is making happen the very things that we believe can *never* happen. But such good things will *only* happen – such good fruit will *only* be born – if we abide in him.

It was gorgeous up at the summit of White Hill, looking out at the green pastures and the rolling hills of County Wicklow, where sheep safely graze and you can see the Irish Sea in the distance. But we couldn’t stay too long. The weather was closing in and we had to get off the summit before the rains came. If you tarry too long, you’ll miss out on the next new thing that Jesus is doing, and you might even find yourself in serious trouble. So Pastor Helen and I – our little community of two – pushed on down the mountain. So it is that we – all of us – travel in our own communities of family and friends and neighborhoods and associations and labor unions and business groups and activist organizations and churches and whoever else we find ourselves travelling with, knowing that *wherever* 2 or 3 are gathered, we are abiding in some manifestation of the Christ: where we remain together and endure together; and amidst the joy and the pain and the hugs and tension and the laughter and tears we dwell with the one who still says, “Follow me.” Amen.