

Homily – Abide In My Love

Rob Keim

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Eight weeks from now, on Monday, May 10th, I start a three month sabbatical. About every five years, clergy take three months off from the day to day ministry of the church, and disappear. Most of you know that my original sabbatical was planned for last year, but for obvious reasons that did not happen. The five hundred mile pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago in Spain did not happen. The trip to the Spanish language school in Costa Rico did not happen. The sexy, exciting things that were going to help me retool, for the next five years of ministry did not happen. Instead, we all entered a holding pattern in which we learned to shelter and wait. We learned those things that would keep us safe, and those things that we needed to do for the common good. We adapted, and we waited.

And, now that more and more people are getting the vaccines it seems that we are getting ready to burst forth. Most Zoom meetings start with updates about who has and hasn't gotten their shots. We compare notes about the side effects of the first dose and then the second dose. We wonder when we will be able to start back with all the things we used to do in life. And, if we are wise, then we also talk about the things we have learned in the last year. When we look back with hindsight, what are the things of God that we will carry forward to make our lives better? And, as we try to do each Sunday let's look at our Gospel reading to see how we might learn about better living.

Today's reading from the Gospel according to John is one of the best known in the whole Bible. Some even say it is the core of their spirituality. In John 3:16 we have "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." That should make you smile. "For God so love the world..." That is a beautiful thing. For many this is a reminder that God is love. God is the source of all love. God's love is boundless and unchanging. God's love is for all people, all things, all of creation. And as I have said before, there is nothing we can do to increase God's love for us, and there is nothing we can do to decrease God's love for us. God's love flows, and flows, and flows. As Christians we believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, these are the pinnacle and the crossroads of that love. It was for the love of all created beings that God the Father sent his Son into the world that we might learn of God's love for us, and that he might show us how to live "The Way of Love." And, we respond to God's love by loving God back, by loving others, and by loving ourselves. This all feels familiar doesn't it? Love of God, others, and self lies at the core of every spiritual journey. Love not only permeates those journeys, it transcends them and binds them together. Divine love embraces everyone and everything. There is nothing outside the divine embrace of God's love. That should make us all smile.

However as humans, we have layered some stuff onto God's love that is a stumbling block. We have tried to show that God's love is somehow limited. We have tried to claim that God's love is only for those who are like us – look like us, think like us, live like us, believe like us. In this way we have created a false god that has nothing to do with Jesus and his "Way of Love," but John 3:16 reminds us Jesus has come to reclaim the entire world for God.

Now, to help us reclaim the love of God, we should remember the way that the word "world" is used throughout the Gospel of John. For John "world" does not mean nature or creation. Instead he means "the system"—as human beings have constructed it. The world is a human system based on the false gods of security, status, pleasure, and power. It is the idols that we use to support the false self. It is the things of this world that lead us away from God rather than towards God.

This is why so many of our saints speak about "leaving the world". We finally have to learn to be "in the world but not of the world." That is, we must compassionately accept the strange way we humans choose to operate and be willing to work inside it, but never really buy into it. We must see things for what they are and also for what they aren't. For this reason, unless we in some way "leave the world," I think we can safely assume we are utterly beholden to it. Are you willing to do your part to reclaim the world for God?

For me part of the genius of the Gospel is that we do not need to move mountains to make the world a better place. The ways of this world tell us we must have more control, more will, or more of everything in order to fix the world. The ways of love tell us that we must abide in the love of God and reflect that love back out into the world. Our work is to be loved. We are to accept that we are the beloved of God. We are to trust that we are worthy of that love. We are to believe that all others are also worthy of God's love. Again, Jesus is a genius. He uses love to reclaim the world and all our human systems. He doesn't just claim the good stuff. He claims it all. In John 3:17 it is written "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." God is calling everyone and everything to God's self, not just a few. Do you hear the call in your own life?

As an illustration of the work of love that is set before us, let me share a story as told by James Finley, a monk, spiritual writer, and clinical psychologist. These are his words. "Imagine that you have a dream in which you are climbing a high mountain. The valley below is where you grew up, where you experienced pain and made many mistakes. You are trying to transcend and leave this place by reaching the summit, on which you will be sublimely holy and one with God.

As the summit comes into view, the wind rising from the valley brings with it the sound of a child crying out in distress. You realize that there is no real choice but to go down the mountain to find and help the hurting child. Turning back, you descend into the valley. Following the child's cries, you arrive at the very home you tried to leave behind.

You gently open the door and look inside. Sitting in the corner on the floor is your own wounded child-self, that part of you that holds feelings of powerlessness and shame. You sit down next to the child on the floor. For a long time you say nothing. Then a most amazing thing happens. As you are putting your arms around this child, you suddenly realize you are on the lofty summit of union with God! This is the miracle of God's love of the world. We already have it. We don't need to earn it. We are already loved by God. This is the work of Jesus. He converts the ordinary, and it is in the ordinariness of our lives that we encounter God and become transformed.

Now, to be transformed in compassionate love does not mean that you do not have to continue struggling and working through your shortcomings and difficulties. It means learning to join God who loves you through and through in the midst of all your shortcomings. As you continue to be transformed in this way, you come to realize that right here, right now, just the way you are, you are at oneness with a God who loves you and takes you just the way you are.

Using the words of James Finley again... "Immersed in love, you look out through compassionate eyes to see the world. Here the dream in which you return to your wounded child-self takes on new, social dimensions. In this expanded version of the dream, you follow the child's cries to the home in which you grew up. You go inside to compassionately embrace the preciousness of the hurting child. As you are putting your arms around the child, it turns into your mother, your father, brother, sister. It is every nameless face you have passed in the street. It turns into the world that "God so loved, that he gave his only Son..."

God loves and is one with all that is lost and broken in everyone. So in the dream, you begin to realize that you are also falling in love with each and every person in the world. As you go on in this love for others, you fail again and again. This is no obstacle so long as you see your failure to be compassionate as just another opportunity to renew your faith in God's compassionate love for you and for all of us in the midst of our crooked journeys."

All we need to do is abide in that love. We don't make the love happen. We just accept it. Stay there with that love, and as you abide it will change the world. So, set off on the interior journey to know you are loved. At times the journey will get interrupted by the crying child and there will be disappointment. But in the end

there is realization that I am already loved. That is the work set before us by Jesus, and not the other grand stuff of the mountain top.

Now, before I conclude today, I want to get back to the questions I asked in the beginning. Over the last year, we all adapted. When we look back with hindsight, what are the things of God that we will carry forward to make our lives better? How are we going to let go of the false gods of this world that are fed by our needs for security, status, pleasure, and power? While you were sheltered at home did you abide in the love of God? Did that love sustain you? Do you reflect that love back out into the world?

And, here are some specific actions we can do as we leave our shelters and re-enter. This is in addition to all that love stuff, but in its own way it is also about love. President Biden and other national health leaders are trying to slow us down in our excitement. They are doing all they can do to prevent another surge in cases and deaths. They are cautioning that we should not stumble and fall on the last few miles of the marathon. They are asking us to wait until July 4th. You and I have the freedom to continue to be safe. We are at liberty to continue working for the common good. We can get vaccinated, wear masks in public, and limit our indoor activities to a few others who have already been vaccinated. In this way we are the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in a world that needs to experience this specific love of God. In this way we can be in the world but not of the world.

This year my sabbatical is not going to be the sexy mountain top experiences that I had planned for 2020. It will be a time of quieter reflection and rejuvenation in which I abide in God's love. I'm going to spend several weeks on the family Farm with my widowed mother. I imagine this will be a time of inner child work, and I expect to meet God there. May you meet God as well.