

Abiding in Love

By: Meagan McLaughlin

May 9, 2021. Today's sermon is on how we humans are formed, shaped, and breathed into being by the hands and breath of God, and how we abide in God and God abides in us.

Readings: [Acts 10:44-48](#), [Psalm 98](#), [John 15:9-17](#)

*** Transcript ***

So many things from today's readings jump out at me. Abiding in love, like Mr. Jesse just talked about. Giving of one's life. The Spirit anointing Gentiles. But today, I have to start with the psalm: "Sing to the Lord a new song!" This simple phrase has me almost in tears even this morning, knowing that our choir gathered together on Wednesday evening, wearing masks and keeping a safe distance, to do just that — sing to the Lord a new song, or perhaps old songs, for the first time since March 15, 2020, over a year ago! And for just a moment, before we go any further, it is worth celebrating the truth and promise that even 14 months of pandemic life have not, and cannot, erase the connections between us, and that the Spirit will not be contained. Sing to the Lord, indeed!

The circumcised believers who were with Peter at Cornelius' household were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They were astounded that people who differed from them in religious practice and ethnicity could be chosen by God. Have you ever been astounded by who God chose? Surprised by who showed up at just the right time, with just the right gifts for the situation at hand? Shocked by who spoke the words you needed to hear, to the point where you knew God had led you right to them? It has happened to me on more than one occasion, I will admit.

This sense of astounded-ness in the case of the "circumcised believers" was compounded by the fact that those clearly beloved and chosen by God were absolutely, undeniably, other. There were people meant to be part of the promise, worthy of the love that was talked so much about in the Gospel of John, and there were those who just weren't. And the Gentiles? They weren't.

It doesn't help that Hollywood has conditioned us to believe that love is simply an emotion. Either someone is attractive, or they aren't. Either someone is lovable, or they aren't. Either we have an emotional response to them, or we don't. And I am quite sure that all of us can think of people, ones we know and ones we know of, that are difficult for us to love. People that even seem to be unworthy of love. We all know this challenge.

We all know just how hard it is sometimes to make the choice to love, to put love into action as Jesus does. We all know that love, contrary to Hollywood's illusion, requires intention, sacrifice, and commitment that perseveres even through the hardest of times. Jesus even tells us that love means laying your life down for others, and Jesus certainly did that for us, all the way to death on the cross. And we all know that truthfully, we humans simple aren't capable of loving this way.

And that brings me to the phrase John uses several times at the beginning of today's gospel: abiding in love. Abide is not a word we use often, and when we do, it usually means "obey," as in "abide by my rules" or "abide by the guidelines we've agreed on." The Greek word used in this passage, however, has a very different connotation: to remain, to be present, to be held, continually. Different, right? Jesus is not inviting us to strive, to exhaust ourselves, only to ultimately fail at loving our neighbors. Jesus is

inviting us to abide in God's love.

Debie Thomas writes this week in her blog, "Journey with Jesus," "My problem is that I often treat Jesus as a role model, and then despair when I can't live up to his high standards. But abiding in something is not the same as emulating it. In the vine-and-branches metaphor, Jesus' love is not our example; it's *our source*. It's where our love originates and deepens. Where it replenishes itself. In other words, if we don't abide, we can't love. Jesus' commandment to us is not that we wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that we abide in the holy place where divine love becomes possible. That we make our home in Jesus's love — the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence."

When I have struggled to love, one of the most powerful ways I have learned to invite God in is to pray the Prayer of St. Francis. You may be familiar with it — Make me an instrument of *your* peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith.

At a time when I had to frequently encounter people by whom I felt wounded, I would take time to pray this prayer, for them, and for myself, by name. Asking God to love me and love through me, because I felt empty. Asking God to bring healing for my woundedness, and in the process, seeing their woundedness as well. Claiming the faith of God, for them and for myself. I had long drives at that time, and sometimes I would find that it had taken me the entire drive — nearly two hours — just to get through the prayer.

We humans, formed and shaped and breathed into being by the hands and breath of God, abide in God, and God abides in us. Because of that, there is nothing that can erase the Spirit's presence in and among us, nothing that can contain the creative, expansive, extravagant love of God. It is this truth that makes it possible for us to embody the love of God in this beautiful, crazy, dynamic, sometimes broken world that God has made.

So, sing to God, in whom we abide, a new song! Celebrate the Spirit that blows away all barriers, and connects us to one another, creation, and God who created it all. No matter the struggles, let us remind one another always to abide in God, who loves in us and through us when we just can't. Sing to the Lord, indeed.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

2021, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, YouTube, video, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, Acts 10:44-48, Psalm 98, John 15:9-17, Jesse Helton