

TEXT: 1 John 4:16; John 15:1-8
THEME: Christ abides in you
SUBJECT: Abiding
TITLE: How Do You Know?

Fifth Sunday of Easter
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Messiah Moravian
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“How do you know?” How do you know $2+2=4$? How do you know the earth is round? How do you know the truth of any historical event and its consequences? How do you know which economic system best serves the common good? How do you know who are your true friends?

If we want to know anything, we need to know that any attempt to confirm or disprove something must be undertaken in a way appropriate to the subject. If I want to know what $2+2$ equals, I can take two oranges and add them to two apples and count to 4. If I want to know if the Treaty of Versailles sowed the seeds of resentment that made WWII more likely, adding apples and oranges won't help. If I want to know who my true friends are, I need to call them at 3:00 am and cry “Help.”

Any attempt to confirm or disprove the reality of God can be meaningfully undertaken only in a way appropriate to what God is purported to be. If we imagine that God is some discrete object visible to physics or some finite aspect of nature, then we simply have misunderstood what the content of the concept of God truly is.

It seems many who make the most of demanding “proof” of God are also those least willing to undertake the specific kinds of mental and spiritual discipline that all great religious traditions say are required to find God. To know God, to the extent that God can be known, we need to attempt the sort of investigation necessary to achieve knowledge of God.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and *knows* God” (1 John 4:7). “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16b). For John, the appropriate way to know one is born of God, the way to know God, is to abide in love for God is love.

Love is not known as the sum of any mathematical equation; love is not proven by any law of physics; love is known only in relation to others. Just as the branch has no life apart from the vine, so we cannot know God apart from abiding in love.

“Abiding” may be the last thing we want to hear about after being confined in place by a pandemic. Abiding is not a word we have much use for in daily conversation, but it is not a word easily substituted for without losing something important. “Wait” or “stick around” don't capture the full import of “abide.”

Abiding has more the sense of a full, personal commitment. It expresses a quality of solidarity which just waiting would never convey; something like the widowed Ruth's wonderful words to her mother-in-law:

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried (Ruth 1:16-17). Whether you or your mother-in-law would find such a commitment agreeable is another matter, but you get the point.

Where in our culture do we know such commitment, such abiding? In relationship to a place? It is estimated the average American moves 11.7 times in a lifetime. The average American changes careers 5-7 times. We are a people on the move, not abiders in place.

What about abiding in relationships? We lose touch with almost half the friends we make. A study charting the social life of 2,000 people found that the average person will make about 29 friends over a lifetime, but will lose at least 5 of those along the way due to arguments. The average length of an American marriage is 8.2 years. New Yorkers actually stick it out longer averaging 12.2 years.

The challenges to abiding are enormous. Employment contracts tend to be temporary and we must move for work. Our likes and dislikes change over time as do those of our friends. Our participation in any social group is only as stable as our interests. Being transient gives us the ability to deny that the self we have been has any real continuity with the self we are now.

“Finding the right way of abiding is the challenge of finding the source from which our life flows, the spring of our own being, the grain with which we are meant to live, and which it damages us to go against,” says Ben Quash, professor of Christianity and the Arts at King's College, London. “It means being part of communities for whom ‘abiding’ is a watchword—above all, for Christians, the Church.”

There are kinds of community that I can choose to belong to because they are full of people like me, or of people with the same interests as me. But these communities lack the sort of stability that could sustain the kind of life together that *changes me* as opposed to the sort of community that *I can exchange*.

At its best, the church is the sort of community that transforms its members. This may happen imperceptibly over a lifetime but it transforms them nonetheless—and that it happens over a lifetime is exactly the point. The Church is not an interest group, and its members do not come together because they are all like each other (or even because they like each other) but because they believe they are all God's children.

And there is the rub, God's other children. We cannot abide in God who is love, John says, apart from abiding in relationship with our brothers and sisters who are at best love polluted with greed,

anger, envy, lust, pride. I cannot know God and, I cannot know myself, apart from knowing God in my brothers and sisters, my neighbors, and if Jesus is to be believed, my enemies as well. This is why love is work, the work of a lifetime.

What do we do, St Augustine wonders, when we comprehend the incomprehensibility of what we are looking for? We do not give up the search as long as we are making progress in our inquiry, because we become better and better by looking for so great a good which is both sought in order to be found and found in order to be sought. God is sought in order to be found all the more delightfully, and is found in order to be sought all the more avidly.

By abiding in love we find the source from which our life flows, the spring of our own being, the grain with which we are meant to live, and which it damages us to go against. By abiding in love we know as we are known.