***ABIDING IN LOVE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

May 6, 2018

Texts: 1 John 5:1-3 and John 15:9-17

In the lexicon of modern English language, there are some words that are rarely used these days outside the walls of the church or apart from the pages of Scripture. For those of us who are here week to week such words may be familiar even if we are not fully sure of the meaning, but they may be completely foreign to the unchurched or the occasional visitor. As you know, the books of the Bible were not written in English (contrary to that oft-quoted proclamation, “If the King James English was good enough for Jesus, then it’s good enough for me!”). The Bible had to be translated from the original Greek and Hebrew, so sometimes the word choice reflects the language of the time in which the translation is made; at other times there is simply no better word to choose, so we get a rarely used word that most fully embraces the meaning of the Greek or Hebrew. For example, we *partak*e in the Lord’s Supper, but do you *partake* anything else in your life day to day? We enter God’s gates with *thanksgivin*g, but how often do you use the word thanksgiving day to day – apart from a certain Thursday in November? *Righteousness* is one of those words; *commandment* is one of those words; *expiation* is one of those words; and perhaps you can think of a host of other words that are peculiar to church or the Bible.

In his farewell address to his disciples in John’s Gospel, Jesus uses such a word that seems to be at the core of his message: *abide*. “Abide in my love,” says Jesus. “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” *Abide* is not one of those words we use every day; if we use it at all it may be to say something like, “I can’t abide that whining for another minute!” which seems to imply “put up with” or “tolerate”. But I don’t think Jesus is telling us to “put up with” or “tolerate” his love. He is asking much more of his disciples and of us.

The Greek word which is translated *abide* is elsewhere translated *remain* or *stay*. *Stay in my love*, *remain in my love*, *live in my love* – these all catch something of what Jesus is saying. Eugene Peterson suggests this translation: *Make yourselves at home in my love*.[[1]](#endnote-1) Embrace that image for a moment – *Make yourself at home in my love*. Move in and eat, sleep, work, relax in Jesus’ love. This is love as a way of life, love as an ethic for living, love in which we live and move and have our being, love that permeates all of life: 24-7.

In his book *Pontius Pilate*, Italian scholar Aldo Schiavone recalls Jesus’ repeated commandment to abide in his love as the precursor to his discussion with Pilate about truth. He writes:

*This insistent urging, hammered home to an unprecedented degree, reveals the very strong and powerful perception Jesus had of himself: witness of the truth, insofar as the truth is love. The God who, through Jesus, enters into the history of humankind to show them the way, is a God of love. Love is the only way possible for Him to become history.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

As Schiavone suggests, love is not only a commandment for how we are to live; it is the very essence of God, the truth Jesus embodied and proclaimed about the Kingdom of God, echoing that shortest of Bible verses: God IS love!

“Abide in my love,” says Jesus. As he anticipates his departure from his disciples, Jesus suggests that what will hold this family of disciples together long after he is gone is love, the kind of love Jesus has shown them day after day after day, the kind of love they have for Jesus that kept them by his side week after week, the kind of love that will lead Jesus to the cross. “Abide in that love,” he says. Live in that love. Make your home in that love. Let love be the center of your life together, for my commandment to you is this: “Love one another as I have loved you.” His death will be the ultimate expression of his love for them and for the world, and it is that kind of love in which they are to live day after day when he is gone. In the words of the hymn: “love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Our friend Jim Simpson tells of a camp held some years ago in Aultbea in Wester Ross, Scotland. Boys from a young offenders’ institution were each given the responsibility of looking after a youngster with learning difficulties. One day was spent climbing the hills; at the end of the day’s climb one of the young offenders who had been working with a young boy with Down’s syndrome was found sobbing in the camp. He had helped the boy up and down the hills throughout the day and they had shared lunch together. On returning to the camp after the day’s climb the boy with Down’s syndrome sat down on the young offender’s knee, reached out and put his arms around him and said, “I love you.” No one had ever said that to the young offender before![[3]](#endnote-3) Hence the tears! How many others are there out there who have never heard those words: I love you? How many have never been hugged? How many have never felt loved? This is my commandment, says Jesus: that you love one another as I have loved you – without condition, without end.

It is that commandment that binds us together as a church and that commandment that shapes our mission as the church. We are a community of followers of Jesus who love one another across our differences and disagreements, a family of faith who loves one another even when we are not particularly loveable – as Jesus loved Peter despite his denials and loved Thomas despite his doubts. To be the church is to love one another in times of joy and sorrow, in sickness and in health. It is not to be the family of faith who agrees upon everything – that was not true of Jesus’ disciples, nor of the early church. It is to be the family, brothers and sisters in Christ, who love one another as Christ loves us. Much of the time that is easy, but sometimes that means, to paraphrase one of our folks: loving those with whom you disagree on just about everything. For us as disciples of Jesus, love is a way of life, a way of abiding together, and that very act of loving one another bears witness to the world that we believe in a loving God who sent Jesus to us in love and who calls us again and again to love one another.

If you would be a disciple of Jesus then abide in his love. Make your home in his love. Live in his love by loving all those among whom you live and with whom you study and work and worship. Love not just those who are easy to love, but also those who are hard-headed or sharp-tongued or hard to love and those who nobody seems to love. Love them with love that is as tangible as a helping hand or as gracious as a word of forgiveness or as welcoming as an invitation to your table. Love them, not because you have to, but because you choose to be a faithful follower of Jesus who tells you to abide in his love. Love them because God loves them and because God loves you and because God calls us all, urges us all, pleads with us all to love one another. In the words of the song, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.” And perhaps the converse is also true: They’ll wonder if we are Christians by our failure to love. What then will they know or wonder about you? Will they know you are Christian by your love or will they be left to wonder? Amen

1. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, NavPress:2002 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Aldo Schiavone, *Pontius Pilate*, Liveright Publishing Corp: 2017, p.126 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James A. Simpson, “Sight and Insight”, *Life and Work*, May 2012, p.47 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)