

Showing Up

Psalm 121; John 15:1-8

Fifth Sunday of Easter, (May 2) 2021

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I think we are called to the work of healing, both inner and out: healing of the mind through a change in consciousness, healing of the Earth through a change of our lives. We can begin that work by learning how to abide in a place.

- Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making Home in a Restless World*, p. 120.

I love this Scripture from John today. I especially love this old word Jesus uses that is so central to the Gospel according to John: *abide*. Abide is an old word that many think is out-of-date in our modern world. Of the 17 uses of abide listed in the Oxford dictionary, eight are obsolete. The word seems to belong to another time.

The word has had a brief comeback among a younger generation due to the popularity of the Coen Brothers 1998 crime/comedy movie *The Big Lebowski*, starring Jeff Bridges as an aging hippy whose chief pursuit in life is bowling. He's a slacker, and when he's not bowling, he likes to sit in a bathtub of water smoking marijuana while listening to recordings of whale sounds. Toward the end of the movie, the Dude, as the Bridges' character is known, makes a summary statement about himself and the plot of the movie when he says, "The Dude abides." Since then, the word abide has made a comeback, though often coming to simply mean relaxing, chilling, or even laziness.

Someone gave me a bobblehead doll of the Dude several years ago, and

every time you touch his head he would say, “The Dude abides.” When Clark Perry was about four, he would come into my office just to hear, “the Dude abides.” One day I went out on the front porch of the church and 4-year-old Clark was sitting in that children’s chair out there. I asked him, “Clark, what are you doing?” He said, “I’m just abiding.”

In today’s scripture from John, Jesus talks to us about abiding. He begins by giving us a picture of what it means to be his disciple. It’s like being a branch living off of a vine, he says. Jesus Christ is the vine, and we are those branches and without that deep, integral, organic connection with him then we will dry up and die.

Then Jesus uses this old word, *abide* to describe how we are to live with him. Much more than relaxing, to abide means to stay with him, dwell, reside, inhabit, remain with him, and it means to do this over a long time. Abide is not about one brief shining moment. It is neither instant nor quick. It is neither dramatic nor glitzy. Abiding takes time. Abiding is steady and slow. Writer Scott Russell Sanders says abiding has to do with going deeper (*Staying Put*, p. 102).

This is the same word used in the first chapter of John when the disciples first come up to Jesus and he asks them what are they looking for? They say, “Where are you staying? Where are you living?” And Jesus invites them to come with him and abide; to abide with him and others of his disciples. They do and John says they remained with him. They abided.

When Jesus invites us to abide with him, live with him, it is not an invitation to abstraction. It is an invitation to a personal relationship with him. And it is also

not an invitation to a *private* relationship – “just me and Jesus.” It is always in community, among friends, with other disciples. We know Christ through each other and therefore, we know ourselves through each other. Abiding in Christ is very personal. It’s very organic.

So, part of the irony and challenge is that we’re hearing this while we’re still virtual and distanced from one another. Many of us have been asking all year, how do we abide during Covid separation?

Therefore, I think it is no small thing to remember that here in John 15 Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night they betrayed him. Surrounding him were the 12 who would, each one, fail to abide with him in his greatest hour of need.

Jesus began his teaching with this old image of the vine and branches, a favorite reference to Israel in the scriptures they all knew. As the prophets so often lamented, Israel repeatedly failed to be fruitful branches that grow from the vine. The disciples would fail too. And so do we.

Any and all of our abiding takes its strength, its nourishment, its healing from the Christ who went to the cross for all of us in our failing and our sin. Now the Living Christ invites us to belong to him, to abide – he in us and we in him. Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you” Christ abides in us; therefore, we are able to abide in him. First his grace, then our response and commitment. Christ abides, Christ lasts, Christ shows up and keeps showing up, Christ endures, continues, hangs in, holds on, to us and in us. Christ abides with us and hangs onto us even when we are virtual and cannot be with and in his body, the church, in the flesh.

Years ago, Michael Chism gave his testimony in the church he and Amy were attending when they were in College Station. Part of his testimony, he later recalled to me, was that much of what he learned here when he was a boy, was the importance of showing up over and over. Showing up, keep on keeping on, and practicing being a Christian even when we do not feel like it. Over time, we become Christian.

Our showing up over the long haul is made possible by the Living Christ's faithful showing up with us, in us, and through us. We are able to abide in Christ because Christ first abides with us and in us.

In my 31 years as pastor of this congregation, I am able to look back and bear witness to this abiding presence of the Living God among us. I think of some of the high and holy moments: when I'm lowering someone beneath the waters of baptism and watching them rise to walk in newness of life. Or Miki singing "Ride On King Jesus" or "Pie Jesu" and we almost leap out of our seats. Or Mary playing the piano where she almost leaps off of the piano bench and we leap with her. Or watching one of our children go over and hug one of us who is not their parent. I remember Pastor Sarah preaching her first sermon when she was 11-years-old, and I remember handing over the housekey to Nel Garner, the first Habitat for Humanity homeowner in Nacogdoches. Gorgeous outdoor worship services or witnessing old animosities and wounded hearts healed in an embrace. When Gerard Manley Hopkins said that the world is charged with the grandeur of God, we know exactly what he meant.

But mostly, God keeps showing up in the daily, humdrum living of our lives. Day-in-day-out showing up in the classroom, raising a child, abiding in marriage, caring and loving someone who perhaps no longer remembers who we are. Daily prayers, even when we do not feel like it. Showing kindness and being merciful day after day, and we understand the Psalmist, “The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and for evermore” (Ps. 121:8).

In the fall of 1964 the schools of Americus, GA integrated. It was the senior year of Greg Wittkamper, who had grown up at nearby Koinonia, the interracial farm founded and led by Clarence and Florence Jordan some twenty years before. From the 1st grade Greg and his friends from Koinonia were treated as outcasts among their classmates but it was his senior year, the year the school was integrated that things got tougher. On that tense first day of school, Greg showed up in the same car with four black teenagers as a show of solidarity. Things became vicious and unrelenting, but Greg endured.

Forty years later, Greg received an invitation to attend his class reunion in Americus, the first contact he had with his old school and his classmates. Along with his invitation, some of his classmates wrote letters urging him to return and asking for forgiveness. One letter said,

Greg, you have shared the sufferings of Christ as few have. ‘He was despised and rejected of men.’ I have not personally witnessed that kind of courage before or since. I don’t know how you endured, but what an example of godliness with humility you have been to me. I will never again say... ‘how could all those Christian people in Poland and Germany have stood by and allowed [the Holocaust] to happen?’ I can’t say now, ‘Well that didn’t happen in my time,’ or ‘I wasn’t a part of something terrible,’ or ‘I never lynched anybody,’ or ‘I wasn’t in

Germany.' No, but I was present with you over a long period of time, and I never once did one thing to comfort you or to reach out to you. It was cruelty.

Greg read this letter and others like it and wept, and he did return for this fortieth class reunion where several other classmates came and asked for forgiveness.

Later, when interviewed about it all, Greg shrugged and said, “Besides showing up, I don’t feel I did that much.”

Greg Wittkamper showed up and endured. To use our old-fashioned word, he abided. Just like Koinonia Farm abided and continues to abide to this day (from *The Class of '65* by Jim Auchmutey; cited by Jim McCoy in the Ekklesia Project newsletter online, April 29, 2015).

That’s our calling too.

And it is all possible because the Living Christ abides with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.