

Abiding Love

John 15.9-17

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I have one of those jobs where I often say to myself, "I can't believe I get to do this." (Yes, there are moments that pop up when I look at Tom or Carolyn or just mutter to myself, "I can't believe we're doing this.") But at the heart of it, my work is about partnership and collaboration. My very best days are almost always filled with conversations that matter. Breaking bread and pouring another cup of coffee. Listening to people's wildest thoughts and fears and dreams and hurts. I get to hold space for a living—sacred space, creative space, imaginative space. All of that is where the prophetic lives—sacred, creative, imaginative space of looking at the world as it is but knowing in our hearts and minds and bodies that there is a world as it should be, and somehow our work together is bringing one to the other. I get to do this for a living. I get to spend my days in this really amazing, dreamy, holy space, almost all of the time.

At the foundation of it all, my job is loving people. I knew coming here almost 5 years ago that I would be moving to New Orleans to fall in love with each of you because that is who I am and that is what I do. I love big. I love quickly. I get swept into the ocean of love for my friends, for my family, for our community, for this world. I joined the staff of Baptist Church of the Covenant almost 20 years ago and didn't yet know the consequences of love as I fell for those people. When I left them to move to Virginia five years later, the change in those relationships sometimes left me feeling like my oxygen supply had been cut off. I hadn't yet learned about healthy boundaries and work-life balance. I just loved them all so fully in every part of my work and life, and leaving for seminary hurt fiercely as our relationships changed. That's one of the consequences of love, and I have tried in all kinds of settings to love with more caution and love with some distance and space, but that doesn't really work. You can't do this job right from a distance. It's not who I am. And it's not what abiding in love is about.

I felt all of that keenly last Sunday morning when I woke up in Dayton, Ohio, preparing for my last day with the beautiful friends in the Alliance of Baptists, already tender-hearted at the thought of saying goodbye to them for another year. As I packed and got ready for the day, I received a message from Kathy Randels saying Dick had fallen again and wasn't waking up. He would transition soon, and she was on her way home from Florida to be with him. I felt my chest tighten as I realized I wouldn't make it home in time to see him. Just a couple of hours later, I sat in worship at Harmony Creek

Church, dear friends all around me, one of the long-time beloveds from Baptist Church of the Covenant introducing the closing worship, when I got the message that Dick was gone. Released from the limits of his earthly form, home and whole in ways we do not fully understand and only try to imagine. And I broke open with grief in a way that completely surprised me. Because part of loving deeply and quickly and wholeheartedly is also experiencing the sharp pain of saying goodbye.

And some of those very same people I loved and grieved when I left 15 years ago were the ones sitting beside me last Sunday morning. And one, my dear Valerie, who never met Dick Randels once in her life, sat and wept with me. Because love abides. This is the kind of open-hearted, full-bodied life sharing that Jesus is talking about in John's gospel. It's not sweet and sentimental. It's not clean and easy. It's not surface and lovely. Jesus is talking about the complicated, tangled, layered love that sometimes breaks us open with grief. The kind of empathetic connection to our friends that tethers us to their lives no matter distance and time. The kind of transformational, revolutionary love that doesn't just impact my life but just might change the whole order of the world when my love gets tangled up in yours. This is the abiding love of Jesus the Christ.

Mary Oliver writes, "There are a hundred paths through the world that are easier than loving. But, who wants easier?"<sup>1</sup> I am certain Jesus' disciples would have chosen easier. The kind of love that leaves you aching in the tension of a world as it is and a world as it should be doesn't feel easy. Jesus has already talked to them about being people of the way of love, he's commanded it of them already and given them this talk already. Now he circles back and tells his beloveds again that they really can do this. They really can love on a divine level because they are his friends. He has chosen them. He has appointed them to love the world like this. He doesn't just promise them they're capable of holding this space for each other. He promises they will bear a lasting fruit in the world because they are branches abiding on the vine of the Christ.

The word "abide" in verse 9 means to remain—to be contented, to continue to be present, to welcome and be well pleased. Continue to be present in my love. Keep holding this space. Welcome the love you have experienced and known in our time together, delight in it, and then remain in that sacred space as you do your work. When you remain, keep time, continue to be present in the space of Divine love, then you will also live in a space of joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems: Volumen One*

Let's keep in mind Jesus' teaching posture in these love lessons: Jesus has washed the disciples' feet both as a demonstration of love and to model the posture for how they are to serve and love the world with humility, compassion, tenderness, and affection. In his exegesis of John 15, Mark Davis says the command of John 13 and 15 is not directly the command to love but to the way of serving the world. Then, the way of love both fuels the serving and is its byproduct.<sup>2</sup> It sounds to me like another flow. We've talked a lot over the past year about being in the flow of Spirit, connected to the dancing movement of God, as Father Richard Rohr has guided us. We've talked lately about the interplay between inner work and outer work, personal spiritual practice and community practice, and you're even helping me create a visual tool for how that inner/outer, personal/community life of faith is another flow. Well, here in John's gospel we're getting a command from Jesus (not just a suggestion with an equivocating "I hope you can try to do some of this" but a full on command and "this is what it means to be my follower") to serve the world/love the world, serve each other/love each other. The serving and loving are connected, flowing, simultaneously fueling and producing more of the other.

So to remain in Christ's love, to hold a space of deep joy, to continue to be present in the love of Jesus, serve the world and love the world, serve each other and love each other. Do it with an open-heart and lowered walls. Practice affection and empathy, let your heart break and watch the love of Christ mend it back together, give yourself to the hard and messy work of caring for the world in the way of Jesus. Alyce McKenzie writes, "Then and now, friendship with Jesus brings followers into a relationship of reciprocal love, creating a community in which people who addressed each other as 'friends' could realize the ideal of mutual self-sacrifice."<sup>3</sup> The community practices this together. The way of Christ's love is not a solo endeavor. If we're going to wash someone else's feet, then we need each other. If we're going to allow ourselves the vulnerability of having our feet washed, then we need each other.

We are finding our way to this radical, revolutionary, transformational love here. On Friday morning I got a text from Tom Rushing and an email from Linda Easterlin that our 1925 glass front marquee on the front of the sanctuary had been vandalized. It's the end of the semester for our university neighbors, and I initially dismissed it as a consequence of college kids making bad group decisions on their way home along Broadway somewhere. But once I made it over here, I realized the situation was more than tossing a rock into a piece of glass and running away. Someone had smashed and ripped out the glass in order to start ripping down my name. And the church's name. A

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<sup>2</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/05/commands-to-love-or-commands-in-order.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/best-friend-of-all-alyce-mckenzie-05-07-2012>

woman's name who some still find to be blasphemous and against God's will as proclaimer and leader here. A congregational name we've toyed around with changing but is rapidly and broadly known across town as a place where truth is told, justice is sought, full inclusion and affirmation and welcome is offered, and the radical, revolutionary, transformational love of Jesus the Christ is practiced. There may be times we want to go an easier route. "There are a hundred paths through the world that are easier than loving. But, who wants easier?"

Barbara Brown Taylor adds, "So love God. Love a neighbor. Be a neighbor, and let us not complicate things by arguing about specifics.

You know what it means to do love because some time or another you have been on the receiving end of it, but remember that knowing the right answer does not change a thing.

If you want the world to look different the next time you go outside, do some love. Do a little or do a lot, but do some, and do not forget some for yourself."<sup>4</sup>

Do some love, my friends. If we are going to stick with this path, we need to abide in Christ's love. Delight in it. Make a home in it. Continue to be present and rooted and centered in the love of Jesus the Christ. And the promise is that we will see fruit grow from our rootedness in that great love. I believe it. It's happening here. I feel that growth in our affection and compassion and the heartbeat of this community. Abide in this love, dear ones, as you have been commanded and appointed and loved to this very moment. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*