

Abiding Through the Spirit

a devotional by Laur Steven

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In Luke's gospel (10: 25-28), when a lawyer challenges Jesus by asking what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus turns the tables on the lawyer by asking him what he has learned from the law. The lawyer answers: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus responds, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

In these commandments we have the core of Christian values. And the wonder of them, the wisdom of them, is that they are mutually reinforcing, allowing us as culturally shaped, diverse human individuals to also transcend ourselves, to become part of a larger unity. This transcending of the self is what we can call growing in God. Growing in God is our preaching theme for the season after Pentecost, also known as Ordinary Time, which goes through the summer and fall to Advent. To break this long season into manageable chunks, we're reflecting on differing aspects of what it means to Grow in God. Currently we're looking at how growing in God requires that we abide in God.

The scriptural touchstone for understanding abiding in God is John 15:5: "I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit" Pastor Beth spoke about this relationship on May 2nd: "Jesus says make your home in me and I will make my home in you. He uses this beautiful image of inter-abiding to emphasize that just as the same life surges through all parts of a plant, the life of God surges through all beings. There is no separation between humans and God and between humans and humans, because of this mutual inter-abiding."

She continues:

"One of the pieces of good news in all of this is that our spiritual growth and fruitfulness doesn't depend on us. Although it certainly takes some effort on our part and we do need to give ourselves to the process, we cannot force growth to happen. This is God's realm of doing. We can yearn for transformation. We can be faithful to pay attention and align ourselves daily with the Source of Love. But ultimately transformation, growth and fruitfulness are a gift and a grace."

These are powerful words from Beth. Our “growth and fruitfulness *are* a gift and a grace.” But what if we do not give ourselves to the process? What if we attempt to force growth to happen? Well, a significantly different relationship with God and our neighbours develops. I’ll explore some of this dimension today.

Our distinctiveness as human beings has the quite natural tendency to make us self-centred. We feel as though the world revolves around us; we see other people as “other”, different, not like us. And so they are. But then, unless we can somehow get a perspective outside ourselves, we soon begin to see ourselves as the barometer of what is normal for all. We have crossed a line. What is normal, we soon see as what is right and good. We *value* it. We want to preserve that normalcy, that rightness and goodness. Those others who seem so strange to us can be allowed into our world if they are willing to become like us, if they share our values. Otherwise, we need to be vigilant border guards to be sure the strangeness doesn’t sneak in and undermine what makes us who we are. When it comes to our relationship with God, our tendency to self-centredness and self-preservation can lead us to turn God into an image of ourselves, a God who protects us, serves us, and keeps at bay our enemies and those strange and possibly evil foreigners who threaten our normal way of life.

To illustrate this tendency, I’ll look briefly at Psalm 9: 9-20, which opens with “The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.” This is a hymn of praise and thankfulness for being a dweller in the stronghold of the Lord. Here we can see the singer’s gratitude for God’s remembrance of and care for the oppressed, the afflicted, and the poor shade over into a militaristic demand that God rise up, defeat, and judge the nations of the earth that threaten the singer. The use of the word “stronghold” sets in motion a metaphorical depiction of a warrior king who protects his followers in a fortress from which he rides out to overwhelm and judge his merely mortal human enemies. While there is a version of abiding here in the singer’s grateful reliance on God, the love for neighbour is scarcely to be seen. In fact, the singer seems to be almost gleeful that “9:15 The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught. 9:16 The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.” The singer both allows God to “execute judgement” and gloats that the wicked have done it to themselves because “they are only human.”

I said above that “unless we can somehow get a perspective outside ourselves, we soon begin to see ourselves as the barometer of what is normal for all.” How do we get a perspective outside ourselves? By relinquishing self and accepting the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. On May 30th Dave Brubacher spoke

about “Abiding in Hope” and referred to Jesus’s words to Nicodemus: “You must be born from above ... The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Dave commented that “the Holy Spirit is God’s presence all around us enabling us to see things through the eyes of God’s love for us.” By relinquishing self we abide in God and God abides in us through the Holy Spirit. We grow in God in ways we cannot map out beforehand with any certainty. But we can trust that God’s will is being done on earth as we find our ability to love the neighbour expand beyond our familiar circle into places new and strange and challenging.

In her sermon last week Pastor Beth said “The kin-dom will not be what we expect or even what we want; in fact, it will probably stir up resistance in us. It’s counterintuitive and countercultural to place trust in an invasive kin-dom that grows in ways we do not fully understand or control. But that’s the invitation Jesus offers.”

The lawyer who quoted the central commandments to Jesus found this out when he asked, “who is my neighbour?” and Jesus responds with the story of the good Samaritan. The Samaritan—the feared and despised enemy of the Jews—renders care for his own feared and despised enemy, the Jew. Thus he transforms the enemy, and himself, into neighbours. Jesus tells the lawyer to “go and do likewise.”

And he’s telling us too. And Mennonite Church Canada is responding. And we at Grace are responding. And it is not easy. The changes in the Mennonite denomination over the past century have been earthshaking for members. I don’t need to go into details; you can name a few I’ll bet. Suffice it to say that for most of us our Grace Mennonite Church is not our parents’ church, and definitely not our grandparents’ church. God’s gracious gift of the Spirit is at work here, and takes us to places we might never have expected or particularly wanted to go. Why? Because we abide in God and God in us.

In 2 Corinthians 6: 1-13, Paul urges the church in Corinth “not to accept the grace of God in vain.” In the terms I’ve been reflecting on today, accepting the grace of God in vain can be understood as not truly abiding, but remaking God in our own image. The fruitfulness of the pruned branch which abides in the vine disappears as we make the world over as ourselves. Our misunderstood vanity is actually a form of withering. Paul quotes Isaiah 49:8, where God says to the Israelites “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” Then Paul turns to the Corinthians: “See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” The urgency in his words is palpable. And is so for us as well. God is listening to us, God is saving us, *now*. And always, as we abide in God. Paul

concludes this passage with a frank appeal to the Corinthians, which takes us full circle, back to the greatest commandments:

6:11 We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you.

6:12 There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours.

6:13 In return--I speak as to children--open wide your hearts also.

I'll conclude with Pastor Doug's opening prayer from June 13th. Our preaching team is often amazed at how intertwined our sermons and devotionals become as we ponder the same theme from our varied perspectives. When I heard Doug's prayer last Sunday I knew I couldn't conclude today more appropriately. Let us pray:

O God, we call out to you in humility,
confessing our deep need at all times
for the blessing of true spiritual awareness.

May we feel assured in our faith that you are present with us,
and within us, as you are within all the peoples of the world.
May we be empowered by your love, as revealed in Jesus,
who treated all people with compassion, calling everyone alike
to surrender the self-absorption that creates enemies of others,
sometimes that creates disgust or hatred toward our own selves.

Help us to listen today to the promise
of transformation of ourselves and the world
that is provided when we trust your grace and follow your ways
with holy desire to love our neighbours as ourselves.

O God, we center now inside your presence
and we commit to hear your voice, and take your hand
as we live with gratitude toward peace and justice in our land.
In Jesus' name. Amen