

Abiding
John 15:4-5, 9-17

This summer we have spent our time considering the metaphor of the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. We have talked about them all, even self-control! Each aspect is Spirit-developed and an expression of LOVE. This is not a list of laws or an outline for a self-improvement project with boxes to be checked when we reach a certain level of competence or maturity, if that were even possible. I liked how Joe said it last week - they are a trajectory!! An arc of love being developed along the path of life as a result of the Holy Spirit living and working within us. We don't always know what the Spirit is up to at any given moment in our lives, but often we will find the Spirit at work in us in the very places where we are most unlike Jesus, because God's purpose is that we look increasingly like Jesus. Paul says in Romans 8 that God has predestined us to become conformed to the image of His Son! That's His plan and the Spirit works in us to transform us developing that beautiful fruit, through the events, people, circumstances, environments in our lives.

The one thing we haven't addressed very fully this summer is what Jesus says about what it takes for fruit production other than via the Holy Spirit. In John 15 Jesus says, "Abide in me, and I will abide in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must abide in the vine, Neither can you bear fruit unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man abides in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." The word abide in this chapter of John is used 10 times and is translated stay, abide, dwell, remain, or live, depending on the translation. I think this might be important!!

This little word "abide" is the point of this message and the point of the whole series, in a way. We can get enthralled with the fruit - but abiding, living, dwelling, staying, remaining in the Vine Jesus is at the core of fruit development and is at the heart of this metaphor. We can read over this word because we think we know what it means - after all we have been abiding somewhere all our lives. But do we know **how** to do it - to dwell remain, live, abide **in Jesus**? Today we just have opportunity to explore one practical way of abiding.

We abide in our abodes - our homes. We dwell in our dwellings! A home is where you make life, where a group of any size or composition lives and relates, where a family may be raised and nurtured, where food is prepared and eaten, where study, recreation and rest take place, where laundry is done and baths are taken, where trash is taken out, where stuff is brought in, where memories are stored. A home is the hub of life for most of us.

Choosing where to make our home is maybe one of the first real investments (beyond education) that a person makes. And it is a costly investment - costly in terms of time (hunting for the right one, fixing it up, decorating it, cleaning it, insuring it, etc.) and money for every part of it for sure. In our passage today Jesus invites us to make Him our dwelling place - to abide in Him, just as He promises to abide in us. For Him to abide in us is for Him to take up residence in our lives. (We will consider that piece of the puzzle later). To abide in Christ is to take up residence within him. It is a costly investment and yet the most life affirming investment we can ever make. He becomes our home, our home base, our dwelling place, where we find shelter and live in family, where we learn from Him about what really matters, what He cares about, where we invest. And what does Jesus care about - what does He want us to invest in?

The passage in John that we read tells us that what is important to Jesus is love and obedience - and they go together. The human race loves "love" but is leery of the word obey. What Jesus makes clear is that obedience to LOVE's demands is paramount to Him. The first listed fruit of the Spirit is Love and all of the other fruit listed are descriptions of the kind of love that Jesus is training us to give to Him and to everyone, just like God's love showers blessings on all.

Jesus also makes clear in our passage that loving isn't a suggestion to those who wish to abide in Him to stay connected to Him. It is the source and way of our abiding. It is a command. Love is to be understood as the basis of our practice, our thinking, motivation, our actions, and words. It is the one fruit that captures so much of the goodness and supremacy of God. God is love.

Jesus' command is quite simple really but not easy: to love - to love as He loves, as the Father loves requires us to allow the Holy Spirit to develop the fruit of love into our very beings through trials, joys, learning, other people, worship, letting go, and hanging on. This is not an easy kind of loving. It isn't the tender affection that we also call love in the English language. The Greek word *Phileo* is the affection that is shared and shown between friends and family and probably what we mostly mean when we say love. In Greek there are several words for love. And "Agape" is the word used in John 15. Agape loving is God's kind of loving. It's robust, sturdy. It's not just being nice to other nice people, to those who believe the way we do, but also to those who are against us. It is loving even our enemies! Jesus makes that clear in both His teaching and His life. It is an intentional loving so that our thoughts are not what do I get out of this, or what pleases and benefits me, but what does the other person need? How can I do what is good and right and best for that person? Does it bring God's best? Does it bring grace, justice, healing, blessing to the other person even at my expense? Is it like Jesus who for the joy set before Him endured the cross for you and me? That's agape love, God's love.

This is all very pie in the sky kind of talk, so let's get real: The place where the Holy Spirit is kneading this kind of love into me is likely the very place where it is hardest for me to give it, to live it. So I ask, "who is the person to whom giving agape, God's kind of love, is difficult for me?" Do I have an enemy or just someone who seems to be working against me? Whom I sense doesn't like me? Or whom I don't like? How do I agape that person? It will be an intentional choice to love like that. God's love is intentional, purposeful, powerful.

To get more personal - How am I loving like this in my home? Home is where the rubber meets the road for loving: What does agape love look like with my spouse, my roommate, my children? What about in other inner circles of relationship - my friendships, my neighborhood, my church, my workplace? Is my loving transactional? You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours? Is it limited - this far, this long, this much and no more?

It's hard to know how to love people well sometimes. Jesus says in this passage that we are to love as He loves us. We must ask, so how does God love me? Of course, he loves completely, eternally, without strings attached always for my best and His glory. But I need something concrete, practical, do-able to hang on to when I think of giving agape love to others. Here is what came to me - 2 actions - maybe it will ring true for you as well. Maybe we can even practice this next week!!

What comes to my mind when I think of God's love for me is that God understands me, He knows me, He even knows my name - my inborn strengths, my physicality, my ability to think and solve and create. He knows where I grew up and who and what I grew up with. He also knows my vulnerabilities, and weaknesses, where I am prone to wander and sin. He knows me and has great compassion for me. Although He made me in His image, He knows where I am broken and has great patience with my inability to be other than just human and a very flawed human at that. He knows me.

Then in knowing me from before my birth, knowing all my best and worst characteristics, He comes up under me to carry me, to bear my burdens, to lift me when I fall, to strengthen me when I am weak, to give his life so that I can live. In Deuteronomy 33 Moses says "The eternal God is your

refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.” In His love - agape - I find arms of love; understanding, accepting, forgiving me, and endowing me with significance, meaning, and worth. And this is just the tip of God’s love for me - His agape love. It will take a lifetime to explore it fully.

However, this may be a pathway, a starting point for learning to love like God loves. It can start with understanding, which starts with listening, not talking!! For some of us, this will definitely be a work of the Spirit! I can seek to understand another person, my spouse, children, friends, co-workers. They will bless us for it. I can attempt to climb into their shoes, to see who they are; get to know them and the whys in their life. This understanding comes with asking questions rather than making proclamations. It comes with wondering, not resting in first impressions, or assumptions, with listening to what is said and what is not said, to clarifying what I am hearing or seeing. Taking the steps to understand another, gives us opportunity to authentically offer grace, mercy, forgiveness from a place of humility. With understanding comes the realization that the other person is just like me, trying and failing and falling at times to be all they want to be, let alone all that they were created to be. When I offer understanding, I can even come up under their brokenness and sin, to help them bear the weight of their own humanity just as I need Jesus to bear the weight of mine.

In one of my favorite books on marriage, The Mystery of Marriage, the author Mike Mason, wrote that one of the tasks of a marriage is for partners to come up under each other’s short-comings, idiosyncrasies, even sins, to help them to become all God has created them to be. That is agape love. Armond did that so often for me. Always for me, lifting me up, spurring me on, telling me you can, I’m proud of you!! I am well aware of times when I did not do that for him, when I didn’t listen well and made assumptions, jumping to conclusions. Armond once said that I had the strongest legs he had seen because I was so often jumping to conclusions. And there we have the conundrum we face when it comes to loving like God loves and Christ exemplified for us. We fail.

When loving like God loves us is beyond us, which it often is, because we aren’t God, we must rest in God’s grace and His love for us and for the other. This is the place where Jesus’ commitment to abide in us is crucial, critical, so important. We are often fickle, unfaithful as we considered two weeks ago, but He is faithful. He promises His disciples before His return to Heaven that He “is with us always, even to the end of the age.” His presence is with us and in us through the Holy Spirit. In John 14:16 Jesus says, “ I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, ...you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans: I will come to you.” We can find comfort and the energy to persist in loving well, because He is with us and His spirit continues the purifying work of fruit development.

Jesus has given us a command to be obeyed, not a suggestion, to love well, even as we are loved by the Father and by Jesus. Learning to love that way is a process and as Joe said it is the trajectory of our lives. We are not perfect but being perfected which will have its final fulfillment when we see Jesus face to face. Until then His love is energized, developed by the Holy Spirit who lives and works within us. As we obey this command we will find ourselves abiding, remaining, dwelling in the vine, Jesus. Making Him our home. As we journey through the ups and downs of this life we can love with the joy and peace of Christ Himself. We can love patiently, kindly, with goodness, faithfully, under the Spirit’s control, all for God’s glory and our joy. Amen Pray.

Please Stand with me for the Hymn Abide with Me.