

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the fifth Sunday of Easter 2021: "Abiding in Christ"

I'm going to begin today's message by telling you a little about a former supervisor of mine from my day's as a teacher before I entered the ordained ministry.

BB, as we affectionately called her, was an extraordinary woman and an extraordinary leader. She was also a human being as flawed and fallible as any of the rest of us. She had a hot temper and an intense nicotine addiction. But, she also had a charisma and an unflagging dedication to excellence that few could deny. Under her leadership a school that had consistently ranked last in the nation for academic achievement and basic safety had tripled its graduation rate and successfully launched an International Baccalaureate program for its most talented students in just three short years. She could be capricious and unpredictable, and heaven help the person who crossed her, but at the end of the day this extraordinary woman had a quality that was hard not to love. Whether circumstances were favorable or unfavorable, whether she was popular or hated, she exuded a steady confidence that she was doing the right thing, and she forged ahead with dogged determination.

Many of the students and faculty feared her, a few would even be so bold as to curse her to her face, and yet when push came to shove, nearly 100% of the people under her leadership would say that she was the best person for the job.

There are thousands, maybe millions, of BB's in the world. What is it that makes them? What is that invisible something that turns

an ordinary, fallible human being into a force of nature, into a faithful hero?

Today's readings, both from the first Letter of John and the Gospel of John, speak of this mysterious act of abiding in God, and God abiding in us. This is beautiful and compelling imagery, but what does it mean?

Perhaps an important place to start is with what it *doesn't* mean. Jesus tells us that if we abide in him and he in us, we can ask for whatever we wish, and it will be done for us.

If we pass over this statement too quickly, it can sound like this: abide in me, and there no evil will ever happen to you, and any and every desire of yours will come to pass.

At the rock-bottom level of our eternal souls, I believe that this is a true statement. At every other level, however, it can take us into some very dangerous territory.

Has some catastrophe happened to you? You got sick, had an accident, suffered financial ruin perhaps? You must be out of sync with God, because things like that don't happen to those who abide in God's will. This kind of thing is thought and said by people of faith **way** too often, and it's called theodicy. It makes a mockery of this beautiful imagery of abiding in God and what happens when we do, and it can do great damage to a person's psyche.

We don't need to look very far to see the plain truth that people who believe, people who strive with every fiber of their being to know God, to love God, and to do God's will in the world still face challenges and even disasters. Jesus even tells us in more than

one place that if we're prophesying the truth most of the world will hate us and perhaps even openly attack us.

So, this image of abiding in God and what happens when we do is definitely not a promise of uninterrupted outward prosperity or even safety. In fact, I believe this image points to something that cannot be perceived by our usual senses at all. It's invisible and untouchable, and yet it's something we know well when we're in its presence. It's what the BB's of the world have.

Perhaps what's most helpful here is another biblical image: the image of the ever-flowing stream. God's will, God's activity in the world is like a mighty river that slowly, inexorably flows toward mercy, toward justice, toward peace, toward health, toward everything that is desirable at the deepest level.

But, like any river, this one has some challenging features. There are snags and hidden hazards. There are rapids and places where we get spit up on the shore. There are eddy currents that, if we fail to widen our gaze enough, can make it seem like the river is flowing in the opposite direction from the main current.

The question that is presented to us is this: all of us creatures must get in the river. About that we have no choice. But what is up to us is how we will travel. Will we go with the current or try to fight against it? Will we let the snags and hazards undo us, or will we patiently learn to navigate them with ever-increasing skill?

In the first Letter of John, the author makes the bold and unique declaration that God is love and that those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Traveling with the river's current, in spite of all obstacles, is what it means to abide in love.

And this is not something that looks the same at all times and in all places. In fact, it looks different in every time and place. There is a moment for love to be kind and gentle, but there is also a moment for it to be fierce and unyielding. There are times when love means setting clear boundaries, and times when it means throwing them to the wind. On the surface love can look wild and turbulent.

But in the midst of all this, there is something happening at the level of the soul that is anything but wild and turbulent. It can be entirely invisible to the outside world, but it is undeniably real. It is settled and confident. It is the state of abiding in God and God abiding in us. I believe that this is the state that all of the great faithful heroes of our past and present discovered.

And this state is available to all of us. The one thing required of us is that we make the pursuit of it our uncontested first priority. The grace is always there, but if we allow other agendas and distractions to claim our attention, we may miss it.

And if and when we find it, we will know. There is a hard-to-miss sign of the state of abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in us. All of the trials and tribulations of the outside world may not let up one bit, in fact they may even increase, but within we no longer

mark them as troubles. Deep within, we receive everything as grace, everything as being part of the current of that river that is carrying us to a heavenly destination. To the outside world we probably start to look crazy, but we recognize that we are actually more sane than ever.

And so my friends, the invitation is out. Shall we embark on this adventure? Shall we seek, every moment of every day, to abide in God and lay ourselves open for God to abide in us? Shall we abide in love, and let love abide in us? This state is a treasure of inestimable value, and it's ours for the taking if we truly want it.