

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, B  
Acts 8:26-40  
I John 4:7-21  
John 15:1-8

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An old roommate of mine had a poster that showed a fuzzy grey kitten clinging onto a branch. Actually, the poor kitten seemed to be hanging on for dear life, its eyes open wide, its front claws grasping the branch while its hind feet dangled down underneath. The caption read: “Hang in there, baby.”

I hated that poster. First of all, I felt sorry for the kitten. And I also wondered about the message: “Hang in there.” I know we say that to each other when we’re in a tough spot: “Hang in there, friend. You’ll make it through.” But it seemed like rather cold comfort. Our scripture lessons today bring a more powerful message for times of crisis, or anytime in life. Our Lord says, not “Hang in there,” but “*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*”

There are times when we feel like that dangling kitten-- vulnerable, scared, and wondering what comes next. Sometimes a sudden event knocks our footing out from under us: we get sick, we lose a job, a relationship ends, we move to a new city. Other times we find ourselves in the midst of an ongoing struggle that has no clear resolution: working in a hostile environment, dealing with chronic pain, moving through a time of grief and loss. Sometimes it’s all we can do to “hang in there” – simply persevere, or in Christian terms, remain faithful, keep on placing our trust in God day by day and praying for God to guide us. To us comes Jesus’ empowering invitation: “*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*”

I love that word, “Abide” — to me it’s one of the most beautiful words in all of scripture. It appears no less than thirteen times in today’s lessons. To “Abide” means to remain, to endure, to stand fast. Abiding has to do with continuing, lasting, staying *with* something. It’s a word we very much need to hear and use, in a world that moves fast and changes fast, where information and events swirl around us. The word “Abide” anchors us in what is real and lasting and good. To “abide in Christ” means staying connected with our Savior. To “abide in love” means remaining steadfast in God’s love and letting God’s enduring compassion shape us, month by month and year by year.

Jesus paints a beautiful picture of what it means to *abide in him*-- that picture of the grapevine, full of life and bearing abundant fruit. If you have ever visited one of our lush Oregon vineyards, you know that you can sense the vitality surging through the vines. At the height of the season, when you walk among those rows and smell the rich soil, you can almost *feel* the grapevines growing, their tendrils reaching out and their fruits plumping up. Jesus says that he is the trunk of the grapevine, and we are those lovely, outreaching branches. We are connected to him

and to the vine's strong roots by a powerful life-force that courses through us. It's such a powerful life-force that I'm told, if you try to prune a branch away from the grapevine too late in the spring, when the growth is really vigorous, it can be like cutting an artery. The sap will practically gush from the wound.

That's how strong the life-force is that flows to us from Christ the vine. Our Lord is continually filling us with what we need to live. Christ's life flows into our lives, naturally, generously, through God's goodness. We are connected with Christ's goodness in an ongoing, organic way. Branches need the vine to give them life. And the vine needs the branches to bear its fruit. We belong to each other in a relationship that is natural and elemental.

Jesus says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." Notice Jesus doesn't say, "Hang onto me, you branches! Hold onto the vine for dear life!" There's no sense of fear or insecurity in this relationship Jesus describes. *Abiding* is about trusting that we have a place with God. We are already intimately related to God, through no doing of our own. God loved us first, and it was God who established this lasting, forever relationship. God has forgiven us and made us God's own, and God will never cut us off from the life-giving vine. God will abide in us. God will live in us, as we live in God. God will make a home with us, and make a home for us with God.

Jesus said, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." Because out of this abiding flows everything else. And it isn't only for our own benefit. We've been made part of God's life so we can have a part in sharing God's life with the whole world. So that we can be part of the new harvest God is bringing into being everywhere. A harvest of compassion and serving and justice. A harvest that brings abundance to everyone, especially those in greatest need.

In a vineyard like the one we inhabit, abiding in God's vine cannot be something completely passive – it has to be active and intentional, so that God's life-force can flow through us to others.

I remember visiting with an elderly woman who was bedfast in a nursing home. She told me what she had been praying about lately. She had been asking God what kind of ministry God wanted her to be doing, from her bed, in that nursing home. That woman was abiding in Christ, and Christ was abiding in her.

I had a conversation with a teacher who was working in a struggling school system. He couldn't make the changes he knew had to be made. He felt squeezed from every side, but he kept on teaching, he kept on keeping on, because he knew it was his calling to serve in that way. God's life-force was flowing powerfully through man.

I received a weary email message from a Christian friend who was struggling to keep on fighting against racism. She was tired – bone-tired and weary of ethnic jokes and derogatory comments and outright cruelty toward people of color. But she wouldn't give up her efforts to raise people's awareness and change their attitudes. The truth is, it was Christ's strength alive *in her* that wouldn't give up.

The miracle is, of course, that for all our abiding, for all that we do cling to Christ -- for dear life -- it's not our clinging to Christ that makes things go. It is truly Christ abiding *in us* that gives goodness to the world.

So whether we're in crisis and barely "hanging in there" or whether we're just drifting along, wondering what God is up to with us, Jesus speaks to each of us when he says: "Abide in me, as I abide in you." Remain with me, because I am remaining with you. Stay with me, for I will always stay with you. I am holding you. I am guiding you. It's my life-force that is flowing through you and helping you to grow beautiful fruit. Fruits of peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness. Fruits of hope and courage and love. Fruits of generosity and justice and compassion.

Thanks be to God. Amen.