

"Before You Go Outside"

Sunday, May 9th, 2021

Sermon by Dawn Jefferson for TriCon Church

John 15:9-17

Good Morning, TriCon church family and friends:

Can I tell you how overjoyed I am to begin this journey with you. I am honored by your invitation and have been overwhelmed by such expressions of genuine welcome. Thank you. I look forward to getting to know you as we live through this summer together, as we delight in God's word and allow ourselves to be challenged by God's own invitation by the Spirit to live for God and love as God loves.

Will you pray with me?

God we are grateful for how you continue to demonstrate your love for us. Help us know as we seek to understand the richness of abiding in this beautiful love you have gifted us with. Move within us as we move outside of comfortable spaces to spread that love in our world. In Christ's name I pray, Amen.

Friends, I do love this text for today but I admit it has some challenges. We are following last week's text and rounding off the end of the 15th chapter of John's gospel. You have probably heard it before, and what initially had me conflicted was that Jesus seems to be giving some mixed messages. And then I was comforted by the fact that most of scripture has enough rich complexity to seem like it's sometimes contradicting itself. I mean, Christ himself is a kind of contradiction being both human and divine, all-sacrificing and persecuted, the Word made flesh. In true form, I find that this final message that Jesus is giving to his friends as he washes their feet pulls and pushes in different directions.

From last week we learned to stay connected to the vine and now we continue today with this ABIDING. God wants us to abide in God's love. And yet...when I think of abiding, I think of home, house, dwelling, resting, residing, remaining. And while Christ is saying abide in my love, he is also saying GO and bear fruit. Now he could have said stay and bear fruit, but he says Go and bear fruit.

I'm remembering that Jimmy Durante song - "Have you ever had the feeling that you wanted to go and then you had the feeling that you wanted to stay?" And I ask, which one Jesus, am I abiding or am I going? And I hear Christ say yes to both. He says yes to both for

me because he is doing both as well. And I appreciate that, most of the things Christ asks me to do, he has already done or modeled.

So, I have a memory that's been helping me to work this out:

When I was younger 8 or 9, I was in LOVE with snow. I loved being in snow, going out in the snow. I'm a winter baby and I was raised in New York. I love Christmas time and just am enchanted with how the world is quieter when it snows, and as a teacher I also grew to truly love snow days. But when I was very small, I had some mixed feelings about a ritual in the morning of days when it snowed and that was putting on my **snowsuit**. My father was a very organized person. When I would come down to the dining room on snow mornings it looked like a firehouse or a triage room as each layer and part of my outerwear was laid out before me in progression: long johns, corduroys, turtleneck, sweater, another sweater, boots, gloves, scarf, hat, and snowsuit. There were two things that I learned about getting into the snowsuit - one make sure to go to the restroom before my dad zipped me up in it because there was not going back, and 2 that I needed to stay wrapped up in this getup until I got inside the large metal black doors of my school building to try to undo all of the tucking, zipping and knots that my father had created.

So, there's all that getting ready. But what was the harder part of wearing this accoutrement, was the moment standing in the vestibule of our house waiting for the school bus. (a threshold) My arms sort of sticking out to the sides and my mouth and face wrapped up just enough so I could breathe. And the whole time I was praying not to start sweating because that would make me all the more cold when I stepped out of the door. In those moments, you might be able to tell from my description that I really thought my dad went overboard. And I kind of resented the process for it feeling over the top and restrictive.

As I was trying to think through what it means to abide in love, I kept coming back to that snowsuit. That image of being so wrapped up in something that you walked around in it. I thought about how annoying it was but also how great a job my dad did at keeping me warm. And I must admit that sometimes when it does snow, I wish I could have that kind of snowsuit to feel so kept, and protected from the elements. I think that the love Jesus is speaking of here is a kind of snowsuit. Such love is a sort of reconstitution of the warmth of home. And while I am out on the school bus, I am also still enveloped in the careful connection with my Father. In order to leave the comfort of my living room with the warm fire, after having my Maypo and hot chocolate still on my breath, I had to be made ready before stepping out into the New York winter. I think Christ is inviting us to abide in the Love of God as a reconstitution of the personal joy we've known in the Spirit before going

into the world. Here, Christ asks us to learn to ***abide before we go outside***. He is warning us that there will be enough happening outside that what is on the inside of us will truly matter more.

You see, this time in my reading to the end of this 15th chapter of John, I skipped ahead to chapter 16. And I like to think that as God does, I had a glimpse of what's next, therefore I could understand the greater context of these verses. The last nine verses of Chapter 15 have the subheading - The World's Hatred. Chapter 15 is preparing us to be in a different environment than our initial abiding. Christ as we remember is speaking to the disciples about his leaving. Preparing them for his absence, and most significantly here, Christ is readying his friends for a time when they will not be accepted by their community because in their being friends with Christ, they will become counter-cultural. There is a kind of LOVE that we must be imbued with, that we must put on like a snowsuit to ready us for the outdoors. The love that Christ is describing here is not the saccharine lovey-dovey kind of Sunday School variety. This here is what I would call **mature love**.

Perhaps you remember the beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*, I've taught it many times. Most people remember the end, but I enjoy the transitions from Act One to Act Two. You see in Act One, we meet a Romeo who is downcast and frustrated by love. In particular, he continues to fall in love with people who will not love him back.

It's what we call unrequited love. And for Romeo, in Act 2, the most amazing miracle is that he has finally encountered a person in Juliet, who will love him back, perhaps as much as he has already loved her.

Now for this scripture's perspective, God is the creator of love and the initiator of love. But not unlike Romeo, God also knows what it is to **not** be loved in return. For all the love God heaps on us and humanity, God does not always anticipate that God shall receive that love back. And that is the context that Christ is preparing the disciples for - a world of unrequited love, an unforgiving world of winter snowstorms. So cold that we will need to fill ourselves with love, we will need to practice mature love before we enter it. The world is not full of Romeo-love, it is full of Montagues and Capulets, factions, groups, people who strategically resist reconciliation. The world is full of warfare and strife, poverty and death, complicated rationales for not restoring people to health or justice, the world does not understand or trust in resurrection nor does it protect people's lives all the time.

Why is this important?

It's important for me because I'm about to graduate into a world that does not all receive, believe or accept my theology or my personhood. I have spent 3 years growing and

learning with about 20 close friends. We are scripture nerds and we laugh at theological jokes. We love planning liturgies and we find joy in praying for one another. We are in fact family. In three weeks, that family that I have relished abiding with is all going to move away. We shall disperse as the disciples do after Christ's crucifixion. And I am asking myself, how can I maintain this abiding as I go?

This is important because many of you are going back to a remnant of the "before times." You are vaccinated and while still social distancing are going to be closer to some person on your job you never really liked. You are going to engage a cousin at Memorial Day BBQ who doesn't agree with your politics. You're going to watch something on the news this week that will deeply disturb you. And you and I are going to have a choice. While Christ has chosen us and not so much the other way around, we still get to choose how we abide and how we go. I was effective in my snowsuit because my parents helped me to develop a *withness* in our three-person unit. We learned how to be together in love. There were some rough times, and even though we've since lost that very house and my parents are now divorced, that abiding will never leave me. The feeling of being tucked inside a scarf that's wrapped around my face will never leave me. And no matter how cold it gets or how foreboding the winter, I know how to abide and I can abide wherever I am. I can have joy and bear fruit even in a dessert. Even in the springtime. Even after one of the hardest years of loss on record.

And friends, many have worked from home and relished some solitary time. Some have just had a season where some critical things are now prioritized because of COVID. And while this pandemic is not over, we are still being invited by Christ to come outside. Abiding is not only for the comforts of your living rooms and basements. Abiding is not really for you alone. There is someone who completely disagrees with you who can be changed by your abiding. There is a Capulet to your Montague who needs to WITNESS your WITHNESS with the Spirit of the living God. It is for you to live out the protective freedom of the snowsuit and go about making other people warm. It will be challenging, there will be unrequited love, maybe some hurt feelings and cross words, but there can also be joy.

I remembered that as much as my Father wrapped me tight in his care and love, as much as he tried to protect me from the bitter cold, he was also the one who took me outside to build snowmen and who instilled in me the desire to sled and to make snow angels. He is the one who taught me how to make a good solid snowball and how to frolic too. The gift of love is that it reconstitutes more love. My snowsuit makes me remember the warmth of my home, but that is not what snowsuits are made for. They are not made for staying indoors. They prepare us to be outside. So too does the love of God compel us outdoors.

We are not called to be followers of Christ to merely stay at home in our warm comfortable churches and read scripture around the hearth.

Before you go outside, find your abide, practice your ABIDE so much so that your life is full of the joy of mature love in Christ. And then, friends, and then, we must go outside and others should witness our abiding; people who like us and people who don't.

Let your abiding in Christ bear the kind of fruit that is joy in you and life in another.

Amen!

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