

The Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year B
May 10, 2009
The Reverend Brett P. Backus

“Living In Christ”

John 15:1-8

“Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

Today's message is about living in Christ. It's about recognizing and accepting our unity with Christ and understanding that it is only through that unity that we are then able to truly live into His love and spread the message of that love to the world.

From the moment of conception, we all were utterly dependent upon our mothers. For each and every one of us, our mothers were our source of life. So intimate was our connection in the womb that she was the source of sustainability, the source of our existence. Her food was our food, her blood our blood, her body our home. Nothing was given to us that did not come from her. Then, after childbirth, our intimate connection with our mothers changed but was not severed. She continued to be our source of life, the producer and provider of our nourishment, our comforter, and our protector. As we grew into children, teenagers, and young adults, our mothers became our nurturers and our caretakers. They became our guides, our compasses. They corrected our attitudes by attempting to sternly put a stop to those characteristics we possessed or actions we took which would not be beneficial to us in the future. They gently built up in us through love and encouragement the characteristics that would aid in shaping our future lives in a positive way. They did their best to do what was best for us. Even well into adulthood, and I imagine as it continues to be so after their death, our connection to our mothers continues on through our admiration and gratitude for, and our recognition of the love that they constantly gave us throughout our lives. We seem to be able to hear their voice speaking through their lessons continually guiding us.

As I sat and contemplated this past week on today's Gospel reading and on the fact that I would be preaching on the very special occasion of Mother's day, I began to write down some of my thoughts, the result of which was the little spiel you just heard. To tell you the truth, I was pretty sure at the time that I would not even use the paragraph that I had written, but I later realized that something about the words I had written actually fit in very nicely with what Jesus is saying in our Gospel lesson this morning. The theme of connectedness or unity that we see existing between mother and child is the very same

type of intimate relationship that Jesus is suggesting we have with Him through his image of the vine and the branches. Jesus was making a fundamental point to the disciples in today's Gospel, and that very same point is extremely important for us as present day disciples as well.

At the time that this dialogue between Jesus and the disciples took place, Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for life after His death. He was preparing them for life after the physical presence of Christ. He knew that they would need to understand the reality of their intimate interconnectedness to Him. Also, from the perspective of the Johannine community, for whom this Gospel is supposed to have been originally written, this was a very important lesson. When John was written, Jewish Christians are believed to have been undergoing persecution and being thrown out of their synagogues. Such a powerful message of unity with Christ was an important and comforting message that would encourage the Johannine community to recognize that though no longer physically present, Christ indeed dwelled within them and that they should choose to live in Christ and bear the fruit of love to one another and the world.

So, too, today does this message carry great importance for 21st century Christians. When you think about it, our faith is difficult from the onset because of the fact that we never had the luxury of seeing or knowing the physical Jesus. We did not have the privilege of such an experience to provide concrete backing for our faith. On top of that, living in an age dominated by science, even our own personal spiritual encounters with and knowledge of Christ many times seem to be somehow thrown in to doubt by the society and culture that surrounds us. Because of this, Jesus' message in today's Gospel perhaps carries even more weight for us today. Jesus' message for us today urges us towards acceptance of the reality that truly through God's incarnation into humanity and into this world, and through His death and resurrection each and every one of us are eternally bound to Him just as a branch is bound to a vine and as an unborn child is bound to its mother.

Jesus' message for us today is the reality of our union with Him. You know, we participate on a weekly basis in another profoundly deep and very spiritual experience through a powerful image and symbol which demonstrates and proclaims this very same reality. It is the Eucharist. The very act of consuming the Body and Blood of Christ is to choose to take Christ into one's self, to recognize that Christ eternally abides or lives within us, and in turn to make the commitment to abide or live in Christ. He lives in us and we in Him. I encourage us all today to really consider this latter piece, our commitment to abide or live in Christ, because this just may be one of our greatest challenges.

When I was in college at UT, I was very involved in the Episcopal campus ministry known as the Tyson House. I went on a small spring break mission trip with them to Bolivia, and when I returned I realized that that experience had turned my whole world upside down. For about a month, I could do almost nothing but sit in the chapel of the Tyson House and pray. I could not go to class, I could not go to the store, I could not even go out with

my friends. At that point, I had already discerned my calling to the ordained ministry and was already well on my way in the discernment process. I was a cradle Episcopalian, I was baptized, confirmed, had always been active in the church, and I always had what I considered to be a close relationship with God. However, even though at that point I already knew in my heart that I was called to become a priest and I was totally committed to that calling, I can honestly say that it was not until the days following that mission trip as I sat praying in that small chapel that I actually whole-heartedly submitted my life to God for the very first time.

I share this experience with you all this morning because I believe that it may show us something about what Jesus is trying to teach us today. It shows us that it is only through our own recognition of the living Christ in each of us that we can eventually come to make a decision or commitment to personally abide or live in Christ as well. It is only through making such a conscious commitment that we as Christians can then finally begin to truly bear the kind of fruit that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel reading, the fruit that is the love of God in this world. Brothers and Sisters in Christ, today as we both contemplate the wonders of motherhood in remembrance of Mother's day and as we come to this altar rail to participate in our Lord's Supper, I encourage us all to be aware, to be conscious of the wonderful message laying behind these deep symbols. Be aware of the message that we as Christians are intimately bound to Christ and He to us through our own free decision to accept and partake in His loving sacrifice for us all. Christ lives in us. Now let us decide to live in Him so that we too may be bearers of His love for all the world.

*“Abide in me as I abide in you.
Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself
unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”*

Amen