

## Remain (John 15:1-8)

In chatting with Pastor Andrea this past week, we discussed the idea of how daunting it is to preach a passage of scripture that quotes Jesus directly. We admitted that this is something that happens with regularity for pastors—it's kind of what we sign up for when we answer the call to ministry. But still, there is a sense of holy fear that comes with that when flawed persons like ourselves stand up to say, "this is what Jesus meant when he said..." On the one hand it seems rather presumptuous to assume that we can know absolutely what Jesus meant. If that were truly the case, then none of us would really need Jesus—we would only need those who claim to know his mind with certainty. On the other hand, Jesus did promise the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit to inform our understanding—and that applies to all who follow Jesus, not just pastors, so bathing our work in prayer, and determining to the best of our ability how we believe the Spirit is leading thought, we, with fear and trembling, present our best understanding of what Jesus said, and trust the Spirit for revision and correction in those who both preach and hear. That said, let's take a moment to place ourselves in the care and presence of the Spirit for the moments ahead...(pray).

The setting of the passage before us today leads us back to the night when Jesus was betrayed. He and the disciples had finished the Passover meal, Judas had left sometime before. Jesus had already indicated that his time with them physically was coming to a close. So this passage is part of a larger section often called "the farewell discourse" as Jesus prepared his followers to enter a season of challenge without his direct presence to guide them through. This season included both the immediate future when the events leading to his crucifixion would play out, and the future beyond these events when they would carry on his work—his mission—without his direct presence. As we've already noted in previous weeks, this created a sense of anxiety in his followers—suddenly the future looked unpredictable at best, and perilous at worse.

Knowing this, Jesus set out to both comfort and equip his followers in the face of this uncertainty. As ever, Jesus was truthful about the conflicts that would come, but he was also honest about how they would persevere. His counsel was simple: Remain in me, and then Jesus followed that up with a promise: as I also remain in you. Jesus assured his disciples that there would be continuity in their fellowship, but at a level greater than what they had already experienced. Whatever the future held would be faced by them with Christ present in them by his Spirit. He would be there, closer than before, guiding, encouraging, equipping, sustaining to the place where they wouldn't just persevere, but flourish. The counsel and promise Jesus gave wasn't given to them alone, Jesus gives this to us as well. Like them, our future seems a bit uncertain in many respects. We're not sure what to expect going forward. Conflicts loom financially, politically, socially, in our sense of well-being and health, even in our families immediate and extended there are disagreements and disappointments. Some of that disappointment is with ourselves—we've not always been at our best in these times. We've not been who we hoped to be. We're restless, tired of what's been going on, but perhaps a bit anxious still about what's ahead. We're like people looking out the window and seeing sunlight filter through the trees we're hopeful, but just north of us the skies look dark and we wonder if that's headed our way.

So now, in the swirl of emotions and conflicting voices we hear around us informing our internal conversations, hear Jesus say, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you." When we hear this word from Jesus, it seems that we focus more on the first part of it than the second. In lessons we're taught how to remain in Jesus—and this often by spending time in the word, by praying, through serving others in the name of Christ, in worship—all of which can be useful and beneficial, but unless we give equal value to the second part of it, the first can be turned into a burden, a sense of obligation that raises a new level of anxiety—am I doing enough to remain in Jesus, or will I be cut off because I don't seem to be bearing acceptable fruit?

This is not the stuff of comfort, it is the dross of condemnation, which seems the very opposite of what Jesus hoped to convey by this teaching. Friends, the power to perform the first part depends entirely on the promise of the second. Don't get too worked up on the

demands of the first, until you have settled into the rest of the second, for the second feeds the first. Dwell in, reflect on, meditate in the idea of Christ Jesus remaining, or in some versions of the text, abiding in you. This one, earlier described in John's gospel as the Word made flesh, who was with God in the beginning, who is God, full of grace and truth—this very one inhabits your inner being because you have made a commitment to be a follower, a learner. All the grace and truth inhabiting that One who is personally the source of it to begin with—all of that is resident in you, all of that is available to you in this and every moment based not on your performance, merit, or worthiness, but solely on the presence of Christ Jesus dwelling in you.

The One who rose above the raging storm by walking on the water—the One who calmly called Peter to join him on the water, the One who enabled Peter to also rise above the storm and experience his peace, the One who rescued Peter as his sensibilities balked at the reality he had entered causing him to sink into the storm—that very One inhabits you—that very One walks with you into whatever storms lie ahead—that very One who rises above the calamity of distress and fury inhabits you. The assurance of his presence in you, in every moment, but particularly amid the storm provides the calm that knows “It is well, with my soul.”

The One who laid out the most sensible approach to life conveyed to us in the sermon on the mount—that One who knows how to live from within under the blessing of God, who described the manner of life grounded in that blessing leading to wholeness, relational integrity, personal authenticity, genuine humility, benevolent love—that very One inhabits you, that One prompts your life choices, that One gives you the ability to live in the manner he described.

The One who has given us his peace dwells in you. The One whose love knows no bounds dwells in you. The One whose joy is centered in the very heart of the Creator, the most joyous being in existence—that One dwells in you.

The One who said come to me, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls—that One inhabits your inner being. That One who said that the student will become like the teacher indwells you.

Now as you spend time considering this—and seriously, you must take time to do this—separate yourself from all other obligations and persons in a place where you won't be disturbed and for whatever time you have available at that moment, do nothing but dwell on the idea of Christ Jesus abiding, or remaining in you. As you invest in this practice, you will affirm the goodness of Christ Jesus, His love for you will be confirmed, His peace and joy will fill you—maybe slowly at first, particularly if you've never done this, it may feel strange at first, but as you continue in this practice, these levels of awareness and understanding will grow in you, and you will begin to respond in kind to Jesus, for where else will you find personal affirmation that compares to what His presence in you means? You are an eternal being, deeply valued and dearly loved, who has a glorious destiny in God's great Universe. The world may shout otherwise, circumstances may try to silence this, people on whom you have relied may abandon you, your own heart may condemn you for past or present failures, mistakes, sins, consequences, missed opportunities, disappointments—all of that may gang up against you, but listen—you are an eternal being, deeply valued and dearly loved, who has a glorious destiny in God's great universe—and the One who secures this inhabits your very being. So as this truth settles into your heart, you will turn to this One and say, “I want all of what you desire for me—I want you before any and everything—teach me, shape me, lead me, fill me with the fullness of your life—in other words, I want to remain in you.”

You see, in that desire, you are a branch feeding on the Vine. Your prevailing interest centers around connection to the Vine. You are not pre-occupied with the process of fruit bearing. Because branches are pre-disposed to deliver fruit as long as they remain in union with the vine. When that union is sound, the fruit will come in its time. What is this fruit? It is the evidence of Christ dwelling in you. It is your life displaying the character of his. It is the beauty of his life shining brilliantly in yours. It is his grace empowering you to love without conditions, to serve for the sake of Christ's purpose, to hope in the face of despair, to encourage, support, and inspire. And this will be compelling as it reveals the character of God, revealed in the life of Jesus who is alive in you. AMEN