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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT

May 2, 2021

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!** Alleluia! **Alleluia!**

Both of our readings this morning describe the tension between law and gospel, between command and promise. It is tempting to focus more on one than the other. Some interpreters of these texts have used them to scare people into faith, which really isn't faith at all—it's coercion.

- "Whoever does not love does not know God..."
- "...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."
- "Whoever does not abide in [Christ] is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

These words of Jesus and the writer of the First Letter of John are not all that is said in these passages, but we have a tendency to focus on that which startles us.

Then there's the temptation to ignore the hard words and focus on the good stuff.

- "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit," Jesus said.
- "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

These words are true and comforting. God loved us first. That's where we'd like to stop, hearing only what God does for me. But a life that is rooted in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ is meant to bear fruit, to reach out to others with the love that flows from Jesus, the vine, and through us, his branches.

And, if we are honest, loving is hard much of the time. Recently, someone mentioned to me how grateful they were that life was "steady," that there weren't any major crises at the moment and that they were getting along with the people in their lives. We would all like life to be like that all the time, but the truth is, conflict and hurt feelings and troubles of all kinds come up in our families and friendships, and in the life of the church.

Yucky stuff happens, and it is then that our connection to the source of love is the only way to heal the rifts that sin creates between people, and between us and God. So here are some words of promise that may help.

Jesus said, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you."

The waters of Holy Baptism washed away the sin that would like to take hold of our hearts. That doesn't mean that sin won't try to make its way back into our lives, we all know it does and sometime it even succeeds. That's when we take a cue from Martin Luther who would actually call out to the power of sin he called the devil, and say, "You can't touch me! I am a baptized Child of God!"

Luther taught the practice of remembering our baptisms every day—when we wash our faces, when we start and end each day in prayer—so that we continually are reminded that the powers that cut us off from God and from one another have no power over us. We claim God’s power in our lives, the power of love.

Last Sunday, when Jesus used the image of shepherd and sheep to describe his relationship with believers, it was a two-way relationship. Jesus cares for the sheep and the sheep learn to trust and love the shepherd. The same is true in today’s image of the vine and branches.

In the natural world, branches grow from the vine. But we are people, not branches, and Jesus knows that we have the choice to stay connected or to separate from him. And he reminds us that “apart from [him] we can do nothing.” When we rely on ourselves apart from Christ, it is harder to tap into God’s love and grace when we need it most.

And in those times, we can return to the promise that Jesus abides in us, that his words abide in us, and the vine is right there ready for us to be grafted back onto our source of life and love.

We don’t use the word abide much anymore. It brings a sense of connection, living with and among others. For John, abiding is about being at home with God. In the opening chapter of this gospel, speaking of Jesus, John says, “The Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Some scholars like to interpret that as, “The Word...pitched a tent among us.” So that, wherever we make our home, whoever our people are, Christ comes to make a home with us.

It is up to us to decide how we will welcome Christ into our daily lives. Coming to worship with other believers is part of that. Here we come to hear his words as they make a home in our hearts, so that we can carry them with us into our relationships beyond this community.

Recently, I read an article that called pastors out on carrying the stress of ministry, particularly during this past year, and coping with that stress in unhealthy ways. The writer asked if it had occurred to us, as leaders of God people, to turn to Jesus for our comfort and strength.

That question really hit me. Pastors, as much as anyone, need reminding to abide in Jesus the vine, even as we preach and teach and trust that Jesus abides in us. It does take intention to abide in Jesus, but it doesn’t need to be another burden or chore.

I’ve been studying the development of healthy habits lately, and once you find a resource or a practice that you find helps you stay connected to the life and love of Jesus Christ, then there are some simple ways to turn that practice into a habit.

Our congregation provides some resources for you to try. *Christ in our Home* seasonal devotionals are loved by many. Each week we send out the *Taking Faith Home* page in the E-News email, that we used to include in our bulletins. I know some folks like to focus on the daily Bible readings on that page to feed them with the Word of God to start their day.

There are other practices, too. You might linger in bed for another moment before you get up in the morning. Breathe in deeply, giving thanks to God for the day and placing your trust in God's presence and guidance.

Choose a verse from one of the Sunday texts as your theme verse for the week. Then, as you take your walk or run, let those words swirl around in your mind. Or pick up some colored pencils to do some doodle drawing, as that verse resonates in your head and your heart.

Or practice Dwelling in the Word with those in your house or with a friend or two. Read a passage and listen to God speak to you. What did you hear that stood out? Read it again. What questions come up? Read it again. What might God be calling you to do or to be?

These are just a few ideas. In order to turn one of these practices of abiding in Christ into a habit, try attaching it to another habit. When you eat breakfast, have the *Taking Faith Home* page and your Bible on the table so you see it and stay a little longer to read that.

Like Luther suggested, when you wash your face or take a shower, instead of thinking about all the things you need to do, take that time to pray, remembering that your baptism has brought you into communion with God and all of God's people.

You will need to decide how to abide in Christ and in God's love in a way that works for you. Jesus tells us to abide in him because he knows that it is only by God's love and power that flows through him that we can access that love and power for ourselves and for those God places in our lives.

Abide in God's love, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, because God's love in Jesus Christ has made a home with you. By that power, we will bear the fruit of his love in the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Alive in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring our prayers before God who promises to hear us and answer in steadfast love.

*A brief silence.*

God of all fruitfulness, you abide in your church and your church abides in you. Cleanse us by your word and give yourself to the whole church on earth so that it bears fruit and witnesses to your love. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You have created the heavens and the earth. As we wonder at the beauty of creation, may we seek vital connections with the land, water, air, animals, and all that depends on the earth for life. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You rule the nations with justice and love. Give the leaders of the earth assurance of your abiding presence, that they lead not by fear but with love for those they are called to serve. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You have loved us so that we can love others. We pray for all in need of your love: those who are poor, lowly, outcast, weak, or fearful. Provide for the needs of all, especially those listed in our bulletins and those we name now in our hearts.

Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

You gather us with all the saints by the power of your Spirit. With them, may our hearts live forever in your keeping. Hear us, O God.

**Your mercy is great.**

In the hope of new life in Christ, we raise our prayers to you, trusting in your never-ending goodness and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**