

ABIDING
Applied Christianity 101
John 15:1-8 (9-16)

18 teenagers, their parents and confirmation sponsors, were all captivated by an hour and a half talk and interactive dialogue about the Holy Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit. Not the usual result with teenagers listening to a spiritual talk. Christian educator, nurse and author of *Raising your Children in an Ungodly World*, Mary Ronan, spoke in real human terms about the *fruits of the Spirit* in our lives. The fruits of the Spirit the Apostle Paul speaks about in Galatians 5:22-23 are: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Mary gave concrete examples of each of these fruits. When she was a young adult her mother contracted cancer and was dying. She and her 8 siblings gathered around their mother looking through the things their mother had saved for each of them in their memory boxes. The brothers and sisters laughed and cried together as they remembered and treasured those precious family memories. Despite their mother's sickness they stayed up talking and remembering late into the night. Their mother died a few days later. While tinged with sorrow, this was Mary's concrete example of the fruit of *joy*.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control: those are the kinds of wonderful fruits that Jesus promises we will bear if we abide in him as a branch abides in a vine.

8 times in the passage Jesus admonishes his disciples to abide in him as he abides in them. He uses the metaphor of a grape vine. The branches are carefully pruned. Only through abiding in the vine and receiving the vine's life and nourishment can the branch bear fruit. The Father is the vinedresser; Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. What does it mean to *abide* in Christ?

Abiding as a branch in a vine is a metaphor of relationship. We are to *abide* in Jesus as he *abides* in us. Jesus likewise *abides* in his Father's love. Earlier Jesus (14:17) had said that the Holy Spirit also abides in us. So *abiding* is relating to God in Christ Jesus. The first way we think of *abiding* is the vertical relationship with Christ.

*Abide with me: (we sing in the old hymn) fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide:
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

The other verses begin:
*I need thy presence every passing hour;
I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;
Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes*

The hymn concludes:
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

We *abide* in a living relationship of love. We *abide* as we receive God's grace, as we are forgiven our sins, nurtured in God's living presence and helped with his power. We

nurture that relationship through prayer in our daily devotion and in corporate worship through songs and prayers. We are fed with his life-giving Body and Blood. Jesus invites us to *abide* in him and promises to *abide* in us, the *vertical* relationship.

If we read Jesus' continuing words in verses 9-17 we will see how he also invites us to *abide* in him through a *horizontal* relationship with one another.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The vertical relationship of God the Father in Jesus, us in Jesus and the Holy Spirit in us is lived out horizontally in Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us through giving his life for us. So we also are to love one another. We *abide* in Christ not only through our living relationship with Christ but also in the quality and care we give to one another in Christian community.

Jesus said that his Father is the *vinegrower* who prunes the branches in order that they might bear much fruit. When I was a boy my family lived in a suburban development of Cleveland Ohio called *Rolling Ranchlands*. It was rather an impressive name for long abandoned farmland that had reverted back to woods. At one time the farm must have grown grapes for all over the woods that I played in as a boy there were grape vines. My friends and I loved to cut off the thick vines growing up into trees and use them to swing on. We'd grab hold of a sturdy grape vine, swing out over the creek and swing back yelling our best Tarzan yell. As we got older and ventured further into the woods we discovered a stretch of young trees with grape vines growing over the top. We discovered we could shimmy up one of the trees and climb from treetop to treetop on the canopy formed by the grape vines, just like a troop of monkeys. But in all my playing with grape vines I don't remember ever coming across any grapes. The branches had grown wild and produced no grapes. So Jesus tells us that we as branches need to be *pruned* so that we might produce good fruit.

How are we *pruned*? It comes through discipline. We are invited into a life of *obedience*, to hear what God is telling us through the scriptures, to lead the kinds of lives that we know he wants us to live. We are invited to live lives of faithfulness and integrity. He invites us to *apply* his love to every area of our lives.

Living more deeply into the spiritual disciplines of daily prayer, of time with God will help us bear fruit. We are invited to the discipline of study and learning more about

God's Word in the Scripture and applying them to our lives. We are encouraged to develop good spiritual habits and regularly participate in the Church's worship. We are encouraged to live faithfully as Christian stewards offering our time, talent and treasures to support the Church and the work of God's Kingdom. Through spiritual disciplines our lives bear fruit in a growing relationship with God and also through letting go of the many negative ways the world tends to distract and entice us.

Furthermore God wants us to connect the dots, to connect his love and grace to more and more areas of our lives. How does Jesus' love apply to our workplace? To our family? To our other relationships? To our speech? To our investments? To our consumption? What is our *carbon footprint*? Lately we have been encouraged and appropriately so to think about how our use of gasoline and electricity, our consumption of energy and goods and services, effects the planet. How in our politics might we better serve Christ's command to love and obey?

A friend of mine always likes to say that the real test of our Christian lives is what we do when we leave the church parking garage, get behind the wheel and start to drive. Many people seem to fail to apply their Christian faith to common courtesies of the road.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control: those are the fruits of the Spirit. Each of them represents a kind of spiritual quality and depth of life. In addition we should think of bearing fruit in terms of being effective in the work of Christian mission and in making a concrete difference in helping others. **What are some concrete ways that Christ's love is bearing fruit through you?** 1) In your spiritual life? 2) In Christian community? 3) And in your life in the world, whether with your family, among friends, at work or other settings? I'd like you to reflect on that question: *What are some concrete ways that Christ's love is bearing fruit through you?* Talk about that with each other at coffee hour. I'd like you to reflect also on a second question: *What practical steps can you take to abide more deeply in Christ and in Christ's love?*

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. He invites us to abide in him as he abides in us and to bear much fruit through that saving relationship. Let us pray:

Lord Jesus help us abide in you as you abide in us. Help us realize the power and help of your Holy Spirit. Help us live more disciplined and faithful lives in order that your love and your life might flow through us in concrete ways and that our lives might bear fruit, the fruit of changed lives and the fruit of making a difference for others. Amen.