

"Abide in me"

For Thanksgiving my family would always make the drive to my grandparents' home in upstate New York, where we'd gather with my dad's side of the family. It was something I always looked forward to--the beautiful drive through the Berkshires, seeing our cousins; often the pond would already be frozen over and we would get great running starts and see how far we could slide.

My senior year of high school, though, I wasn't looking forward to it very much. I was already tired of talking about my college search, and I knew it would be the topic of conversation. I didn't know where I was going, or where I wanted to go, or what I would study. I couldn't answer any questions.

So I convinced my younger brother, Jamie, that we should dress exactly alike. I hoped this would create a distraction, that people would ask me about my clothes instead of college. It was an unintentionally awful outfit, a real homage to the 1990s--severely pleated khakis, a button-down shirt in a shade of blue that should be saved for basketball jerseys, and, on top of that, a cream color sweater vest at least one size too large. Jamie wore exactly the same.

And still all anybody wanted to talk about was college!

Looking back, I had some good stories to tell. I had learned some things about who I was. From the overnight visit at the college in Minnesota, I knew that I did not want a college experience that looked like staying up until 4:00 a.m. on a weeknight, watching movies that would give me nightmares, while sitting on plastic milk crates. I also learned about myself that I would put up with all that discomfort, rather than say anything to my hosts, for fear of being judged.

But that all embarrassed me. And what good were my stories anyway? They answered a question that no one was asking: What have you learned about yourself recently? It was tempting for me as an eighteen-year-old, as it still is today, to think that the important question is "What am I going to do?" That the question "Who am I?" is best answered by what I do.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us just the opposite. "I am the vine; you are the branches." Know who you are first. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." Start from who you are and the what to do will follow as naturally as a vine bearing fruit.

Remember, Jesus speaks these words to his disciples on his last night with them. A night when they are anxious and asking, "What are we going to do without you?" Jesus reassurance is to say, "Don't worry about what you're going to do. Remember who you are."

And Jesus tells us how to remember. "Abide in me as I abide in you."

You know what it's like when you hear or say a word so many times that it starts to sound really strange and you kinda forget what it means? Here's how many times we heard the word abide in our scriptures this morning:

abide, abides, abide

abide abide, abides

abide, abide, abides,

abide, abide, abide

abide,

abide.

Fourteen times! So we get the point. Today is all about abiding. But what does that mean?

To abide is to live in, to inhabit. God is our home, the place where we live and move and have our being. To abide is also to stay, or to remain, so when Jesus says, "Abide in me," he's telling us there's nothing we have to do or accomplish. Stay right where you are. You are already at home in God.

This sounds like good news I hope, and it is, but if you're like me, there's a part of you that can't stand it, that just goes crazy without something to do or accomplish.

In the spring of my junior year, again in high school, my English teacher, Mr. O'Brien would occasionally take us outdoors for class, not to teach us, but to make us sit by ourselves in nature. He was obsessed with Emerson and Thoreau and believed that if we were ever to really learn anything of importance it would be from a bird or a tree, not from him. I thought he was just a lazy teacher. I'd find a spot to sit and spend the hour complaining to myself in my head about how awful Mr. O'Brien was. "I can't believe he's getting paid for this. What a scam!"

My anger at him felt like a kind of fire in me, and perhaps it was. In retrospect, I'm grateful for it. If it was a fire it was a cleansing one--the kind that clears out dead, withered branches, to make room for new growth. The branches that were blazing in me--"I can't believe he's getting paid for this. What a scam!"--were at least partly ideas about merit, that Mr. O'Brien wasn't doing enough to justify his wages. Somewhere hidden from my awareness, that cruel inner judge was surely finding me guilty of terrible inadequacy, too.

One afternoon in the late spring, I went as far away from Mr. O'Brien and the rest of the class as I could. I must have walked nearly a mile, down to the bank of the river that ran through our idyllic campus. I found a tree that was leaning over the water, and I climbed onto it. At first my inner protest went on as usual.

But then something happened. It might have been the sound of the river, rushing along below me, how it soothed my troubled mind like a parent rubbing the back of a crying

child. Suddenly, I was perfectly at peace. Abide in me as I abide in you. I couldn't have said this at the time, but in that moment, I knew who I was and that I was enough. There was nothing I had to do or prove.

There's nothing wrong with accomplishment. This morning we recognize and bless the Class of 2018. We honor their accomplishments, and we pray that they will go on from here to do many wonderful things in the world. But nothing they do--nothing any of us do--can add anything to the joy we bring God by the simple fact of our being.

I've been reading recently Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*. It's written as a letter from a man to his son. The man, having become a father in his old age, realizes that he will not know his young child as an adult, and so he writes his son a book-length letter, saying, "I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have been God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle."

This father has been a preacher his whole life. Presumably he's had experiences of the divine. And yet it's in his baby boy that he meets God as if for the first time. It's such an important revelation that he writes his son a letter to tell him.

In the scriptures this morning, God is writing a similar letter to us. If you ever wonder what you've done in your life, change the question. Remember instead who you ARE: God's abiding place.