

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
May 6, 2018

“Abide – and Draw the Circle Wide”

“Abide in my love.”

John 15:9

Prelude:

First – permit a word about what happened here last week. A call was extended to and accepted by the Rev. Timothy Murphy to serve as the next Senior Minister of Plymouth. That’s a big deal – a momentous occasion – and I’m happy for the church. Thank God that good effort has helped paved way for what promises to be an exciting new chapter in the church’s life.

***** ***** *****

There is a simple message this morning.
As reflected in the title:
“Abide – and Draw The Circle Wide.”

But beware. The simple message comes from a complex, finely developed passage found in the gospel of John, designed to inspire and inform – for the church – a credible Christian witness in the world that has desperate need of it.

The 4th gospel is a thoughtful and sophisticated composition of Christian reflection, laced with themes that are of compelling interest for the author and the community for whom the gospel was written. In the 15th chapter, Jesus speaks:
“I am the true vine, God is the Vinegrower, the vinedresser.”

Jesus is a planting of God,
And from the vine, from the planting
stems and branches come forth,
bearing fruit. The message sent:
As Jesus is God's planting, so also are we.
And to the degree that we are connected,
we produce the fruit Jesus produced.

Our author is picking up and keeping current
a rich image lodged in our Old Testament scriptures:
called it a seed theology.

Life begins in a garden – yes?
God is a sower, planting seeds, vines, trees.
Israel was a planting, a vineyard designed for life.
We find this image in Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah,
Ezekiel (19), Psalm 80.

If there is one verse to reference and illustrate,
it might well come from Micah the prophet,
who spoke of a wonderful day when all
the nations of the world would stream
to the Lord's house (Micah 4:1),
where the word of the Lord will sound,
arbitrating and reconciling all differences,
and swords will be converted into
plowshares (garden implement)
and spears into **pruning hooks** (yet another
implement for garden maintenance),
and the nations shall not look and train
for war anymore,
but ... and here is the key passage:
the peoples of earth "**shall sit under their
own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts
has spoken**" (Micah 4:5).

In his commentary on John's gospel, Herman Waetjen reminds us – back in the day of Jesus – the **“vine”** was a common metaphor for the nation of Israel. You couldn't put a coin in your pocket without seeing variations of vine imprinted on shekels and dimes; and you couldn't get into the Jerusalem temple without passing through golden gates, and suspended overhead there were golden vines, hanging grape clusters said to be **“as tall as a human being”** (Waetjen quoting Josephus; see page 347, *Gospel of the Beloved Disciple*).

Can you imagine such beauty and splendor, affixed to Temple – and its projection of glory and wonder as the house of God. So it is quite stunning really to hear Jesus speak, **“I am the true vine.”**

***** ***** *****

This is background to **“Abide in my love,”** Jesus speaks to us. **“Bear fruit, fruit that will last ...”** (John 15:16).

Abide – not an expression commonly found in our speech. Fans of the Coen Brothers film will find it familiar: **“The dude abides”** (Couldn't resist mentioning this). But outside of that circle, not a common term.

To abide is to dwell, to lodge, to stay fixed in a state; to abide is to comply, to conform, it is to endure, with honesty of thought, purity of heart; in a word: it is to have credibility.

“Abide in my love,” Jesus speaks to us.
God has loved me, I’ve loved you,
so stay, dwell, endure in the love
I’ve lavished upon you.

This is the point being driven by Jesus.
This isn’t mentioned in passing, but is
repeated – again and yet again in this gospel.

**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** (John 15:4).

Passages such as this work to convey
the understanding that our spiritual lives
are tightly bound and woven; we are all
interrelated and interconnected; and
the interconnectedness is summed up
in the term – abide. Endure as a credible witness
to the my Word, as branches of the Vine
planted by God through me.

“Credibility is a basic survival tool”
(Rebecca Solnit). And it is sorely lacking
in our nation today.

When we abide, we become conduits
of the love Jesus channels. Only so will
the church have a future worthy our calling.

It is not just any love being touted in this
lesson, but a greater love.
It is not enough for us to abide in any love,
but in a greater love.
And the greater love is defined:

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

This is the connection we are invited to make,
if we be inclined to abide.

Abide in the greater love.

Resist the allure of lesser loves,
loves that seek to preserve life for some
at the expense of others.

Abide in the greater love that
will lay life down, that will give life up,
for the good of others.

It is this understanding of greater love
that authenticates our work in the world.

If the church engages in anything less,
then the church’s work in the world
is discredited.

Lesser vs. Greater Love –

There was an instance in the news this
past week that captured my attention,
that illustrated greater vs. lesser love.

There is an appointed chaplain that serves the
House of Representatives in our U.S Congress,
a Roman Catholic Jesuit priest, Father Patrick
J. Conroy. Father Conroy was fired, somewhat
abruptly, by Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan.
Speaker Ryan, for the record, is also known to
be a practicing Roman Catholic.

How do you get yourself fired
from being a chaplain?

Apparently, the Speaker didn’t appreciate a prayer
offered by Father Conroy when the House was working
on passing a new tax bill in November of last year.
Reportedly, Speaker Ryan informed the chaplain:

“Padre, you just got to stay out of politics.”

What was the content of the provocative prayer you ask?
I’ll share it with you.

“May all members be mindful that the institutions and structures of our great nation guarantee the opportunities that have allowed some to achieve great success, while others continue to struggle. May their efforts these days guarantee that there are not winners and losers under new tax laws, but benefits balanced and shared by all Americans.”

I’ve read and re-read the prayer, and for the life of me, it sounds rather innocuous. Only when you measure it from the standpoint of greater and lesser love does it possibly prick the conscience.

Lesser love presumes there will be winners and losers of some sort; greater loves sets a different bar, a hope for blessings to be balanced and shared by all.

There is follow up to this – Father Conroy was encouraged to rescind the resignation that was asked of him, which he did, and Speaker Ryan accepted it. A rare show of bi-partisan support contributed to the Speaker’s change of heart. But not without exposing those camped in lesser loves and some in greater love.

As one member of congress commented: **“There’s a crowd (religious) in Congress that doesn’t like urban, Catholic Jesuits who have a broad-minded approach to things, and they want(ed) to replace (Father Conroy)”**
(Rep. Gerald Connolly, Virginia, quoted in Huff Post article, 5/2/18).

As part of our worship this morning we have observed our 17th anniversary of being an ONA congregation, which is an expression of the church’s

commitment to greater love, to be fully inclusive of all God's children, and especially those who historically have been denied full, fair, and equal treatment in the church.

A week or so ago we received a mailing from the ONA Coalition of the UCC written by Andy Lang, the Coalition's Ex. Director. Andy wrote:

"I'm sometimes asked why there are 1,500 ONA congregations in the UCC. How did a project that started in 1987 grow in 31 years to become the largest LGBTQ welcoming church movement in the world?"

That question gave me pause - the largest LGBTQ welcoming Church movement in the world? I couldn't help but think - in the UCC we don't have the largest anything! And yet - if Andy is correct, our commitment to greater love has given rise to a world leading movement based upon extravagant welcome and Jesus like love in which we strive to abide.

Andy offered answer to his question:

"Graceful engagement."

I commend it to you this morning.

This is where I hope we might abide (in part), showing ourselves to be a people of graceful engagement.

Grace - God's gift, unmerited, radical and liberating, calling us together to abide, in community, where we can be gracious as God is gracious, where the expectation is that we will strive, we will try, to love with love like that of Jesus.

And engagement: **"we choose to stay in relationship even if conflict threatens to separate us."**

I feel a need this morning to simply say, thank you, to those members and friends of Plymouth Church who identify as LGBTQ.

Without you, we are not whole.

Without you, the church gets mired
in lesser loves, that so often are
fearful and anxious and mean spirited.

Without you, the church lacks authenticity.

Without you, the church is diminished,
denied a full panoramic view of
God's stunningly creative and
redemptive purposes.

Without you, the body, the body of Christ
is incomplete.

Without you, we as a community are
resigned and left with lesser love
that is not equipped to save
from all that ails us.

This is why we need abide – and draw the
circle wide. The greater love compels us.

You can divide the world – can you not –
between the broad and the narrow;
some that give expression to lesser love,
and others that display greater love.

I hope we here at Plymouth Church would
have the drive and desire to keep drawing
the circle wide, that we be loving and warm,
graceful and engaging; understanding
that it is not always easy, but
right and reflective of God's love.
The decision is always ours to make – day by day.

I happened to be reading Peter Gomes
this week, his work, *The Good Book*; as Gomes
reflected upon the Bible and its gospel message

of greater love, he quoted the poet, Edwin Markham, and verse from the poem, "Outwitted."

**"He drew a circle that shut me out-
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him in !**

Anyone here this morning who hasn't had occasion of being shut out - labeled as unfit, unworthy, unacceptable. Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout?

Jesus was cast out; Jesus suffered such indignity; And he would have it otherwise. The greater love will always keep working to save and redeem and make whole.

When we team together and love like he loves, then we can't help but draw the circle wide, to show and share the love that is worthy and acceptable to the One whose love encompasses the world and all who dwell therein.

***** ***** *****

I want to close with a quote from Washington Gladden, which speaks of friendship as the defining characteristic of religious endeavors (Recollections, "Looking Forward and Backward," p. 429).

"I ... believe that the time is drawing near when the Christian Church will be able to discern and declare the simple truth that Religion is nothing but Friendship; friendship with God and humanity. I have been thinking much about it in these last days, and I cannot make it mean anything else; so far as I can see, this is all there is to it. Religion is friendship - friendship first with the great Companion, of whom Jesus told us, who is always nearer to us than we are to ourselves ...

Then turning to humanity, friendship sums it all up. To be friends with everybody; to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship; is there anything more than this that the wisest and best of humanity can hope to do?

Could it be that religion –
at its best – is “nothing but Friendship.”
Friendship – tied, laced, intertwined with
the greater love of Jesus?

Give it a test. Abide – draw the circle wide.
And see what comes of it. If it brings sweet relief
and rest for the soul, then praise the God whose
compass has drawn you in. Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*