

5 Easter, Year B
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Trinity Episcopal Church
April 29, 2018

Abiding With Each Other
Acts 18: 26 – 40, John 15: 1 – 8

Committed relationships are tough – let’s face it. In fact, I often marvel that couples are able to stay together for a few years, much less a lifetime. When Cherise and I first were getting together, we were both very ambivalent – so much so that Cherise flew off to Europe for a “cooling off period.” Well, after endless phone calls and letters, it was clear I wanted to spend my life with her.

But it takes two to tango, so, full of trepidation, I got on a plane to Paris to ask her to come home with me. But after a week in that beautiful city, she still wasn’t sure. That’s when I realized I had to get crafty. I remembered that our first date in Boston had been to see the screen adaptation of E. M. Forster’s *“Room with a View”*, about a couple falling in love in Florence – the most romantic film imaginable. So I asked her to travel with me to Florence for another week, and it was there that I asked her to *abide* with me. Thankfully, she said, “Yes.”

In today’s reading from Acts, we hear echoes of the first great doctrinal controversy that rocked the early Christian communities. Were the Gentiles, like the Ethiopian eunuch, eligible for full membership in the church? Did the Gentiles have to become Jews in order to join the “Jesus Movement?” Did they, as Peter and James insisted, have to be circumcised? Or, as Paul and Philip believed, could they simply be baptized? Now we know there were many such doctrinal struggles throughout the church’s history, about who was in and who was out, about who could be full members, and others relegated to the margins.

Recently, I’ve been re-reading feminist theologian Elaine Pagel’s wonderful book *Beyond Belief*.¹ Pagel reminds us that, in spite of these spats between church leaders, for the early Christian communities, their faith was not about belief or doctrine, but about *a way of life*, about how Christians chose to be good news for each other, about whether they had the faith and the courage to *abide* with each other in love.

Abiding with someone is not the same as living with them, or relating to them. It is about embracing *all* of who they are – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and saying: “Here I stand – with you – I can do no other.” It’s a deep commitment to co-creating a new, shared life out of the very different fabrics and patterns that are the accumulation of our individual lives. And this is true whether we’re talking about our relationships with our life partners, our friends, the members of our faith community, or with our God.

It's sort of like vines growing together, as we heard in today's gospel. And this isn't so easy, is it?

Many of us might feel a little suffocated when we think about all this growing together as vines, all of our roots planted in the same pot – isn't that a little too close for comfort? A little too intimate? What that boils down to is fear, plain and simple. Which is exactly why Jesus, in the middle of his sermon about vines, reminds us that it is love – only love – that casts out fear. And the thing about growing together like vines is that it means we have to change, that we're constantly being shaped by each other, usually through the painful process of pruning. Just as vines struggle to grow, we struggle to love each other. It can be very hard work.

But the wonderful thing about the image Christians as a community of love, in John's epistle, and in Jesus' gospel image of the Christian community as a vine, is that clear sense that we are never alone. We get to *abide* in God, and we get to *abide* with the God we discover in each other. In the process, just like the early Christians, we learn how not just to *share* Jesus' good news, but to *be* that good news for each other.

Abiding with each other means stepping out of our own personal garden of security and self-interest, into an orchard filled with the promise of abundant fruit.

We all know that it's easy to *fall* in love; the hard work is *staying* in love, *abiding* in love... right?

Abiding together means not just committing to the excitement of *entering* that orchard, but also committing to the day to day labor and discomfort of pruning and nurturing the vines and tendrils of our relationships, so that they can stay healthy, so that we are continuously surprised by the joyful harvest of the fruit we bear for one another.

And so it is when we dare to abide with God and with each other, to see God and each other as what sustains us, to open ourselves to God nurturing in us the fruit that the world so desperately needs. And to find that this sense of connection is precisely what each of us has hungered for all along.

Isn't that what we've been doing for the last several years at Trinity? *Showing up*, even when there are a hundred other alternatives? And why do you show up, week after week? Because you know that this is a place you are accepted for just who you are; where you won't be judged, shamed or blamed; where God's love, filtered through each of the rest of us faulty human companions at Trinity, still somehow manages to shine through?

And because you have chosen to abide together right here *these* last two years, you have prepared yourselves for an extraordinary new chapter when you greet your wonderful new Rector this summer.

Thank you for your courage in committing to abide with each other in this place. May God grant you the grace to abide with *the rest of God's people* as you leave this place today – those near and far, those who are friends and those who are strangers, searching out the presence of God in each and every one, so that at the end of the day, when it's time to rest, you will discover once again... that God was abiding in *your own hearts* all along.

ⁱ Elaine Pagels (2003). *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*. New York: Random House.