

John 15:1-5

#abide2019

July 28, 2019

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

*Title Slide

“Abide in me, as I abide in you.” I just returned from the 2019 General Assembly of the Christian Church (disciples of Christ), where we spent the week talking together about what it means to “abide,” to abide in God and to abide with each other. We heard some really great preachers speak to this and we tried really hard to live into this ideal as we conducted the business of the church. On the first night of General Assembly, our General Minister and President, Rev. Dr. Terri Hord Owens preached. In her sermon, she reminded us that the important work to which we are called requires us to stay connected to, to abide with, Jesus. For me, that means hanging out with the kind of people Jesus hung out with and prioritizing justice, peace, compassion, and love the way Jesus did.

But the question is, what does that mean for our life together, both as a whole denomination and as a local congregation? How do we stay connected in the midst of the beautiful diversity that is the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), especially in this time and place when it seems division is everywhere? Every time we gather for General Assembly, I see us struggling with this. During business sessions, I listen as people with vastly different points of view and ways of being in the world debate Assembly resolutions. And at worship we sing songs that do not represent the theology being taught in the seminary I attended and we hear gifted preachers who say things that make some of our faith siblings very uncomfortable, even angry. And then at the next General Assembly we change this or that in order to appease the group or groups who felt under represented at the last gathering.

This has been a source of frustration for me over the years because I have always kind of felt that we spent too much time trying to force connection around things in which we would never agree. So when I heard the General Assembly worship planning committee was inviting ministers to submit sermons based on the John 15 text, I submitted one, thinking I could talk about how I see connectedness and what it might mean to abide in God and in each other. The preacher whose sermon was chosen preached Sunday night for the whole Assembly. It was not me. I was invited to preach that sermon last Sunday morning, however, at First Christian Church in Newton, IA. This morning I would like to share parts of that sermon with you because you, and our experiences in ministry together, were my inspiration.

I began the sermon by sharing some of my experiences with the church when I was young. I've talked about those with you before. I had warm, fuzzy experiences as a small child in my grandparents' little Presbyterian Church in Quincy, IL. But unfortunately, I had many, many cold, prickly experiences with various churches and, Christians in general, when I was a teenager and young adult. Based on my own life experiences, I believe when the church is at its best, we are part of the answer to the world's brokenness. And when the church is at its worst, we are one of the primary causes of brokenness in the world.

*This is why the Disciples Identity Statement has become sort of a touchstone to me. Here it is, "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." This is a BIG vision we try to live into. It draws on a metaphor written by Paul in a letter to Jesus followers in Corinth.

*In that letter, he wrote about the body of Christ and highlighted the ways in which the unique spiritual gifts each of us has been given connect us and are necessary parts of us, as the Church.

*Today's text from the Gospel of John presents another powerful image of the Church. This image of God as the vine grower, Christ as the vine, and all of us as parts of that vine-no hierarchy, no difference between one part of the vine and another, is focused not on our unique spiritual gifts but on outcome or, as the author of John puts it, bearing fruit.

Both this image from the Gospel of John and Paul's from I Corinthians have something to teach us about being Church. But consider for a moment Paul's image of the body of Christ, each of us using our gifts...some of us preaching, some leading music, others teaching Sunday School, and still others using their gifts for community service, organization and administration, all of us giving our money and our time. And all of that is very, very good. If at the end of the day, though, we don't bear fruit or achieve the outcome we are after, our churches continue to shrink and even disappear, and most importantly, the world stays broken.

The fruit we are to bear is the shared and embodied love of God which has been revealed to us in Jesus' life and certainly in our own lives as well. According to the metaphor in the Gospel of John, each part of this vine has the opportunity to bear fruit, as long as it stays attached to the rest of the vine. That's easy, right? It sounds easy, but staying attached to each other is counterintuitive for many of us. The problem is, we live in a world in which independence is prioritized. The idea of being dependent on one another is uncomfortable. From the time we are two years old, we are insistent, "I can do it by myself." No, we can't. So, what does this text have to say to us who pride ourselves on our rugged individualism?

In order to answer that question, we need to know a little something about the world into which this metaphor was originally written. The Gospel of John was written sometime between 80 and 100 CE, a full generation after Jesus' death and shortly after the destruction of the

temple which, understandably, created chaos in the Jewish community. Jewish leaders were very concerned about people believing the wrong things. Their way of dealing with heretics was to throw them out. Get with our program or get out. John's original readers were among those who had been tossed out, isolated by the temple leaders, so they probably saw themselves as a persecuted religious minority, which partially explains the anti-Semitic tone we encounter in the Gospel of John.

Throughout John's narrative, there is tension between religious leaders and Jesus. The author used this tension to clarify who Jesus was and why he had come, hoping to convince readers that God and Jesus were one, a model of community. The very first words of the book, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God," and later, "the Word became flesh and lived among us," are as close to a thesis statement as there is in the Bible. Over and over again, the author points out his understanding of the unique relationship between Jesus and God, specifically, the ways in which Jesus reflected the heart of God. This intimate relationship was based on love; the deep, *abiding* love Jesus had for God, and that God had for Jesus and for all people connected to the vine.

John's community identified as Jewish, but because they believed Jesus was the Messiah, they were not welcome in their own religious home. I wonder how many of us have felt unwelcome like that in another faith community or even sometimes in this one. We say the words, "We welcome all to the Lord's Table..." but sometimes our actions say something else. Sometimes what we really say is as long as you believe like I believe, agree with my opinions, you have a place at the table.

*Disciples of Christ founder, Barton Stone, was fond of describing us by saying, "Unity is our polar star," but the truth is, we Disciples stumble over the question, "Unity around what?" It has become clear to me that

even saying, “Unity in Christ,” doesn’t mean the same thing to all of us. This is true, not only at General Assembly, but it is also true in our local congregations. And, while I believe diversity, including theological diversity, is a good thing, our text today says that in order to bear fruit, we must abide, not only in Jesus, but we must be connected to each other. I want us to consider that our connection to each other is not agreeing on right theology, but agreeing on our purpose in the world. In other words, referring back to the Identity Statement, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), in all its manifestations, exists for only one reason, “to bring wholeness to a fragmented world.”

At the heart of wholeness is God’s love for all creation and, in turn, our love for God and one other. That kind of love is the power that builds bridges and tears down walls. That kind of love draws us from isolation into community. That kind of love inspires us to learn about one another, listening to each other’s stories, sharing our greatest joys and our worst nightmares and it fuels our passion to look, with hope, beyond the here and now and into the future. That kind of love is the fruit we are to bear. And Jesus, himself, showed us what that looks like.

For his way of loving was not a mushy, sentimental emotion. Instead, it was love that shouted, turned over tables, said hard things to powerful people, and risked everything for the sake of repairing a broken world. This is one of the reasons it is maddening when I hear followers of Jesus talk about how there are certain things we shouldn’t talk about in the church. The example I hear most often from clergy and lay people is that we should “stick to the Gospel and stay away from politics.” We know, though, that the Gospel is political. Jesus was political. He was constantly butting up against the Empire. He was killed because he was a threat to the government. Jesus was not partisan (a Republican or Democrat), but he was definitely political.

*I was encouraged during the first business session at the General Assembly when we passed a resolution calling on us to make our churches safe places to have difficult conversations. The resolution was brought to the floor by the General Youth Council. Our young people are telling us they want to wrestle with hard topics and they want to do that at church, with people they love and trust. I was especially moved when a man, who was clearly emotional, spoke in support of the resolution. He said, "As a conservative in this denomination and as someone who voted for Trump, I support this resolution. I find it refreshing that as a Disciple, I can believe what I believe...[and not be afraid to express my beliefs]." Difficult conversations are important if we are serious about loving as Jesus loved because they help us discern truth together. And like Jesus and his followers 2000 years ago, we are called to speak that truth to power.

In the United States, the power centers are Washington and Wall Street and we have to be talking about them both. The church should not tell people who to vote for, but if we are really serious about Jesus' kind of love, how can we avoid talking about the practices, policies, and legislation that deeply affect and even oppress the human beings we are called to care for?

We have to talk about all of it---racism, xenophobia, homophobia, addiction, mental illness, greed, voter suppression, gerrymandering, living wage, funding for education, universal healthcare, immigration, guns, misogyny, and all the rest. We have to talk about these things because we cannot repair what is broken if we can't name it and bring it into the light. And I have seen that, when we take on these hard topics, it is life-giving to the people in our communities who are just plain tired of the fight and tired of struggling alone.

Here's the part of my sermon when I got to tell them about you:

When I was called to Disciples Christian Church in Bartlesville, OK, in January of 2017, the Search and Call Committee was honest about the state of the church I was coming to serve. They told me that their next minister would either help them turn the church around or that minister would be the one to help them turn out the lights. No pressure at all. One interesting thing to note is in 2017, there were 126 churches in Bartlesville. That is a lot of churches for a town of 35,000 people. You wouldn't think, with that many churches in town, there would be anyone for miles around not already connected to a church.

Sadly, with that many churches, people have had the opportunity to be hurt and disappointed by more than one church. Members of the LGBTQ+ community have experienced "radical welcome" at churches, only to learn later they would never be allowed in church leadership and the ministers would never officiate their wedding. People of color have been warmly received into churches long enough to have their pictures taken to represent diversity in church brochures, yet that same diversity was never represented in the artwork, liturgy, and music of the church. Women have offered their gifts to the church, only to be told those things are reserved for men.

These are snippets of stories I heard when I got to know people in our community. I believe them because in my own ways, I have lived them. They are examples of the church at its worst. Because of that, at Disciples, we knew we had to do more than say, "We aren't like that," because our neighbors had heard that before. So, we have tried to listen to people. We don't pretend we are perfect and won't find some way to disappoint them, but we ask for the chance to try to prove we are who we say we are. It's pretty messy sometimes, but it's worth it.

Welcoming everyone feels chaotic a lot, but don't we want God to be accessible to as many people as possible? The truth is, churches, even Disciples churches, do things that make people feel like they don't

belong. We may not come right out and say, “You don’t belong here,” but we do and say things that make people feel unwelcome. And the worst is when Christians claim it’s what God wants. And when challenged, the Bible is trotted out and flopped on the table, “See, it says so right here.” Loudly quoting the Bible at people does not bring us closer to our purpose.

Our text today reminds us that sometimes in order to bear fruit we have to give something up. Verse 2 says, “Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” What must we give up to move the world closer to wholeness? How about giving up the idea that all of us have to believe the same things about God, Jesus, and the Bible? Do you sense most Christians are willing to let that go? Just as there was tension about right belief in John’s community 2000 years ago, there is tension among Christians, even in our own denomination, now. Theological debate is in our Disciples DNA, but theological agreement is not our reason for being. We are here to love as Jesus loved, one story, one person, at a time.

*In the church I serve (that’s here), loving people looks like this:
In 2018, we voted to become Open & Affirming, not because every single one of us can articulate a coherent theology around sexuality and gender identity, but because we agreed that welcoming and including and loving all people was our purpose.

We put a playground in the sanctuary. It’s that area in the sanctuary, for young children and parents with quiet toys a rug for playing and napping. As cool as it is, we put a playground in our sanctuary, not because everyone wanted toys and a bright colored rug with roads for little cars and fire trucks in the middle of the sanctuary, but because we wanted children in our sanctuary. We decided sanctuary décor and keeping things quiet and in good order are not more important than loving each other.

We don't sing a lot of hymns with patriarchal language any more. We've even changed the words to the Doxology we sing, not because none of us imagine God with masculine characteristics, but because for some of us, and for some people who haven't stepped foot in our church yet, that language is hurtful and because of that it makes God and God's love inaccessible. Tradition is not more important than loving each other.

I could go on and on about the ways in which these extraordinary people (that's you) have felt uncomfortable in the last 2 ½ years. They have opened up our local newspaper and read criticism of their church and minister. They have hosted candlelight vigils and last-minute community gatherings on so many occasions. And these days, lifelong members look across the sanctuary and realize they don't know the names of everyone in the room anymore and that feels exciting and a little strange.

Through all of this and more, we have not agreed on everything. But we have agreed on one thing, our purpose. We are not church for ourselves. We are not church to employ our staff or to have a place to worship. We are church for the ones who aren't here yet, who haven't found a place to belong. We believe God's dream for this world is for all of us to become who we were created to be and to live together respecting and valuing all that God creates. It is our job to love as Jesus loved, even when we disagree and even when it makes us uncomfortable and cranky. And, if ever we start to lose sight of that, we will call ourselves back to who we are, "We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."

I ended my sermon in Iowa on that note. I will end with this quote from author and social justice activist LR Knost:

“Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is you.” Amen.