

*ARE YOU HOME YET?*

John 15.1-8

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Lesson: John 15.1-8

*Note: This is a composite of the text using the New Revised Standard Version and The Message by Eugene Peterson.*

“I am the true vine, and my Abba is the vine-keeper who removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit gets pruned so that it will bear more fruit. You have already been pruned back by the word I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Those who separate themselves are like deadwood and are gathered up and thrown into the bonfire. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Abba is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Anthem: “Sing Hey for the Carpenter”

Sermon: Are you home yet?

Often I find myself confused about what it is I am being called to be in the world. Maybe it’s all clear to you. Maybe you have it all figured out. But I’ll admit that it can be a struggle for me to have a clear sense from day to day what it is that I am being called to be in the world.

And, when I look to our spiritual traditions, sometimes it feels like I’m getting mixed messages.

For instance, this morning our choir sang ...

*Come with me, come wander, come welcome the world ...*

*Come leave what you cling to, lay down what you clutch ...*

*Sing hey for the carpenter leaving his tools!*

*For Pharisees leaving their rules!*

*For fishermen leaving their nets!*

*For all of those people who leave no regrets!*

So, as one expression of what I am being called to be, it sounds like I am being invited to wander, to leave that which is familiar, to lay down what I hold on to.

I'm being called to a spiritual adventure.

One of the most common ways we describe our spiritual lives is as a journey. In June, we will start our spiritual journeys series in Adult Learning again and get to hear the stories of how the spiritual lives of those among us have evolved over time. It's a great series and I hope you will make time to be here for it.

In my own life, I have been called on various spiritual journeys along the way. I left the familiarity of home to go on to the adventure of college. And that adventure pruned away some of my provincialism and opened my eyes to a whole wide world.

I left that academic and spiritual home that my college became for me to venture out into graduate school in Chicago where I was the small town boy learning to live in a big city. I was the clueless white kid living in a black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago. I was the good little boy who had to come to terms with being gay. I was the preacher's kid who didn't go to church anymore.

I had been called on this adventure. And, in all of it, there was some pruning and some wandering and some more awareness – until I looked in the mirror one day and realized that somehow I had become the 'prodigal son' I never intended to be. And, like the prodigal, I found myself in an unfamiliar place with no clue how to find my way home or even if there was such a thing as home.

The culture didn't help me very much, addicted as it is to movement, enamored as we are to drifters and developers and the next best destination. Our American heroes, Scott Russell Sanders says, are explorers, speculators, and rainbow-chasers. "Our Promised Land," he writes, "has always been over the next ridge or at the end of the trail, never under our feet."

So keep moving.

*Come journey, come wander, come welcome the world,  
Leave behind what you cling to, lay down what you clutch,  
The things that impede you won't matter that much.  
So let go of those tools, those rules and those nets  
The journey is lighter un-weighed by regrets.*

That's my version, at least, of this message about being called on this grand spiritual quest – an *adventure*.

That's one message. Then there is the one that Janet read for us before the anthem this morning from John 15, “*Abide*,” it says – not leave everything behind and launch yourself on an adventure – but “*abide* in me as I *abide* in you,” Jesus says. “Make your home in me just as I do in you,” as Eugene Peterson has it -- stay with me because separated off on your own, you can't produce anything; “but if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you,” you will be like that good healthy branch, connected to the vine that is rooted down in the soil so that it produces a lot of fruit.

So, “*abide*,” Jesus says.

*What does it mean to be alive in an era when the earth is being devoured, and in a country which has set the pattern for that devouring? [Scott Russell Sanders asks.] What are we called to do? I think we are called to the work of healing, both inner and outer; healing of the mind through a change in consciousness, healing of the earth through a change in our lives. We can begin that work by learning how to abide in a place.*

This is the mixed message I'm talking about. On the one hand, our spiritual traditions calls us to an adventure, to leave behind the things that keep us from moving forward and more fully embracing our lives. On the other, our spiritual traditions call us to abide, to stay put, to stay grounded in the things that really matter and in those connections that will feed our souls.

So which is it? Should I stay or should I go? Or, perhaps more accurately, how do I stay grounded and connected when I am also called to a journey that invites me to let go of all that I cling to? How do I stay on the adventure and abide all at the same time?

We may have our own predispositions about this. Some of you are adventurers – you always seem on to the next interesting thing; that new book, the rising star, the newly discovered profound experience.

Others of us are abiders. We're the ones that stay at home and keep the lights on so that you can always find your way home.

And I think our spiritual traditions are trying to tell us that we need *both* of those dispositions to stay true to our calling.

“Adventure” itself is a good modern word. “Abide” sounds a little old-fashioned. We don’t talk much about abiding these days. That’s why Eugene Peterson’s version of this passage in John 15 has it, “Make your home in me as I have made my home in you.”

But I think “abide” means something more than just being “at home.” We probably know it more from its negative connotation – the things we *cannot* abide; the things we have difficulty putting up with. I cannot abide whining – even when I do it myself. I cannot abide those flagrant acts of disrespect we see in the news and witness in our own lives. Increasingly, I cannot abide the political rhetoric of our time. I know something about abiding by what I cannot abide.

Positively, abiding is about the kind of presence that has an enduring quality to it – not an enduring *quantity*, not just gritting your teeth and sticking it out, but making a commitment to an enduring *quality* of how you will be present. Scott Russell Sanders says, “If you stay with a husband or wife out of laziness rather than love, that is inertia, not marriage.”

Abiding is about the kind of presence that has an enduring quality to it.

One of the things I loved about Sunday afternoons growing up was that, as a family, we would routinely go out to lunch together. Usually other people would join us as well and I always wanted Mrs. Bronson to come and sit by me. She was one of those adults who just seemed to know how to make a kid feel accepted and respected and loved. She would ask me questions. She would invite me to tell the stories of my adventures. She listened. There was this enduring quality to her presence that went with me when I left home for college and when I found myself wandering the streets of Chicago and when I looked in the mirror and saw how lost I had become.

In other words, no matter what I let go of, wherever I wandered, whatever adventure my life handed me, Mrs. Bronson abides in me and I abide in her. In fact, the quality of that enduring presence makes me want to *be* Mrs. Bronson to someone else. When I talk with little kids – or adults for that matter – I want to be that kind of enduring presence because, even though she is long gone now, it’s still true -- I abide in her and she abides in me.

I'm wondering this morning if there is someone who abides in you and you abide in her or him – some experience of that quality of an enduring presence that stays with you no matter where the adventure of your life has taken you.

Henry Francis Lyte is described as a “neurotic” pastor who spent most of his career in a little fishing village in England. Perhaps it wasn't much of an adventure but Henry was that kind of steady presence that journeyed with the people through their own experiences of joy and loss and pain and death.

When Henry faced his own struggle with tuberculosis, he remembered that story in Luke 24 about the two disciples on their way home after all the disappointment that came with the death of Jesus.

Along the way, a stranger joins them and asks why they are in such despair. “We had hoped,” they say, “that this was the one who would redeem Israel.” And this stranger begins to talk to them about all those things that have grounded their lives in hope and they begin to re-imagine what all this could mean.

As they arrive home, the stranger turns to head off. But the disciples say to him, “Abide with us.” And the stranger comes into their home and there is something about the quality of this stranger's presence that, when he breaks the bread, they see Jesus in him. And these two immediately head back to Jerusalem where the adventure starts all over again.

Henry knew this story. And he knew the kind of presence he had been with others on their journeys. And he knew that quality of enduring presence that he needed for his own. So, just a few weeks before he died, he wrote:

*Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
The shadows deepen, Lord, with me abide;  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

It's hard to know, day to day, what it is we are being called to be. Sometimes it seems like the culture and our own spiritual traditions give us mixed messages about all that. For the sake of our own lives and the sake of the world, it does seem like we are being called to an adventure in healing, in repairing the world, in re-imagining hope. That adventure will mean leaving some things behind and letting go of some things we have held on to. In the process, it might be hard to tell if we are abandoning things or being abandoned.

And from somewhere deep inside their may be this voice crying out: “Abide with me!” And, friends, today – on whatever adventure you find yourself, no matter how lost you feel, regardless of unsure you are of an answer – today, if you hear *that* voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

The Anthem, “Sing Hey for the Carpenter,” is by John Bell. Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put* (Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 104 & 120. The backstory of Henry Lyte’s “Abide with Me” is by Rupert Christiansen in *The Telegraph*, Sept. 22, 2007 and can be found on [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk).