

What Is Most Important: Abiding in Jesus

John 15:1-17

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On this Sunday before Easter, it is good for us to reflect on that which drove Jesus past his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to the cross of Good Friday. What was the driving principle of Jesus' life? What was it that motivated Jesus to endure an agonizing death that he did not deserve?

Jesus' priorities were established by what was most important to him. And if we are his followers, then what is most important to Jesus should be What Is Most Important for us. Jesus has told us What Is Most Important, and we have reflected on What Is Most Important since Ash Wednesday:

The most important command, says Jesus, is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.¹

If we are going to live into What Is Most Important, then we will have to keep Jesus front and center in our lives. If What Is Most Important is going to define the way that you and I live, then we have to walk with Jesus step by step, every day.

We have to abide in Jesus.

In 1951, a Presbyterian minister named Robert Boyd Munger wrote a devotion that would become an instant classic. In today's parlance, it went viral. The devotion was titled, "My Heart, Christ's Home." The premise is very simple: Once we ask Jesus into our heart, we must be willing to let Jesus be Lord of every area of our life. We don't just give Jesus the key to our front door; we hand over the title and let him be the master of our lives in every way. Munger starts his devotion in this way:

One evening I invited Jesus Christ into my heart. What an entrance He made! It was not a spectacular, emotional thing, but very real. It was at the very center of my life. He came into the darkness of my heart and turned on the light. He built a fire in the cold hearth and banished the chill. He started music where there had been stillness, and He filled the emptiness with His own loving, wonderful fellowship. I have never regretted opening the door to Christ and I never will - not into eternity!...

After Christ entered my heart and in the joy of this new relationship I said to Him, "Lord, I want this heart of mine to be Yours. I want to have You settle down here and be perfectly at home. Everything I have belongs to You. Let me show You around and introduce you to the various features of the home that you may be more comfortable and that we may have fuller fellowship together."²

¹ Mark 12:29-31

² Robert Boyd Munger, "My Heart, Christ's Home", gospel tract published by InterVarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL,

The prayer of the believer to have Jesus dwell in our hearts is very much like what Jesus asks of us when he invites us to abide in him. It is wholehearted devotion to Jesus, seeking to live as Jesus' faithful disciple every day.

The story of Mary and Martha in the 10th chapter of the Gospel According to Luke gives us a glimpse into the heart that seeks to abide in Jesus. It is a familiar story. Mary and Martha invite Jesus to their house for dinner. Martha is all about the meal. She is frantically running through the kitchen trying to ensure that everything is just right for the meal. Mary, on the other hand, decides to spend her time at the feet of Jesus, taking in all that Jesus has to offer to her. Martha gets frustrated that nobody is helping her, and her frustration becomes apparent to Jesus. Jesus gently chides Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better..."³

This certainly is not a teaching that says working for Jesus is unimportant. What it is, is a teaching that says when we let what we are doing interfere with our relationship with Jesus, then our focus is off.

Mary, though, has set her priorities right. She sits at the feet of Jesus, her focus squarely on what Jesus is telling her.

Scot McKnight, the author of the book, Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others, points out that attending to Christ in the manner of Mary will involve three things. First, we will listen to Jesus. We do this through an intentional reading of the word. Not simply reading for information, but more important, to read for formation. We are to read with a mind to hearing God tell us something we need to know in order to grow more and more into his love. The second thing that attending to Christ will entail is regular attendance in worship. There is something that happens when we come together to worship—the music, the liturgy, the proclamation of God's Word, the celebration of the sacraments, the prayers—that you cannot get when you are by yourself. No amount of communing with God in nature will add up to what we get when we worship together. The third thing is Christian fellowship. Again, we are better together than we are alone. It is in gathering together that we can encourage one another, care for each other, build up each other, hold one another accountable.⁴

In the 15th chapter of the gospel written by John, Jesus is a fan of the word "abide." In the New International Version, the word is translated as "remain", but in some of the older versions of the Bible the word is "abide." I like the term "abide" better because it adds to the meaning of "remain." To abide carries the connotation of dwelling, living-with, staying. In other places in the New Testament, when the word we see translated as "abide" or "remain" has God as the subject, then it points to God's faithful endurance in his word and his promises; what God says and does stands and lasts. God's abiding carries the sense of imperishability, both in terms of length of time as well as quality.

Whether it's "remain" or "abide," Jesus says the word 11 times in this morning's lesson. It must be important, to abide. And in our attempts to live out Jesus' teaching on abiding, we should make the God-meaning of enduring faithfulness our goal.

If we are going to abide in Christ, we have to remain connected to him. Jesus makes

1954.

3 Luke 10:41-42

4 Scot McKnight, The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others - 10th Anniversary Edition (Kindle Locations 2344-2345). Paraclete Press. Kindle Edition.

this so very clear when he uses the example of the vine and the branches. The only way the branches will bear fruit is when they remain attached to the vine. If a branch is cut off from the vine, it loses its life source, and it will wither and die.

The truth is, Jesus doesn't technically need us to proclaim the gospel, but he has chosen us as his instruments by which his gospel will be shared and bear fruit. But in order to bear fruit we, the branches, have to remain steadfastly attached to the Vine.

That is what abiding is. Abiding will only happen when we embrace Christ and hold on to him with all we have.

To abide in Christ is to abide in his love. That's how Jesus puts it for us. One moment he is telling us to abide in him. The next moment he is telling us to abide in his love. In truth, they are one and the same, for Christ is indistinguishable from his love.

The same love which the Father has shown to Jesus, Jesus shows to us. Now he calls us to love one another with that very same love by which he has loved us. And he tells us that this kind of love is self-sacrificing love: Greater love has no one than this, that they are willing to lay down their lives for another.⁵ Scot McKnight makes this observation: "What Jesus says about 'abiding' clarifies how [What Is Most Important] works: God loves us, his love flows to his Son, and by abiding in [Jesus] (following him), God's love flows to us. We, in turn, can let that love flow to others. It couldn't be simpler."⁶

Jesus says that What Is Most Important is love: love of God with our whole being, and love of others. Now he confirms that in order to live into What Is Most Important, we must abide in him; we must abide in his love.

I don't think I am wrong to say that Jesus distills everything down to love. For one thing, the Jesus-centric understanding of love is way more than a mushy, warm and fuzzy emotion—that's something for a whole other sermon series. But even the apostle Paul confirms the primacy of love. In his letter to the Romans he says, "...the one who loves another fulfills the law... love is the fulfilling of the law."⁷ He also famously says in First Corinthians, chapter 13: Now, these three abide (there's that word again): Faith, hope, and love. *And the greatest of these is love.*⁸

Here's something that I had really never thought about until the other day. In order to know that this isn't just wishful thinking or a pie-in-the-sky idea that Jesus has, we need to look at the context in which Jesus calls us to abide in his self-sacrificing love. At this point in the gospel, Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples. They have just completed the last supper. Jesus knows what is about to unfold in the next 18 hours, but the disciples don't know; they're just confused and melancholy, because Jesus has been a bit somber at dinner that night.

But on this side of the cross and empty tomb, you and I know what is about to transpire. And so we can appreciate the seriousness with which Jesus would be addressing his disciples on that particular evening. He is, after all, sharing his last words with them.

Jesus knows that his disciples are going to fall asleep in his hour of greatest need. And yet he tells them to abide in his love.

Jesus knows that he is going to be arrested when one of his friends turns him in to the

5 John 15:13

6 Scot McKnight, [The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others](#) - 10th Anniversary Edition (Kindle Locations 2431-2433). Paraclete Press. Kindle Edition.

7 Romans 13:9-10, NRSV

8 1 Corinthians 13:13

authorities. And yet he tells them to abide in his love.

Jesus knows that he is going to face a farce of a trial, and he is going to be flogged to within an inch of death; and people are going to mock him and beat him and spit on him, and cram a crude crown made of thorns onto his head. And still, Jesus tells his disciples to abide in his love.

Jesus knows that he is going to die in agony and abandonment on the cross. And still, he tells his disciples to abide in his love.

With all that Jesus knows the disciples are about to face and witness, Jesus' word to them is simple and clear: Abide in my love.

You see, when Jesus tells us to abide in his love, he is not doing so from the comfort of a college ivory tower where he speaks in the abstract and theoretical. Nor is he urging us to abide in his love from the safe setting of a Bible study in your living room.

No, he's urging us to abide in his love from the perspective of one who is about to confront the whole body of human sin ever committed or that ever will be committed, in a life-and-death struggle of God's goodness over evil.

Jesus' answer to everything he is about to face, is love.

It makes me wonder if I'm really willing to commit to living out What Is Most Important. I'm not sure I have it in me, to love in that way. I'm not sure you have it in you.

But this I do know: Jesus had it in him, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, he comes to us so that we can embrace What Is Most Important, and so we can make it our way of life.

I hope that you will take time this week to go to the gospels and spend time in the last week of Jesus' life. This last week of his life is so important in the telling of the gospel, that fully 40% of the gospels are dedicated to these last days.

And as you reflect on the last days of Jesus' life, marvel at his love. Love that is not afraid to speak the truth. Love that is not afraid to face the most oppressive evil. Love that is willing to endure betrayal and denial by his friends – and by us. Love that is dedicated to ensuring that you and I may receive forgiveness for our sins and be reconciled to God, that we may have eternal life.

Reflect and marvel at his love.

And then say to yourself, "I want that for my life."

That is, after all, What Is Most Important.

Amen.