

## **ABIDING IN JESUS, REVISITED**

**ACTS 8:26-40; JOHN 15:1-8**

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**THOMAS H. YORTY – WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Struggle is at the core of those Scripture readings we heard this morning. Did you notice? In the conversion of the Ethiopian, from Acts, he was reading the Hebrew Scripture, he had come to the part of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah and he was beguiled, curious, wanted to learn more.

The Holy Spirit, this is in the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit speaks to Philip and says, “Go over to that government official and get in his limousine (he was a very high government official. He was in charge of the entire treasury of Ethiopia) and interpret the Scripture for him.” And the Ethiopian asks Philip, “Of whom does the writer speak? Of himself or of someone else?” Philip then begins, starting with that Scripture reading in Isaiah interpreting the good news all the way through the life of Jesus through Pentecost.

The Suffering Servant continues, doesn’t it? It doesn’t just start and end with Isaiah. It is manifest and fulfilled in all of its power and glory in the life of Jesus. But it wasn’t over in his life either? It continued to be at work in the life of God’s people. And it continues today. All of us are called to lay down our lives as Jesus laid down his life to bring hope and strength and renewal to the world.

The second reading about the vine and branches is also a reading about struggle. Maybe you didn’t think of it that way. But it does have to do very directly and intimately with struggle. We will talk about that in just a minute.

I would like to shift our focus now if we could to this beautiful sanctuary. This treasure, this gift to not only us but the city of Buffalo in which we worship every Sunday. It is good every once in a while to look at this sanctuary and see it from the perspective of a visitor. I remember it took me about six months, my first six months of worshipping here Sunday in and Sunday out. I just couldn’t take my eyes off those windows. The blue that permeates the windows. That mysterious captivating deep blue.

This sanctuary is so beautiful but it is not just beautiful. It is a teaching moment. This sanctuary is modeled on the Gothic plan. We have talked about this a little before. Dr. Holmes designed the plan for this sanctuary including the stained glass windows and symbols here in the chancel. Dr. Holmes was something of an expert on Gothic cathedrals. He went to France every summer of his ministry. He was at Westminster from the 1890s to the 1930s and he would spend the entire summer in France. He literally visited these cathedrals and was a student of the Gothic cathedral and so this plan and design is very intentional.

If you have visited those cathedrals you see the plan right here. On the north wall of the sanctuary are scenes from the Old Testament. On the south wall are scenes from the life of Jesus. In medieval days when everyone, except priests and the learned class, was illiterate, people couldn’t read the Bible. The way people learned about the Bible was by looking in the windows and reading the glass. This was a direct link for the people to God’s word.

These sanctuaries as I say are teaching moments and it is very interesting to me that Dr. Holmes selected the symbols around this arch. We are here every Sunday and they are gorgeous. They were restored in 1993 when the sanctuary was restored and the colors are terrific. They would go very well in my living room. But there is a lot more here than Martha Stewart. These are symbols of the martyrs. There is a saw, an ax, a knife, a serpent. These are the instruments of death. The ways by which and the means by which the early followers of Jesus were killed.

You see, struggle is at the heart of today's Scripture readings. It is also at the heart of this sanctuary. Of all the symbolism Dr. Holmes could have chosen from the Bible and the Christian tradition he chose these symbols. Isn't that fascinating! We come here every Sunday and our attention and our eyes are focused on the front of the sanctuary on the symbols of death, on struggle.

At the top, on the ceiling of the chancel is not just a pretty design but the vine and the branches right out of John 15. When I read this text a week ago I asked myself why did Dr. Holmes choose the vine and branches for the heart of our sanctuary. Then I remembered the time in which he lived. It was a time of struggle. It was a time when fundamentalism was attempting to redefine the church – interpreting the Bible literally in the face of the new movements and ideas of science. There was an exclusive, narrow, small world view threatening the life of the church and nation when Dr. Holmes was at Westminster. The church was struggling mightily for its identity. Who it would be in a diverse and modern world? Dr. Holmes also established Westminster House on the east side of Buffalo for German immigrants coming to Buffalo to work in the industry here. To help them assimilate into and survive in a new culture.

So I thought of this theme of struggle and it was very prominent in his life, in his time at Westminster. Then I remembered John 15 and the circumstances in which Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the vine and you are the branches." It was at the Last Supper. These verses in John are called the farewell discourses – chapters 14 to 17. These are Jesus' words to his followers after he announced to them that he would be arrested, tried, crucified and killed. When he told them that you could see the terror and fear splash across their faces. "This is our leader. What if our leader isn't here any longer? Three years we have followed him. Listened to him. Tried to do what he asked. It hasn't been easy. But if he is gone we have no leader. We are meeting in this upper room because the world is hostile to his followers. The world is going to do away with our leader. If he is gone then what?"

So Jesus, in chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel, comforts his disciples. In chapter 15 he tells them that "I am the vine and you are the branches. If you abide in me I will abide in you." Like the old Shaker song says, "if you will live in me, I will live in you." *Lord of the Dance* remember? Jesus is talking about something much stronger than memory. He is saying "when I am gone you won't have to remember me." It's not like we will have to try to remember him and then apply his teachings to our lives. He said, "I am going to be alive in your heart. I am going to abide with you and guide you from within."

Did you ever have the experience, if you are a parent, talking to one of your children and then thinking, "I sound just like my mother." My mother abides in me for better or worse, in my ideas, my values, in the way I conduct myself, my physical resemblance, my mannerisms and quirks. My mother is alive in me. I really sound like my mother.

Wouldn't it be great if sometime you were in a really tough situation, facing some profound challenge or loss and maybe you said something to yourself or someone else and when you heard yourself you thought, "I really sound like Jesus. Jesus is abiding in my heart, his character is part of my character."

One of the things I love about this mural is that you cannot see where the vine ends and the branches begin. It's all one. Jesus said, "if you abide in me I will abide in you." He said that when his disciples were facing his death and their own persecution. He didn't say "I have a magic wand." He didn't say, "there, there it's going to be OK. God will take care of everything." What he said is, "I'll be in your heart." It reminds me of Jeremiah 31 where Jeremiah says, "I will write a new law in their hearts. In their hearts they will know me."

The flip side of that statement is "If you abide in me." How do we abide in Jesus? That is the quid pro quo. And he is pretty clear. "If you abide in me you will bear much fruit." Galatians 5: peace, kindness, patience, understanding. That is the fruit you will bear. In whatever circumstance you face. Not just when life is going well and everything is rosy. But when life is tough. You will bear that kind of fruit. But if you don't abide in me you won't bear fruit and those branches will wither and die and be burned. So it is a relevant question. How do we abide in Jesus?

I don't think John is suggesting that we will abide in Jesus by reading books about Jesus and learning as much as we can about the Jesus in the historical narrative so that we can dissect and analyze every which way: did he say this or that. Was he alive and in the village or town? Did he ever utter those words? That kind of research is interesting. It is good for Ph.D. dissertations. They deepen and advance our knowledge of the time and of Jesus and that is important. But I think what Jesus was saying when he said, "if you abide in me," what he was saying to his disciples is "If you befriend me, if you spend time with me like you would spend time with any friend. If you tell me what is important to you. If you share your hopes and dreams with me." Isn't that how we get to know someone well? Inviting that person into your life. Getting to new depths and levels of understanding and intimacy. That's what Jesus was talking about, "if you abide in me, I will live in you."

Sunday morning is not the only time we abide in Jesus. Through every day of the week it is important to shape our days around befriending Jesus. Remembering that Jesus is with us where ever we go. God and Jesus make a claim on our whole lives.

The vine and the branches in Dr. Holmes scheme make a lot of sense, don't they? They remind us that our Christian faith is a faith where we are called to struggle. We are called, with our eyes open to the world, to be a sign of grace and peace where ever we go with whom ever we meet. We are not called to come here Sunday morning and anesthetize ourselves. To be numb to the realities of life. We are called to embrace the whole of life and when we do that as followers of Jesus it involves struggle.

I think these images of struggle and integrity and faith that Jesus is in our hearts brought great comfort to Dr. Holmes and to our ancestors many years ago.

When you stop and think about it what more could you possibly want to face your personal struggles or our struggles as a church and society than to know that Jesus is alive in your heart and in the heart of this congregation. Amen.