



A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, *Rector*

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

17 March, 2024

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Now, I know that any one of us, myself first among us can think of all the things that make us unique, individual, and odd. If Sam and Catherine were here right now, they would be nodding ferociously if not popping up to share all the things that make me weird. Weird dad. But in spite of all those things that make us unique, there are more things that make us common. I think one of those things that makes us common in this room is our desire to participate in the good of God.

We see the brokenness and struggle of the world about us. We have experienced it firsthand in our childhoods, in our adulthoods, in our working places, in our homes. We know how broken the world can be, how much pain and suffering the world can cause.

And we within this room and within countless other communities of faith, Christian and non-Christian alike, people come together to say, we wish to participate in the good of God. So first I want to celebrate that common desire that we share. And I want to talk about for a few minutes, ways that can help us as a Christian community in particular, participate in that goodness we have experienced in Christ.

So let us hear again one of the verses. It's a small little verse, but so filled with meaning and import from today's gospel. "Whoever serves me must follow me and where I am there will my servant be also."

Now we in the Episcopal Church are really, really good about speaking about the first half of that sentence. Whoever serves me must follow me. We talk about with great pride and satisfaction the way of service in the world, and I am quite proud of the many ways that we offer here at Christ Church that the many opportunities that we have to do just that to serve Christ as we serve one another and as we serve our neighbor. But it's that second half of this sentence that I think we often easily overlook.

And where I am, there will my servant be also. In the gospel of John, that language of abiding is central, in fact. In fact, in just a few chapters from today's 12th chapter, I think it's the 15th chapter, we are going to hear the language, the specific language of abiding with Jesus. He will adjure his disciples to abide in



me as I abide in you and for them to abide in his love. Abiding is that sense of dwelling, that sense of being with Jesus where he is. That sense of abiding is therefore present in today's gospel as well.

And if we want to follow him, if we want to lend our hands to the good work of his heart and his life, if we want to give our lives to that goodness in the world, it might help for us to abide more with him. So it begs a little reflection or it offers us an opportunity to reflect on where do we find Jesus and what might happen when we find him there. Now, we could of course pull apart the gospels to find all of the myriad of places, but I think as we look at the gospels in a whole, we find Jesus in four principle places throughout his life and we find them rather sequentially and I think rather intentionally in that sequence,

Every one of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, begins with a particular encounter of Jesus. We find Jesus in each one of those gospels with God at the outset of his ministry. We find him literally at the river Jordan. He is being encountered by his cousin John and baptized by the Holy Spirit. And over and over the course of his life, we will find Jesus step away from the community to abide with God in solitude, to hear again, if you will, those words that were spoken by God to him at his baptism, "This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased."

You'll remember again at the Mount of Olives as Jesus ascends it for that powerful encounter with God that we know as the story of the transfiguration. We hear those words again. "This is my beloved."

If we are to follow Jesus, we are invited, encouraged, even, to abide in the solitude of God's love for ourselves. If we were to go and encounter Jesus, if we were to go and to find our place alone with God, to hear that word again for each of you, for each of us, you are my beloved, God proclaims to you, not just at your baptism, but each day of your waking, and each night of your sleeping, God proclaims to you, "You are my beloved." And if we were to open our ears in that moment of solitude, we might hear that same word being proclaimed not just to us, but to all of our household, and not just to each of us in our household, but to every household on every block in every city around the world.

If we stop in the solitude of God to hear again the first word that God speaks to each of us at our waking and at our sleeping, if we abide with Jesus. After of course he hears those formative transformative words, we find that Jesus then goes out for a period of solitude. We find Jesus alone with himself. In the great journey of the desert those 40 days, we find that Jesus grapples not with God, but fundamentally with himself. We call it Satan, but it is the temptations within him to abandon the love and way of God. Those same temptations dwell within in each of us, that desire to step away, that desire to abandon the goodness of God ourselves. And like Jesus we must confront those very same temptations in order that we might walk into the world each day solidified, fortified, strengthened and committed in the very love that God invites us to share.



If we abide with Jesus, if we are with Jesus where he is, we will find time for ourselves to grapple with the struggles and temptations of our own hearts. From there, we find Jesus immediately building a community of faith around him. He calls those first disciples into communion with him as we gather in this place ourselves. He calls his disciples around him to be a community of support and a community of practice for the way of love. He sees in his disciples their growth, he experiences in his disciples, their friendship, and their support for the very commitments that he has made just as he supports them in the journey and commitments they too have made.

It is with his disciples, however, that he also practices the very love He proclaims. There are two stories that I wish to just draw to our attention, to our memory about Jesus practicing the way of love and grace, first with his disciples. On that fateful night as he gathers with his disciples in that upper room to celebrate that last supper with them, he is confronted with a profound choice. He knows that among them there is at least one, if not twelve, that will abandon him, one that will betray him over to the authorities. And as he places that fateful bread into the hands of Judas, he must make a choice. He must practice critically, the freeing and redeeming love that he has proclaimed.

He must allow Judas to be free. To go out into the dark. He must free himself of the temptation to overwhelm Judas with power and force and domination and give himself. That is, Jesus must give himself into the hands of God's love. His disciples are a crucible of his formation as he learns to practice the very love he preaches. And of course it is then with Peter. One wonders what he would've done with Judas, but we see it when he encounters Peter. Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Jesus practicing the very forgiveness and reconciliation that he has proclaimed all his life.

The community of his disciples is a community of support and practice for the very way of love. If we are to abide with Jesus, if we are to be with Jesus where he is, we are to be a part of a community of like-minded, like-hearted disciples, committed to the way of love that is God's in order, that we may be supported by one another, that we may support one another, and that we may practice together the love, the reconciliation and redemption that God proclaims. And then finally, we find Jesus in a fourth place, and that is in the world, but not just in the world broadly, but in the world very specifically. We will find Jesus over and over and over again in the places where the suffering are to be found. He finds himself encountering lepers and the blind. He finds himself encountering the sick and the paralyzed. We find him encountering over and over again, those who are suffering, those who are broken, those who are cut off from the powers and centers of life.

He goes into those places and he encounters and he sees the suffering of the world. He sees the struggling of the world and he is literally touched by their suffering. The hands of a woman with a perpetual hemorrhage reach out and touch his cloak. The tears of a woman cleanse his feet. The hands of another



anoint his head. The eyes of the blind are touched by his hands. The ears of the deaf are touched by him as well. We find Jesus over and over again in the places that the suffering dwell. And in those places he sees their suffering. He is touched by their pain, and he has the opportunity to offer his healing.

If we are to abide with Jesus, if we are to be where Jesus is, we are to find those places to be in those places where suffering still occurs and there is ample suffering in this world if we are looking for a place to encounter it. We need to be in those places in order that our hearts may be transformed as was Jesus's so long ago. To abide with Jesus, to be where Jesus was, is of course to see him at work, to see his vulnerability and the conversion of his heart, to witness too the activity of his heart and the love of his hands.

Friends, we are invited always to abide with Christ. To abide with Him in God, to hear God's profound love for each of us in the world. To confront in the solitude of our hearts, the temptations that draw us away from the very love of God and of our neighbor. To be with one another as a support and to be supported by and to practice the very grace that we proclaim. And finally to be with the suffering of the world in order that our hearts might be softened and our hands extended with a very grace and love of God.

There are many things that make us odd and unique in this world, but there is one thing that draws us all together, and that is the common desire to participate in the good love of God for the world. And may we abide with Christ where he is, so that we may participate with him in his love. Amen.